

Chapter 4 The Collapse of Russia

What have I missed?

Nothing. Nothing. Now all you gotta do is tell us how to win this year and next year, like you said in your ads.

Well, there's one thing I want to follow up on that I didn't want to bury in the masochist chapter. You read it?

Glanced at it. Don't quiz me or anything.

I said that High & Tight looked like an experienced bunch of sharks to me, and yet they didn't spend 70% of their money on hitting the way I recommend. Their hitting payroll came to \$1715: 66%.

The manner in which leagues allocate their money varies quite a bit. The Panther Valley League spent \$1738 on hitting last year, the Couch Potatoes \$1642, and the Washington Ghost-NL only \$1580.

Theoretically, hitters can only earn what you pay for them. I say Bonds was worth \$46 last year, but that's on a pay scale of \$1820 for all hitters; he took a 2.5% chunk out of the pie. The Panther Valley pie was \$1738, so -- if you accept all my denominators as being quite realistic -- he takes the same 2.5% chunk and earns \$44. For the Couch Potatoes he earns \$42. For the Washington Ghosts he earns \$40.

You end up with different sets of prices for each league.

In my league, you don't end up with Barry Bonds for \$40.

That's sort of what I said. The market would eventually learn. In the meantime, if you don't want to spend what Barry Bonds is worth, that's all right by me, because I'll get him that much cheaper. I don't want to *pay* Bonds \$46. My formulas could care less about market prices, but experience will gradually bring the market in line with my formulas.

For several years, I had the satisfaction of watching this happen, but we're in Stage Three now, the final stage, and I have to admit: the market will not budge any further. There's a threshold beyond which the market will not step in the trashing of pitching. It seems to be stuck at 35%.

John Benson -- or perhaps Mike Dalecki, I'm not sure which -- first noticed this. The older leagues tended to divide their money 65/35 between hitting and pitching, and so John made the reasonable decision to divide his prices up that way. I'm going to hold out a few more years and then maybe do the same thing.

You're kidding?

Probably. Knowing me, I'd rather be wrong than switch. But it's worth thinking about. Why doesn't the market come any further?

Answer -- just as before -- experience. Teams that spend less than 35% of their money on pitching aren't getting very good results. In the High & Tight league, the Prima Donnas got away with it; Double Play got whacked.

Richard Pike of Allstar Stats studied what the first and last place teams in his leagues paid for pitching and concluded: "For American leagues, spending between \$110 and \$119 on pitching was the segment with the most first place finishers." To me, that's a shockingly large amount; I'd never spend even \$100 on pitching, but you can't argue with results.

He has 77 standard American leagues, and the data shows that 17 teams in the \$110-\$119 pitching bracket finished first, 7 finished last. In 110 National leagues, the breakdown for this bracket was 11 firsts, 8 lasts.

The most popular and successful price bracket in his National leagues was the \$80-\$89 bracket: 30 firsts, 22 lasts. What I like to see -- but the next best bracket was \$90-\$99: 21 first, 15 lasts. In the bracket that I favor, \$70-\$79, 15 teams finished first and 15 finished last.

In the American leagues, in this \$70-\$79 bracket, the record was 6 firsts, 9 lasts. I do take some comfort from the fact that the record of American league teams spending less than \$50 on pitching was 2-0.

I can see you're rapt.

Don't worry about me. I can wait. Let me know when you're finished.

I'm finished.

So what's the secret plan?

Spend on pitching.

That's it? Spend on pitching? Someone from a stat service sends you a few charts and you renounce everything you ever said?

I'm not renouncing. I'm just an old-fashioned, eight-category type of guy -- or seven categories, I've gone with seven categories several times. But if you're afraid of life in Stage Three, then you've got to punt two categories.

Two categories?

Yes. The two most expensive categories. But we're skipping just a whole bunch of steps. Let's go back to the auction in the American Dreams League last year. Here's what we paid for hitters, what they ended up earning, and the team stats in the hypothetical final standings:

hitting	paid	earned	net	AB	HR	RBI	SB	BA
Tooners	187	230	43	5978	170	783	151	.269
Moose	181	214	33	5092	187	688	101	.282
Palukas	205	205	0	5651	144	734	120	.275
Amaros	153	175	22	5674	116	665	139	.254
Nova	207	236	29	5755	191	812	152	.263

hitting	paid	earned	net	AB	HR	RBI	SB	BA
Nabobs	182	177	-5	5482	151	700	116	.247
Wssacs	95	89	-6	2857	27	274	77	.283
Hackers	164	168	4	5427	156	726	67	.256
Guns	145	170	25	4493	179	667	45	.267
Brancas	198	181	-17	6019	109	657	134	.266
Bags	185	181	-4	5354	115	685	110	.273
Veecks	170	148	-22	4329	140	582	81	.251
total	2072	2173	101	62111	1685	7973	1293	.265
average	173	181	8	5176	140	664	108	.265

One of your teams spent under \$100 on hitting? It looks like they're dumping three categories.

They didn't mean to, but they are definitely dumping two.

pitching	paid	earned	net	IP	W	S	ERA	Rto	\$TOT	Pts
Tooners	73	72	-1	958	51	40	3.89	11.62	302	67.0
Moose	79	94	15	924	62	60	3.95	11.47	308	64.5
Palukas	55	77	22	1109	62	35	3.86	11.74	283	63.5
Amaros	107	120	13	839	50	100	3.55	11.19	295	59.0
Nova	53	46	-7	1163	73	0	4.15	12.47	282	54.5
Nabobs	78	82	4	1296	73	18	3.58	11.90	259	53.5
Wssacs	165	95	-70	1170	63	61	3.83	11.75	183	53.0
Hackers	96	90	-6	1190	87	36	3.95	12.15	257	47.0
Guns	115	90	-25	736	37	105	4.12	11.93	260	44.0
Brancas	62	62	0	1080	75	1	3.89	12.04	243	44.0
Bags	75	64	-11	768	45	54	3.86	12.52	245	43.0
Veecks	90	67	-23	1227	60	31	3.89	12.10	215	31.0
total	1048	959	-89	12459	738	541	3.87	11.92	3097	624.0
average	87	80	-7	1038	62	45	3.87	11.92	261	52.0

Look at the wretched Wssacs -- \$165 on pitching! He embarrassed the entire league. Thanks to him we spend \$87 per team when the average is supposed to be \$78. In the Heath leagues, both Bos-Wash and Dewey Bush underspent us, and that hasn't happened in years. We spent 33.5% of our budget on pitching!

Take it easy. It's only a game. Didn't do the Wssacs much good, did it?

But how did they lose \$70 on pitching, \$6 on hitting, and finish up with 53 points?

Precisely. Look at them sitting there with \$183 -- that should be good for about 15 points, last by 20 points, and there he is sitting in the middle of the pack. Hugh Sweeney, the Wssacs owner, did this to mock me.

What exactly did he do?

Punted power. No homers, no ribbies -- no thanks, not this year. Can you imagine? This was our jubilee year. Everybody at the same starting line, the finish line the same distance away. For the first time since 1981, no keepers. Wouldn't you think he'd have the guts to run the same course?

He's not the only one. Look at Nova and the Brancas: one save between them. John Benson likes to say there's no such thing as a typical team and a typical league, everything is context, and pretty soon he's going to be right. The saves

denominator for the Brancas isn't 3.4, it's *one*. When Mark Eichorn finally got a save in September, the Brancas gained half a point in the standings.

So these two teams were punting saves?

Punting saves but clearly not piling on the starters, either. The one thing this league has in common is fear and loathing of bad innings. That's why I couldn't use it as one of the five leagues to determine the average pitcher in the masochists chapter. Too few innings, too few wins, too low ERA, too low ratio.

Did everyone get their innings?

Oh, sure; no problem. Everyone but the BB Guns. When their pitching staff of Ben McDonald and Scott Terry didn't pan out, they went with Don August, Alan Anderson and Bill Krueger, and when that didn't pan out, they figured they already had punted three categories.

You guys get your jollies trying to finish last?

No, we get our jollies trying to stay *out* of last. We have huge anti-fire-sale incentives -- \$6 penalty for finishing last, fewer keepers, things like that -- so no one ever quits. What happens is, you don't fall into last, last comes up and gets you. Going into the last week of the season, the fifth place team had 49 points, the 12th place team 43 points. Six points separating 8 teams. It gets your attention. You're not bored in the last week.

I see Moose Factory sitting there with the most Patton \$ in the hypotheticals. Did you pass the Tooners?

No. But on the last day of the season, out in Seattle -- thus the last game of the year -- Tino Martinez came to the plate for his last at-bat. Les Leopold and Larry Fine of the Tooners were keeping track at Reuters. If Tino just walks, the batting average of the Bags stays at .26897. The Tooners have finished the season with a .26909 batting average... Tino homers, the Bags hit .26914, the Tooners lose a point, and we tie them.

American Dreams 1991 Final

	AB	HR	RBI	SB	BA	\$
Tooners	6299	159	791	144	.269	223
Moose	5574	189	739	105	.277	219
Palukas	6169	151	792	125	.271	213
Nova	6214	192	832	162	.256	237
Amaros	5803	151	709	135	.245	184
Wssacs	3123	40	303	77	.282	97
Bags	6008	129	742	129	.269	199
Brancas	6340	113	676	148	.263	188
Guns	5215	199	783	49	.266	192
Hackers	5757	140	735	69	.257	164
Nabobs	6064	153	738	141	.250	195
Veecks	5382	184	724	56	.255	173
total	67948	1800	8564	1340	.263	2293
average	5662	150	714	112	.263	190

pitching	IP	W	S	ERA	Rto	\$	\$H+P	Pts	+/-
Tooners	1074	64	71	3.51	11.47	114	337	72.0	5.0
Moose	1152	78	63	3.56	11.03	126	345	72.0	7.5
Palukas	1510	94	37	3.82	11.91	104	317	67.0	3.5
Nova	1476	90	2	4.11	12.23	65	302	59.0	4.5
Amaros	1196	72	60	3.87	11.56	103	287	47.5	-11.5
Wssacs	1276	70	57	3.84	11.73	98	196	46.0	-7.0
Bags	1037	59	83	4.17	12.71	82	280	45.0	2.0
Brancas	1222	89	5	3.91	12.15	74	262	44.0	0.0
Guns	960	41	72	4.46	12.84	52	244	43.0	-1.0
Hackers	1223	85	66	4.04	12.28	102	265	43.0	-4.0
Nabobs	1279	66	17	3.84	12.35	61	256	43.0	-10.5
Veecks	1437	77	37	3.90	12.08	85	258	42.5	11.5
total	14843	885	570	3.91	12.02	1067	3349	624.0	0.0
average	1237	74	48	3.91	12.02	89	279	52.0	0.0

Looks like the Veecks didn't quite make it.

Nope, still last by half a half a point. They make the biggest improvement, mainly through trades. In that game in Seattle, Eric Hanson pitched a two-hitter and couldn't get the win for them. One more win and the Veecks tie the Moose with 78; we finish second by half a point and the Veecks tie for ninth. Surely no team has ever finished last before with more than 40 points. The average point gap top to bottom was 2.68, smallest in the Heath Leagues.

You're all a bunch of fuck-ups. Randy Johnson and Flash Gordon? My kid could play in this league.

We need him. That's the thing, we've all been at it too long. We're like fighters who have to put rocks in our gloves. I can't think of a single team that played it straight except maybe the Hackers, and Doug Jones was their reward.

This is your secret? Punting categories?

Punting *two* categories. And they have to be homers and ribbies. Don't you see how liberating that is? Tons of Stage Three teams have punted one category; it's done all the time now. You trade away your useless assets. But there's Sweeney at the end, having pre-punted two categories, his team not able to get it up over \$200 while everyone else has risen to what the third-place Palukas were worth coming out of the draft, and he's still *right there*. He's in sixth place with \$196. He's pitiful, he's one of the worst teams ever seen on paper, and he's two places out of fourth.

Um... What's the second part of the plan?

Lots of slots to fill with fliers. He's only got about a 10-man roster anyway; what does he care?

Who was his best flier?

Willie Randolph \$1. Just because you've got a glorious plan, doesn't mean you're going to be bathed in glory.

Look. I like your book. There was a time I learned a lot from it. But I don't know how to break this to you... this is real disappointing.

Can't win them all. How'd you do, by the way?

Three firsts, two seconds, four thirds, one fourth, and had to fire sale a few times.

I see.

Looks like the Moose has got some good keepers for this year.

We do, but then so does everyone else. I haven't had a chance yet to analyze it.

Want to do it here?

Not really. I think I better take this to the printer's before it costs \$5 to ship in the mail.

You're not even going to explain inflation?

Right. Better do that.

When your league hands in its freeze lists -- think I really have to?

Probably not. You can always sell back copies of your old book.

Hey, that's a great idea. I've got a whole box of the 1989 edition. Went to Florida with 100 and came back with 98.

*There was some good stuff in that book, I remember.
Sorry, don't get touchy.*

It's all right.

Anyway, you were saying?

I was?

About inflation?

Oh. When you have the freeze lists, add up the salaries. Then make rough estimates of the earnings. Say that 20 players are frozen for \$200. You think they're going to earn \$400. That's a \$200 profit for the league as a whole.

The league can't have a profit. The dispute over what hitters and pitchers earn may never be resolved, but a league that spends \$2600 earns \$2600. If it has \$200 in freeze-list profits, it's going to incur \$200 in auction day losses.

If 20 players are frozen for \$200 in a National league, 210 players are available for \$2200. But they will only earn \$2000. The inflation factor is the amount they will be paid divided by the amount they will earn: $2200/2000 = 1.1$. An inflation factor of 10%. Multiply 1.1 times whatever you think any available player will earn to figure out his inflation value.

Barry Bonds is available. You think his stats will be worth \$43 this year. Multiply 1.1 X 43. His inflation value is \$47.

The inflation value is the break-even point. If you break even on 23 players, you finish halfway between first and last.

How's that?

Real good. Bet it weighed under a gram.

I've always said you should have one price only for hitters. What you think the hitter is going to earn. But maybe you should have the inflation value next to it. During the auction, as you write down the prices players are getting, this may help you see the inflation factor gradually disappear, as it has to. If two numbers clarify rather than confuse, then two numbers are better, obviously.

Also, at the beginning of this, you told us how to make a third number. I've been thinking -- maybe we'll try that, me and my partner.

Try what? I'm sorry, I'm a little tired.

Change your prices.

Change my prices?

Why not? What you said was, if the league you're in spends 65% of its money on hitting instead of 70%, all you have to do is multiply 65/70 times the prices in this book to get league-specific prices for yourself. If another leagues spends 63%, you multiply by 63/70. Seems pretty simple to me.

No, no my prices show what hitters have earned, regardless of what the market thinks; it's what they've earned fair and square, and you'll be cheating them if you do that.

That's just what I was thinking.

Okay, fine, but remember, you then have to multiply 35/30 or 37/30 times all the pitcher prices. Do you really want to jump Bill Wegman to \$37?

Ah, we don't worry about pitchers. Like you, we just close our eyes and grab.

Fine. You do that. Good luck keeping 15 different prices straight. Or is it twenty? See you next year.

Hold on! What's this next year? You've still gotta make some predictions for us. Then there's the pep talk.

You mean my top 10 outfielders? I've got to do that again?

To be honest, I was hoping you would expand it a bit.

How far?

You know... like maybe the top 10 infielders and outfielders.

Ah. But no catchers?

And no pitchers. You can skip them, too.

This book is full of predictions, you know. That's what the weighted averages are.

I know. But they're not organized. And like you said, they're not your predictions.

They're mine for now. I hope I'll do better when I start making my guesses a little before the draft. But I'm standing by these 3/2/1 babies all the way. Next year I'll be matching them up against the mechanical forecasters. Player by player by player, we're going mano a mano.

You actually think your waited averages can compete with James and Benson and Shandler?

Maybe not. We'll find out. Depends on whether the hitters cooperate.

You really must think they're all rip-off artists.

No, I don't. I think all three of them do something well, or I wouldn't bother promoting them. That's all I'm doing. I may get them some sales, but they won't lose any. To lose a sale, you have to have made a sale, and in that case, the buyers make up their own minds.

So what is it they're good at?

Ron Shandler has synthesized the whole sprawling field of sabermetrics into eight rows for each player: 1987 through 1991, so he's got a five-year scan. Then first half, second half for 1991. Then the '92 forecast.

His "Rotisserie-format Ratings" are awful -- in 1991, Canseco (93, on a scale of 100, the scale expressing "the effect a player has on his Rotissereie team, based on HRs, RBIs, SBs and Batting Average") ahead of Bonds (86), Cecil Fielder (76) way ahead of Will Clark (62), Dean Palmer (53) ahead of Travis Fryman (51), Andujar Cedeno (36) ahead of Jeff Blauser (27) and, of course, Glavine (55) ahead of Clemens (52) -- so ignore them. Concentrate on Linear Weights, Runs Created Per Game, Expected ERA, etc, etc, and you're sure to spot some things.

A lot of sabermetricians just can't get with Rotisserie baseball -- Ron runs some sort of contest called The Challenge that I would bet uses eight categories during its warm-up tosses -- but that doesn't mean we can't get with them.

And spot -- you know -- could you give a for instance?

Sure. Roberto Alomar seemed to have his ups and downs at San Diego, but his linear weights in 1989 and 1990 were 6 and 4, respectively.

Meaning?

Meaning he was pretty close to average, zero, both years. Last year his linear weight was 24, meaning he was six times better than 1990 in the best measurement anyone has yet devised of the real game (as opposed to twice as good in our crude facsimile), and -- here's what's in it for you -- Shandler projects a linear weight of 35 for Alomar this year. That's supersonic. Linear weights count *all* the interior stats, and according to Shandler's projection, Roberto Alomar is going to shoot right by Julio Franco as an all-around offensive threat.

What did you say his address was?

Shandler Enterprises, P.O.B. 1001, Merrimack NH 03054. John Benson's is: Diamond Analytics, P.O.B. 7302, Wilton CT 06897.

Man, you really are chickening out in the last few pages. What do I get from Benson?

John's the opposite of Shandler; he really does know Rotisserie baseball. And he knows baseball; he actually gets out on the field and talks to players. I did that once; wangled a press pass to Yankee Stadium, went onto the field during batting practice, looked up up up at John Olerud (I'm not short) and was speechless.

But you're saying his prices are total rip-offs; you're sticking by that, right?

What are you doing this to me for? I'm hoping to get in one of his mailings this spring.

They're not *quite* total; they're ballpark figures, which is all he claims. His prices are low and if you stick to his optimum bids, you'll have about \$100 left over --

There you go.

-- but don't stick to his optimum bids. Don't pay any attention to his prices. Frankly, don't pay attention to most of his advice, because it assumes your opponents are nincompoops. But John does scour the minors. He talks to batting coaches. He talks to scrubs. He talks to John Olerud. He'd talk to Billy Martin if he could. All this stuff is reported in a newsletter. He lays it on the line: the 10 most likely to succeed even though they've been flops so far; the 10 most likely to flop even though they've been supersonic so far. John marches into the future with a brisk stride, which is the only way to go in this game.

But hell, you know all this. What are you asking me for?

Just trying to see where you stop.

Thanks. But you admit you've read them.

Hell yes.

See? We are one big Stage Three commune. That's what I've been saying from page one, but it's taken all this time to fully sink in on me.

Six-hundred-fifty players in the big leagues. Maybe another 350 that are worth following in the minors. One thousand. No problem. We can keep track of them, and if we can't, if we see a stranger, we flip through the 900 comments of Bill

James, the two Stats Inc. books, the Baseball Almanac, the Baseball Register, the back issues of Baseball America, the back issues of Baseball Weekly, today's copy of USA Today; we'll call the PR department if we have to, but we will find the slippery son of a gun, we'll get to know him. And so will eleven or nine other teams by Waiver Monday or Tuesday. We'll put our blindfolds on and make our bids. Life in Stage Three has become a crapshoot from Dennis Eckersley, who the Wssacs could have had for one measly dollar more, to the 144th and last player picked on a reserve list.

Who was?

Todd Worrell, Wssacs.

Sweeney's a loser, what can I tell you?

Now you say! Sweeney had the last pick because he *won* the year before. Don't you see? By calling Sweeney a loser because he bought Thigpen instead of Eckersley, picked Worrell instead of -- who? -- Chito Martinez? -- he couldn't use him -- instead of Doug, not Dwayne, Henry -- you're buying into the skill scam. That's just exactly what James, Shandler and Benson are into when they tell you how wonderful their projections were. They want you to believe the future is predictable because that's what they're selling.

Benson score himself too? I missed that.

I haven't seen his book this year. But I'm going to place one of those little side bets that are always fun. Do you remember what he said about Mickey Tettleton last year?

Not really.

Good, then I can refresh you. Tettleton is trumpeted on the back cover of the 1991 book as an example of successfully predicting failure. Inside we read: "To roll out the first of many 'I told you so' items, we may as well begin with the first team and the first position. From the 1990 book: 'Tettleton is NOT the hitter that he looked like in early 1989... Fruit Loops' performance was a fluke... You cannot expect much more from Tettleton than about .250, 15 HR and 55 RBI in 1990.' Tettleton turned in .223-15-51. Once again this year, somebody in your league is going to have higher expectations, and you should let them have Tettleton." The side bet is that John is going to let one of his "49 writers with inside contacts" dispense with Tettleton this year.

I don't think you're going ^{to} get in his mailing.

Hey, Phil Mushnick of the New York Post says much harsher things about the point-spread touts, and they're owned by Al Pacino, and Mushnick's still around. Doesn't it bother you, though, this posturing?

Nah, you gotta act confident, like you said.

The back of Benson's book -- I'm just noticing. Listen to this; it says: "The track record proves it... this book had more correct predictions and better forecast stats by far than any other source in 1989 and 1990." (Dot dots his.) This is five lines above the Tettleton boast, in Times Roman 18 boldface, and I'm so inured to this stuff that I don't even see it. Did you? Do you remember reading it?

Not really. He may be getting a little too confident if he doesn't back it up. He doesn't?

I don't know. I mean, I don't *think* so; I didn't see it, but I didn't read every last word; and, John, if you do back it up, I apologize. That's why I've created a dummy coporation myself, Patton Ink, so you can't take my house. But I'm so far into this, there's no reason to stop now.

John pitches the skill scam more relentlessly than anyone else. "Plain hard work and the application of sound principles are the stuff that win pennants... The truth is that winning methods can be learned by anyone. Having a good memory helps, but the keys to victory are experience, enthusiasm, concentration and hard work. If you ever doubt this statement, consider the progress made by every player after one year of experience... The learning curve doesn't stop after one year. With the game only ten years old, I feel safe in saying that nobody can define the learning curve at this point."

I can.

The learning curve is over. It's finished. There is no Stage Four.

That's because John is absolutely right about one thing. Winning methods *can* be learned by anyone. The keys to victory *are* what he says they are, and *everybody* in Stage Three is experienced and enthusiastic; the people who don't concentrate and work hard are long gone. If each owner is in possession of these virtues, if we all deserve to win, then how, in fact, is the winner decided?

I know what you're saying, but it's depressing. I got to tell you, we were forced to fire sale maybe a few more times than I let on. We picked up Viola for \$17, can you believe it?

Bad luck.

God damn right. Me too, I'm getting sick of this game. I don't even feel like a pep talk.

Oh, don't get sick of this game. Just accept it for what it is. Are you sick of poker? Besides, you've already had your pep talk.

Where was it? In the masochist notes?

Sweeney.

The Wssacs? Oh, man, I don't want to hear about no double dump. I'm not in the mood.

Well, you should be. I'll try to frame this so you can see the big picture; few people are in as many places to take advantage of it as you and your partner.

Glance over the latter part of the AL hitting section, particularly the Cory Snyder and Robin Yount comments; buzz through the AL pitcher section again. Two slightly different propositions emerge. First, the value of a ballplayer's performance, a matter of debate a few years ago, is now a matter of consensus. Second, predictions as to what a ballplayer, hitter or pitcher, is going to actually do are extremely similar. What this does is crowd us into a very small room.

Thinking about our jubilee draft of 276 players, Sweeney literally got claustrophobic. He realized his chances were one in 12, maybe less. Sweeney's very smart, and perhaps realized concentration is not his long suit.

He looked at the most crowded corner of the room, the one that we think we can predict the best and that is also redundant, and therefore is the one that we spend the most on, and said: I'm not going anywhere near there.

Hey, I get it. He kissed off power, the two things you've got to have. He really was depressed.

ERA and ratio are the two things you've got to have, because you need them to get wins and saves. Bad ERA and ratio are the keys to last place.

So he finished sixth. Big deal. Sixth is as high as he goes.

Sixth is as low as he goes. Sweeney has completely taken risk out of the game. He can't finish last. He doesn't have to think. Does it take a lot of brains to buy Clemens and Stewart? With a little luck, which we all need, he can finish first. Your problem is you're blinded by failure. Maybe I have to show you some of the auction so you can see just how close he came to pulling it off.

I must say, I myself didn't realize what was happening until we were well under way, but I should have suspected something in the first round.

		ROUND 1					
nom	by	#	cost	earned	+/-	byr	l.b.
vek	1	Henderdon, R	57	41	-16	mf	vek
tnr	2	Cole	32	19	-13	wsx	nov
nova	3	Eckersley	49	40	-9	mf	wsx
brc	4	Carter	35	36	1	vek	nov
nab	5	Crim	9	1	-8	gun	
ams	6	Thigpen	45	23	-22	wsx	
pal	7	Belle	20	26	6	pal	tnr
hak	8	Yount	28	15	-13	bag	brc
mf	9	Clemens	34	44	10	wsx	tnr
gun	10	Canseco	46	44	-2	nov	hak
bag	11	Griffey, Jr	38	39	1	pal	
wsx	12	Gruber	33	19	-14	gun	brc
		average	36	29	-7		

The second player nominated is Alex Cole; the Tooners hate rookies and it's just who you would expect them to --

Hold on a second -- "mf" is Moose Factory, right?

Yes.

After the first three players you had spent \$106?

Steals and saves. Like I say, I'm very old-fashioned.

But you've gone flying out of the chutes, just like you've told us never to do. Then when a bargain like Joey Belle comes along, you can't do anything.

I have four answers to that.

1) No one's flying out of the chutes. In all cases but one, the sexiest names we can think of are being thrown into the ring, and far from going wild, already you can see the room is into safe sex. In the one case, the Nabobs are trying to find out if people are finally going to have the hots for middle relievers. They don't. Nor do they have the colds.

2) Belle seemed like a good bet, yes; I hated to see someone who hit 25 or 30 home runs in spring training go no higher. But I really knew the room was wearing condoms when Gruber only went for \$33. The safest sex is hindsight.

3) We can pick each round apart ad infinitum; I'm putting a few of them out with all my notations so you can do that if you want to. But the purpose is to focus on the Wssacs. I want you to see what a powerful no-brainer they had going for them; how bad luck and, yes, serious fuck-ups were all that stopped Sweeney once he had devised his plan.

4) His name is Albert Belle.

The plan was, quite obviously, to win in six categories, come in last in two. Had Sweeney succeeded in doing that, he would have had 74 points. He was counting on no team coming out of the auction in great shape; he figured all these old goats would punch themselves silly, and he was right. Seventy-four points would have won.

The notation on the right, l.b., means last bid before the winning bid (Adrian Williams, the auctioneer, kept this record for me as best he could, and already in the first round, the cigar smoke, the sparring, the yammering of the crowd proved too much for him). You don't see the Wssacs even making the last bid on Rickey because they have no interest in his homers. Then they do buy Alex Cole. Then they almost buy Eckersley. Then they do buy Thigpen. Then they do buy Clemens.

I noticed Sweeney acting a little agitated after the gavel sounded on Eckersley. All Bill and I were trying to do was push the Eck into the 50's. Why didn't Sweeney follow? Not planning to spend a nickel on power, he could have chased Eckersley to \$55, \$60. This was his first fuck-up.

		ROUND 2					
nom	by	#	cost	earned	+/-	byr	l.b.
tnr	13	Jones, D	36	-2	-38	hak	brc
gun	14	Sheffield	29	1	-28	pal	
brc	15	Olson	35	23	-12	vek	gun
vek	16	Davis, G	32	7	-25	brc	hak
nab	17	Bedrosian	12	6	-6	wsx	bag
nov	18	Henke	34	29	-5	tnr	gun
hak	19	Fielder	34	32	-2	tnr	nab
bag	20	Davis, M	23	2	-21	bag	hak
mf	21	Montgomery	20	29	9	ams	gun
wsx	22	Greenwell	32	26	-6	tnr	nab
pal	23	Kelly, R	37	31	-6	nab	gun
ams	24	Puckett	27	32	5	tnr	
		average	29	18	-11		

Why is he buying Bedrock? Why isn't he at least getting the last bid in on Doug Jones, Olson, Henke or Montgomery? This was his second fuck-up. Even getting Jones would have been better, because it means he's staying focussed on what he has to do.

At least he's nominating the right people; first Gruber, now Greenwell. (The order of nomination from now on is by position in the room; in the first round, it was in reverse order of last year's standings.)

The Tooners created the backbone of their team right here, by the way. In the space of six players, they spent \$127 on what would be worth \$119. That's a great return on the top-of-the-line players. The Tooners were making a move while most people are waiting for bargains that are not going to materialize if this caution prevails.

Also notice that three times the BB Guns have the last bid on a closer; their mounting concern over the prices relievers are going for will turn into a fatal attraction.

I thought we weren't allowed digressions?

You're not.

		ROUND 3				
nom by	#	cost	earned	+/-	byr	l.b.
tnr	25 McGwire	32	8	-24	nab	mf
gun	26 Mattingly	22	17	-5	vek	nab
brc	27 Stewart	30	-12	-42	wsx	ams
vek	28 Sax	28	33	5	brc	
nab	29 Worthington	5	2	-3	bag	nov
nov	30 Farr	19	27	8	ams	
hak	31 Gonzales, Ju	21	24	3	vek	mf
bag	32 Browne	13	1	-12	nab	
mf	33 Welch	21	1	-20	ams	brc
wsx	34 Burks	34	13	-21	hak	tnr
pal	35 Raines	39	31	-8	nab	tnr
ams	36 Clark	29	19	-10	vek	
	average	24	14	-11		

Here's where Sweeney dies, but at least he dies focussed. Clemens and Stewart; the Eck and one other closer... fill the rest in from the multitude of middle relievers and starting pitchers that will be available for under \$10.

The Amaros, you notice, having been foiled by Sweeney on Stewart, snapped up Bob Welch.

The Moose, I notice, had the last bid on McGwire.

And Peter G, I notice, stole Juan Gonzalez away from us. I tell you, these last bids are fascinating.

		ROUND 4				
nom by	#	cost	earned	+/-	byr	l.b.
tnr	37 Aguilera	26	38	12	ams	
gun	38 Saberhagen	19	29	10	tnr	mf
brc	39 Fisk	13	13	0	hak	mf
vek	40 Quintana	8	18	10	nab	wsx
nab	41 Vaughan, G	8	6	-2	gun	nab
nov	42 Harvey	30	46	16	gun	nab
hak	43 Thomas	26	35	9	mf	pal
bag	44 Buhner	21	17	-4	nov	
mf	45 Ryan	15	29	14	mf	
wsx	46 Finley	20	15	-5	brc	nab
pal	47 Russell, Je	24	27	3	pal	bag
ams	48 Cuyler	17	22	5	tnr	
	average	19	25	6		

Not much action from Sweeney in this round. The round is only shown because he does try for Quintana; there just aren't that many pure batting-average types to go for.

The hell it is. It's shown because you pick up Thomas and Nolie here.

True. I wish Adrian had recorded who had the last bid on Nolie.

It might also be pointed out that -- still very early in a marathon day -- a round is showing a profit: the runners who are waiting for their reward at the end are going to be disappointed.

		ROUND 5				
nom by	#	cost	earned	+/-	byr	l.b.
tnr	49 Reardon	26	30	4	gun	nab
gun	50 Plesac	21	3	-18	nab	bag
brc	51 Henneman	22	24	2	hak	nab
vek	52 Schooler	27	10	-17	gun	
nab	53 Brown, K (TX)	6	-5	-11	nov	vek
nov	54 Gleaton	11	0	-11	nab	
hak	55 Boggs	19	21	2	wsx	MF
bag	56 Milligan	19	14	-5	gun	hak
mf	57 Hanson	23	6	-17	vek	
wsx	58 Hrbek	22	23	1	nov	
pal	59 Stieb	24	6	-18	wsx	hak
ams	60 Guetterman	16	7	-9	nab	brc
	average	20	12	-8		

I started to figure out what Sweeney was up to when he bought Boggs. Never one of his favorite players, but when someone said \$16, he said \$17 with great vigor. Since there is no minimum at-bats, Boggs was going to be worth \$50 to him.

Then he bought Stieb, thank God. Not a fuck-up at the time -- a third grade A starter was within his budget (and nobody else's) -- but Stieb and Stewart are what spared us.

And Alex Cole.

Heck no -- Alex Cole did fine for the Wssacs.

He gave him a \$13 beating. You've got it right there in the first round.

He gave anyone *else* a \$13 beating. Sweeney's taking my book, ripping it up, and flushing it down the toilet.

Maybe he never read it?

Sweeney? Sweeney can rattle off the prices for pitchers in the books before I flip-flopped denominators the way other people recite license plates -- he does it all the time -- but now he's playing his own game with his own prices and there ain't *didley* we can do about it.

So you're saying Cole is worth more than \$19 to Sweeney since Sweeney's into two-category players?

Bingo. And even though Cole fell on his face -- often literally -- he somehow hit .295. The formula for computing batting average assumes teams will have over 5000 at-bats; the Wssacs don't even buy 3000. So in Sweeney's very own Appendix B, Cole earns \$7, not \$4, in batting average. He still earns \$12 in stolen bases. The average player gets \$9 of his \$13 from homers and steals, so Sweeney's average player -- the one that he plugs into his formula -- is worth \$4. We divide 13 by 4, get a factor of 3.25; multiply that times \$19; and Alex Cole is worth \$62. Somewhere around there.

Hell, I don't know what he's worth, but he's worth a lot more to Sweeney than anyone else, and that's all that matters.

		ROUND 8				
nom by	#	cost	earned	+/-	byr	l.b.
tnr	85 Tartabull	29	35	6	gun	
gun	86 Seitzer	13	5	-8	bag	
brc	87 Ripken,C	22	42	20	gun	
vek	88 Surhoff	16	16	0	ams	
nab	89 Alomar,R	26	42	16	nov	
nov	90 Gibson,K	21	17	-4	bag	
hak	91 Hoiles	10	6	-4	mf	
bag	92 Felix	24	8	-16	hak	ams
mf	93 Palmeiro	24	34	10	pal	
wsx	94 Trammell	21	13	-8	ams	gun
pal	95 McRae	15	19	4	pal	
ams	96 Pena,T	8	6	-2	nab	
		19	20	1		

You skipped a few.

So did Sweeney. This round is shown because he lets Roberto Alomar go right by him. Ever since he bought Boggs and Stieb, he's been under the impression that he's got to cool it, because he's spent some money.

He hasn't? Cole \$32, Thigpen \$45, Clemens \$34, Bedrosian \$12, Stewart \$30, Boggs \$19, Stieb \$24... that's \$196 for 7 players. He's got \$64 left for 16 players. Four dollars a player and you think he can buy Alomar?

I know he can, because who's he got left to buy? Who else besides Alomar has batting average and speed, but won't have a lot of money tacked on for the other categories?

Say he spends \$30 to get him. That's \$34 for 15 players. He can still pop anyone he wants to \$20. Or he can maneuver in the \$5 range. Crapshoot players that have no appeal to anyone else -- someone like Daryl Hamilton -- he can pick up easily.

Can I digress?

Well... all right.

You said there weren't going to be bargains later, but there the BB Guns are, not having to spend \$30 for either Tartabull or Ripken.

Every year you do this. Mr. Hindsight.

Why not point out that the Hackers snapped up Junior Felix for \$24? Prices are holding up fine. We've cleared out the best starting pitchers. All of the last stoppers went in a flurry in rounds four and five. The Veecks, having put down \$35 for Gregg Olson, ended the suspense about the last but most questionable stopper, Mike Schooler. In this round we're clearing out the best hitters left that we can't ourselves afford.

The Tooners have bought Puckett and Greenwell for \$59; they nominate Tartabull. The Brancas have spent \$28 for Steve Sax; they nominate Ripken. The Nabobs have forked out \$76 for Raines and Roberto Kelly, so they put Alomar in play. The Moose have bought Frank Thomas, and now are doing our best to make the remaining first basemen fetch some money. In round seven we nominated Stubbs.

What did he go for?

\$24. A bargain, just like Palmeiro.

I wish you'd show every round.

Can't. Can't even show all of Sweeney's buys, but here are the next two.

		ROUND 12				
nom by	#	cost	earned	+/-	byr	l.b.
tnr	133 Thurman	10	10	0	wsx	bag
gun	134 Knoblauch	7	21	14	brc	pal
brc	135 MacFarlane	6	12	6	bag	nab
vek	136 Melvin	2	2	0	pal	vek
nab	137 Bankhead	5	-3	-8	nov	
nov	138 Bichette	11	15	4	ams	brc
hak	139 Gladden	11	12	1	wsx	brc
bag	140 Snyder	10	-2	-12	bag	nab
mf	141 Eiland	2	-6	-8	pal	mf
wsx	142 Pasqua	11	14	3	nab	mf
pal	143 Holman	7	9	2	brc	brc
ams	144 Candiotti	11	32	21	nab	nab
	average	8	10	2		

Now Sweeney's got \$36 left for \$13. Thurman and Gladden were just what he didn't want to do. But he was getting nervous. I'm sure he was thinking back to Roberto Alomar with vast remorse.

Aren't you being a little hindsightful yourself? You would have sworn these two couldn't swipe more bags than Alomar, who only had 24 at San Diego?

Not steals, batting average. He thought he had 70, 80, 90 stolen bases in Alex Cole, and probably a .250 batting average. The Brancas bid \$10 on Gladden because they thought he would pop a few.

Meantime we've now bought over half our players, and prices haven't sagged a bit. Bichette, Gladden, Snyder -- they would get a dollar more *maybe* in the first round. They might get a dollar less.

I see you just barely rubbed Eiland off on someone.

Actually, we wanted him. Another of our lucky misses.

ROUND 13						
nom	by	#	cost	earned	+/-	byr l.b.
tnr		145 Fryman	13	23	10	hak mf
gun		146 Gubicza	5	-10	-15	nov
brc		147 Williamson	11	1	-10	tnr bag
vek		148 Baerga	8	18	10	mf
nab		149 Evans	4	8	4	bag
nov		150 Guillen	11	18	7	brc
hak		151 Gomez	8	8	0	nov
bag		152 Jackson, Bo	7	2	-5	wsx bag
mf		153 Knudson	2	-11	-13	tnr mf
wsx		154 Jacoby	9	2	-7	ams mf
pal		155 Guthrie	5	-1	-6	nab
ams		156 Tapani	5	35	30	hak mf
		average	7	8	1	

Jackson, Bo? Has Sweeney lost his mind?

Not at all. This is the next-year part of the plan. He's going to pick up Carney Lansford for \$1, Joey Cora for \$3, Matt Merullo for \$1.

Some of it's going to pan out next year. This year he could care less. Towards the end he was asking the room for a hot tip on a catcher who wouldn't play, and before I could close my mouth I suggested Mark Parent. The Wssacs did win batting average, but Moose Factory stayed within hailing distance all season, and if I had just said Rick Dempsey, we would have beaten the Tooners.

Was Knudson another one of your sleepers?

He was. Adrian was completely exhausted by now, but he noted our last bids, and in round 13 we came within two ticks -- Knudson and Jacoby -- of finishing last.

Then again, you came within two ticks of Fryman and Tapani.

And so it goes. The sixteenth round is the last round in which Sweeney bought a player that I have a complete record of.

ROUND 16

nom	by	#	cost	earned	+/-	byr	l.b.
tnr		181 Spiers	2	18	16	nab	tnr
gun		182 Navarro	2	13	11	pal	gun
brc		183 James, C	10	4	-6	brc	nab
vek		184 Leyritz	4	-2	-6	mf	vek
nab		185 Anderson, B	3	6	3	pal	
nov		186 Champarino	3	-1	-4	pal	
hak		187 Karkovice	2	3	1	ams	hak
bag		188 Olin	5	12	7	bag	
mf		189 Hall	3	20	17	mf	
wsx		190 Green	1	-1	-2	wsx	x
pal		191 Whiten	7	8	1	ams	pal
ams		192 Phillips	8	23	15	bag	mf
		average	4	9	4		

Under \$5; we're into the crapshoot.

You don't keep a record of the crapshoot?

I try to, but people start passing when it's their turn to nominate, I miss a few; it gets pretty sloppy. The main point is that Sweeney, who has been able to take a powder during at least half the bidding, has fallen apart. Gary Green is not Carney Lansford. There were still 86 players to go when he nominated him. Why not nominate Tony Phillips, who was obviously still available?

It looks like there are some good players left for the crapshoot. In hindsight.

And there's plenty of money still; Phillips, Whiten and Chris James tell you that. In addition to the winning bids, the Nabobs, Palukas and Moose can go at least to \$9, \$6 and \$7.

I see you lucked into Mel Hall.

Did we? We nominated him. Since Phillips follows, we could have gone to at least \$9.

You saying you would have?

No, that we could have. We wouldn't have nominated him if we thought he would have. We definitely were in the market for homers. That's why Leyritz caught our fancy and Spiers didn't.

I thought it was one of your principles to just buy value, don't worry about balance? We got some new thinking on that?

Yes. It's called being left out of balance by your ever more crafty competition. I noticed some weird final saves totals when I was doing the masochist chapter. In Pioneer Valley, the Sultans bought 90 saves and ended up with 85; 17 more than the next team. In Lookout Bush, the Poopsters bought 73, made 17 trades, and still ended up with 73 saves; 16 more than the next team. In Magnolia State, the Field Mice started out with 100 saves and ended up with 113 saves. The worst

finish was by the Field Mice, second, so these people weren't idiots; but I do believe they had trouble dishing off their excess.

And like you said, you never have too much ERA and ratio.

For sure. If they couldn't get value for their value they kept it. But the Field Mice finished half a point behind the Causey Rebels with 33 saves to spare. That's being a little stubborn.

In all events, here's the team Sweeney assembled, arranged to look as much as possible like a viable big-league roster.

WSSACS								
paid player	IP	W	Sv	ERA	Ratio	earned	net	
34 CLEMENS,R	271	18	0	2.62	9.42	44	10	
30 STEWART,D	226	11	0	5.18	13.94	-12	-42	
24 STIEB,D	60	4	0	3.17	11.31	6	-18	
8 KING,E	151	6	0	4.60	12.54	-1	-9	
1 HOUGH,C	199	9	0	4.02	11.78	8	7	
3 NUNEZ,E	25	2	8	6.04	14.57	2	-1	
8 SWIFT,B	90	1	17	1.99	9.96	23	16	
12 BEDROSIAN,S	77	5	6	4.42	12.22	5	-7	
45 THIGPEN,B	70	7	30	3.49	13.05	23	-22	
165 total	1170	63	61	3.83	11.75	95	-70	

paid hitters	Pos	AB	HR	RBI	SB	BA	earned	net
1 MERULLO,M	c	140	5	21	0	.229	3	-2
1 PARENT,M	c	1	0	0	0	.000	0	1
1 LARKIN,G	1b	255	2	19	2	.286	6	5
3 CORA,J	2b	228	0	18	11	.241	5	2
1 RANDOLPH,W	2b	431	0	54	4	.327	17	16
19 BOGGS,W	3b	546	8	51	1	.332	21	2
1 LANSFORD,C	3b	16	0	1	0	.063	-1	0
1 GREEN,G	ss	20	0	1	0	.150	-1	0
32 COLE,A	of	387	0	21	27	.295	19	-13
11 GLADDEN,D	of	461	6	52	15	.247	12	1
1 GRIFFEY,K	of	85	1	9	0	.282	2	1
10 THURMAN,G	of	184	2	13	15	.277	10	0
6 WEBSTER,M	of	32	0	0	2	.125	-1	-7
7 JACKSON,B	dh	71	3	14	0	.225	2	-5
95 total	76	2857	27	274	77	.283	89	-6

The earnings have decimals, so the total is a little different than if they were whole numbers.

His keepers are the pits. The only other one besides Willie Randolph who was any good was Billy Swift.

Which just shows how fortunate we are not to be plagued by the second part of the plan. Spring training may revise your low opinion of Bo and Lansford.

Sweeney had to sweep the pitching categories; he finished eighth in wins, seventh in saves, fifth in ERA and fourth in ratio: 28 pitching points.

Double it and he's got 56 points; he's still right in the middle. That's just where we hate to be. We bail out when we see that coming.

So would I, just to narrow down the teams I had to follow.

The thing is, Sweeney did finish in the middle, even though he fell 20 points short of his pitching goal. This offense of his -- which fell well short, too, ninth in stolen bases -- earned 18 points. He finished 73 home runs and 373 RBI's behind the Brancas, and for this he's awarded 2 points. Clearly, in Sweeney \$, his offense was worth more than \$89. It turned a profit. If Dave Stewart had just pitched like Bob Welch, the Wssacs would have been in the money.

Now -- this is what's so sad -- the only team that played it totally straight last year:

HACKERS							
paid pitchers	IP	W	Sv	ERA	Ratio	earned	net
9 MCCASKILL,K	178	10	0	4.26	13.12	1	-8
14 APPIER,K	208	13	0	3.42	11.53	17	3
5 TAPANI,K	244	16	0	2.99	9.77	34	29
2 DELUCIA,R	182	12	0	5.09	12.56	-1	-3
2 TIMLIN,M	108	11	3	3.16	11.96	15	13
4 ROGERS,K	110	10	5	5.42	14.94	-4	-10
2 BURNS,T	13	1	0	3.38	12.15	1	-3
22 HENNEMAN,M	84	10	21	2.88	12.27	24	2
36 JONES,D	63	4	7	5.54	14.78	-2	-38
96 total	1190	87	36	3.95	12.15	90	-6

paid hitters	Pos	AB	HR	RBI	SB	BA	earned	net
13 FISK,C	c	460	18	74	1	.241	13	0
1 WHITT,E	c	62	0	3	0	.242	0	1
17 DAVIS,A	1b	462	12	69	0	.221	6	11
4 O'BRIEN,P	1b	560	17	88	0	.248	14	-10
1 GANTNER,J	2b	526	2	47	4	.283	11	-10
2 LAW,V	3b	134	0	9	0	.209	-2	4
13 FRYMAN,D	ss	557	21	91	12	.259	23	-10
9 NAEHRING,T	ss	55	0	3	0	.109	-3	12
34 BURKS,E	of	474	14	56	6	.251	13	21
13 DEVEREAUX,M	of	608	19	59	16	.260	21	-8
24 FELIX,J	of	230	2	26	7	.283	8	16
1 HUFF,M	of	243	3	25	14	.251	9	-8
16 WINFIELD,D	of	568	28	86	7	.262	24	-8
16 BAINES,H	dh	488	20	90	0	.295	23	-7
164 total	83	5427	156	726	67	.256	168	4

They bought three quality starters, two grade A relievers; played the crapshoot for their other pitchers. They skimped on no category on offense --

Steals.

Burks and Felix were meant to be four-category studs; as such, the Hackers got them at damn good prices. They bided their time, picking up Winfield late; they bought something old and something new; they made excellent \$1 hitting selections; they never risked \$40 on anybody; they fought for bargains 23 times.

This is a textbook Stage Three operation, and really not a bad team as you just scan the roster, and they finished half point out of last.

So if Hanson picks up the win for the Veecks with his three-hitter in the last game of the season, the Hackers get this year wrecked, too?

Yep.

You guys going to give the Veecks a break?

Nope.

I'm going to think about this. I gotta admit, I'm going to think about this.

Don't take too long.

Why not?

Because Sweeney's plan only works if he has no competition.

You see, it may seem like we're stepping out on Stage Four, but we're really not. This is the disintegration of Stage Three into all sorts of different fiefdoms. yet as soon as one other team comes over the line, as soon as somebody else wants Boggs as much as you do, the jig is up. But if you get in there now, right now, and you do just a *little* better than Sweeney did, you'll finish in the money.

I guarantee it.

Can I quote you to Mushnick?

Yep.

I'm starting to like it. I am. Do I have any chance of finishing first?

Certainly. Stage Three has been the Great Leveller. If your American league team had 74 points last year, it would have finished first in the American Dreams, second in the Lone Stars, second in the Washington Ghosts, second in the Michael Menerys, first in Beizbol, first in Connecticut Valley, second in Virginia Beach, and second in Tri Ds-Jamaica Plain.

If your National league team had 62 points, it would have finished first in Magnolia State, tied for first in Lookout Bush, first in the NL Washington Ghosts, second in Pioneer Valley, second in the Couch Potatoes, second in Out of Their League, tied for first in Hight & Tight, and second in Brauhaus.

I'm really starting to like this.

Better do it quick. It's your last chance to take luck out of the game. I won't say it's skill.

But I'm going to have to pick my pitchers, won't I? No more reaching in and groping.

Yes, you will. However, what's happened in Stage Three is that hitting has become as much of a crapshoot. Back when teams spent maybe 55% of their money on hitting, you could spend 70% and corner the market. But now that they spend 65% on hitting, you can spend 80%, scuffle for small profits 13 times, and buy one Junior Felix.

I keep coming back to the Robin Yount comment. This whole book is right there. If we could reassemble the bidding sheets of everyone in my league last year, I wouldn't be surprised to find 12 teams bunched between \$20 and \$25 for

Felix. I had him down for \$23, Walter Shapiro had him down for \$21. Junior was not, shall we say, Kirby Puckett?

Nor was Kirby.

Exactly. Nor was Kirby.

What's he going to earn this year? Kirby?

Just kidding. Thought I'd get you while your guard was down.

I'm not sure what the point of the game is if it's not to make your own guesses.

Hey, I'm going to make my own guesses. I just want to see what yours are. To tell you the truth, I thought that part was a little cheap, showing your guesses for last year in your book this year. I'm not saying Walter Shapiro doesn't exist.

He's on sabbatical in Japan.

Uh-huh. It does take some some nuts, though, to do that while you're mocking predictions that were in books last year.

The predictions were fine; it's the self-scores I poke fun of. But okay, I can rattle off a few guesses. Losing these contests doesn't bother me a bit; it's losing in my league that hurts. Let's see... how about the left side of the NL infield? Five deep, to match last year's 10 best outfielders.

Shortstop: HoJo \$41, Larkin \$36, Frenandez \$27, Bell \$21, Barberie \$18.

Third base: Sabo \$34, Williams \$30, Zeile \$29, Wallach \$24, Pendleton \$19.

Whoa. Can you afford these prices? You won't give up on Tony F, will you? You like Barberie that much?. I thought you said Zeile would stop running?

No. Can't afford them. If you let me, I'll buy two, though.

I used to say that my prices -- my dollar guesses going into the auction, not the numbers the formulas produce to measure the year before -- were predictions of what the player would do, but that's changed. The prices now are prices. They take into account position scarcity, inflation, Mark Goodman -- a whole host of other concerns. And one of them is to be different. Zeile probably won't have that good a year, nor will Barberie, but I've got to take a chance somewhere. I want to be in a slightly different corner of the room. As predictions, let's just see if I get the order right.

The one thing I did predict with total accuracy last year -- I remember saying this to Dollar Bill as we climbed the stairs to McSorley's -- was that the room would enforce prices and the room would stay the course. No Bermudas Triangles anymore: through sheer force of will, by dint of never-ending concentration, we've banished them from existence. So we could relax. We bought the Eck and Rickey in the first two minutes, then just sat back and cooled it until the \$20 range. We bought Frank Thomas and Molly, then sat back and cooled it some more. In the teens, we bought Edgar Martinez, Fruit Loops and Nolie, then cooled it some more.

Is this my pep talk? If so, am I getting the skill scam?

God no. We got lucky in the crapshoot, we got lucky in the teens, we got lucky in the 20's, we got lucky in the 40's and we got lucky in the 50's. There was no margin for error. This is my last chance probably for the next decade to say how lucky the game has become, because it will be that long before it's our turn again.

And the only reason it was half our turn last year is that the Tooners came back to us. They had a four point lead going into the last week; in mid-August they had a twelve point lead and we were getting fewer at-bats each week than the Wssacs. For the Tooners, who have finished in the money more often than any other team but who have never taken it all, the baseball gods were awfully mean.

What was their angle?

Nothing fancy. Pound every quantitative category except wins. A three-man rotation of Saberhagen, Bosio and Leary. A rotation of Bosio at the end -- after much assistance getting there from Tanana, Aquino and Hesketh -- because they traded Saberhagen.

For who?

Aguilera, when Aguilera had a 12.46 ratio. They cruised in with 74 innings to spare, were first in ERA, second in ratio, and only had 17 more saves than wins.

I proposed a mid-season rule change: any team that has more saves than wins automatically has its saves pared down to the number of wins. I still think it's a good idea and am going to push it at our winter meeting.

You are?

Yes. How can you have more saves than wins? It would be a much neater way than the 1000 inning rule -- maybe in conjunction, so people don't buy one starter and one middle reliever -- to ensure that starters are taken a little more seriously.

Who wants to take them more seriously? I think you are a little tired. Anyway, with this Sweeney plan, the last thing I want is people chasing after starters.

So you're going to do it?

In half my leagues. Not the ones where I have good freeze lists. Not the ones where certain players aren't available.

Better do it quick.

I heard you, I heard you.

It's sick. I love it. No way it can be stopped.

Don't know why it took you so long to finally see the beauty of it?

Probably because you've finally wrecked Rotisserie baseball. But that's all right, it's only a game.

I'm just the historian. Sweeney did it. Besides, it's just a temporary virus that will go away as soon as one other team takes the plunge.

You going to do it this year?

Me? I wouldn't think of it. I've got a good freeze list.

And even if I wanted to, I would be the second one in.

Sweeney's doing it again?

Not Sweeney. Sweeney spawned the beast and disappeared. No one's even talked to him since May. But a trade has already been made that says the beast lives.

Travis Fryman \$13 for Luis Polonia \$27.

The Nova had Polonia. They grow very attached to their players, but how could they turn down this offer? For the good of the league, they knew they should, but in the end they couldn't refuse. And now the Hackers have the foundation of their team.