Chapter 4
Do Look Back

In a no-nonsense, forward-looking book, does 1992 merit a whole chapter? (The Q & A, which normally follows the masochist chapter and is the casualty of a policy of no nonsense, would have asked this question in its ramshackle way.)

Yes. Absolutely. A close look at the previous year -- not the game of baseball but the game of Rotisserie baseball -- yields all sorts of clues about the upcoming season. The great teacher in this game is experience; however, our senses don't always tell us exactly what it is that we're experiencing.

For instance, inflation. We all know that freeze lists drive the prices of unfrozen players up, and I've made general estimates in the past as to how much inflation occurs in the typical league, but it wasn't until this year, working on what used to be called Appendix A, the balance sheet of profit and losses for individual players, that I stumbled on the obvious method of determining the amount of inflation that takes place in the vast army of Heath leagues.

For the average salaries of players, I've always used leagues that have no freezes, either because they're just starting or they're starting over again. You need a minimum of three such leagues; unfortunately, Jerry was unable to supply me with that number this year (the game has certainly peaked and may be contracting), and so -- what to do?

Jerry sends me the average salaries that he himself computes; why not simply use them? I knew why -- and so does the reader -- but I added them up anyway. He rightly averages only the prices that were established in 1992 auctions -- the unfrozen salaries -- and in 24 standard National leagues they added up to $2,942; in 24 American leagues, $3,521. These leagues only, have $2,600 and $3,120, respectively, to spend.

There's your inflation factor: 13% (2942/2600) in the NL; 13% (2329/3120) in the AL.

It's not that any particular league invents money; it's that every league overspends for unfrozen players. Jerry lists the prices paid in all 24 leagues, with the freeze list prices designated by an asterisk. The line for Frank Thomas, for example, reads: $20*, $25*, $40, $20*, $45, $17*... and the average salary for Thomas, based on the non-asterisk prices, is $41. The two players above Thomas, Mickey Tettleton and Danny Tartabull, have average salaries of $21 and $33, and you can plainly see inflation at work among these three hitters. Under the column SAO (Santa Ana Oxymorons -- in less no-nonsense years, I used to relish in these names), the salaries are shown as: Tartabull $24*, Tettleton $27, Thomas $25*. Does anyone for a minute believe there was an Oxymoron in the room who thought Tettleton would outhit Tartabull or Thomas? Tettleton was available; the people who owned Tartabull and Thomas probably duked it out for him.

Baerga $1*, Hamilton $2*, Ventura $10*, Aguilera $15* -- SAO had an especially potent set of freezes, and they overpaid by much more than 13% for the available players. Yet, while inflation clearly varies from league to league, depending on the freezes, the fact that 24 American and 24 National Rotisserie leagues arrived at identical composite inflation factors I doubt is an accident.

Hence a nice little shortcut is suggested by this bit of snooping around in the 1992 numbers: If you have neither the time nor inclination to assess the freeze lists in your own league, you could do worse than multiply 1.13 times the prices of key players that you have targeted. Don't let Sandberg go at $35; push him to $40.

Table 1 -- formerly Appendix A -- is for those who do want to calculate what the inflation was in their own league. I didn't have time to add up all the frozen players in SAO, but, to see if I was on target after tentatively arriving at my prices, I totaled all 230 players that Ozone, a National league, drafted last year. They earned $2,619, a near bull's eye, and 106 of these were frozen players whose salaries totaled $1,206. They earned $1,393. Therefore, is that the inflation factor? 1393/1206, or 16 percent?

By accident, yes. Sixteen percent is the inflation factor for OZN last year, but that's not how you figure it out. You want to know how much money there is to spend on unfrozen players ($2,600 - $1,206 = $1,394) and how much they can earn. They can only earn what the frozen players don't earn, so last year it was $1,207 ($2,600 - $1,393). The inflation factor is the amount the *available* players will cost divided by the amount they will earn (1394/1207), which happens to be also 16 percent.

Thus OZN is an unfortunate example (I haven't even had the opportunity to analyze the American Dreams freezes yet). Because this is so important to preparing for the draft -- not just a lot of masochistic blather -- I'll give a much clearer illustration of the difference. Suppose the frozen players cost $800 and earn $950; what's the inflation factor?

It's not 950/800, which is 19 percent.

It's 1800 (2600 minus 800) divided by 1650 (2600 minus 950), or 9 percent.

To be sure, not all teams can pay a 9 percent inflation rate; the teams without strong freeze lists have to sit and wait, and wait, and wait, until inflation finally, inevitably vanishes.

As to which teams have strong freeze lists, that depends -- doesn't it? -- on what you think of their freezes. But here's a tough call, even in hindsight. Which of these OZN teams had a better freeze list last year?

Mudvillians

	sal	$	+/-
P WORRELL,To	8	14	6
P HERSHISER	13	2	-11
P TEWKSBURY	10	40	30
P BRANTLEY,J	15	14	-1
3B ZEILE,T	15	12	-3
OF SALAZAR,L	5	1	-4
OF NIXON,O	16	22	6
OF REDUS,G	8	6	-2
OF BONDS,B	39	53	14
9 freezes	129	164	35

Johnny's Benches

	sal	$	+/-
P SMITH,Zane	3	14	11
P AVERY,Stev	15	13	-2
P SMITH,Lee	20	38	18
OF GONZALEZ,L	18	12	-6
OF LEWIS,D	10	9	-1
OF DAWSON,A	21	29	8
6 freezes	87	115	28

Well?

Do you want more profits overall (Mudvillians) or more profits per player (Benches)?

In a wide-open draft, the Benches are in better shape; they have more money to spend and there's talent to spend it on. However, as we have seen, OZN's freeze lists tied up more than half of the talent in the league; this draft is going to be a nasty battle for scarce resources. For these two teams, this was the outcome:

Casey's Mudvillians

	sal	$	+/-
P BLACK,Bud	3	-1	-4
P MASON,Roge	3	6	3
P SEANEZ,R	8	0	-8
P SABERHAGEN,B	18	4	-14
P CANDIOTTI	14	16	2
C WILKINS,R	2	8	6
C BERRYHILL,D	6	8	2
1B MCGRIFF,F	33	40	7
1B MURRAY,E	21	22	1
2B ALICEA,L	1	4	3
SS SVEUM,D	1	-1	-2
SS JONES,T	1	-1	-2
OF REED,D	1	2	1
UT GUERRERO,P	19	1	-18
14 buys	131	109	-22
23 Mudvillians	260	272	12

Johnny's Benches

	sal	$	+/-
P WOHLERS,Ma	10	6	-4
P JACKSON,Mi	10	3	-7
P OLIVARES,O	14	1	-13
P WILSON,Ste	1	-6	-7
P BURKE,Tim	1	-4	-5
P WALK,Bob	1	10	9
C REED,JS	1	-1	-2
C SLAUGHT,D	1	15	14
1B PERRY,G	1	3	2
2B SANDBERG,R	35	40	5
3B STILLWELL,K	3	1	-2
3B HANSEN,D	3	0	-3
3B SABO,C	29	11	-18
SS BATISTE,K	4	-1	-5
OF O'NEILL,P	24	16	-8
OF DYKSTRA,L	23	23	0
UT GIBSON,K	9	1	-8
17 buys	170	119	-51
23 Benches	257	233	-24

Any wild spending sprees anywhere? I don't see them. Eddie Murray, Omar Olivares, and the two utility players are the only prices I might quarrel with. The Rudy Seanez gambit is a failed but worthwhile attempt by the Mudvillians to find someone to go with Brantley. The Benches' season was wrecked less by Olivares and Gibson than by O'Neill and Sabo, both acquired at terrific prices, considering the talent pool.

All these teams want to do is hold onto their money. If they can break even in the draft, they have $295 and $285 teams; in the tight confines of Stage Three, very possibly winners.

But they can't. The Mudvillian's see their profits dribble down to $12 and finish fourth in the hypotheticals (no changes after the draft; in the actual final standings, they finished third). The Benches come out of the draft $23 in the red and finish seventh in the hypotheticals (eighth in actuality).

Now, suppose all of Ozn's frozen players last year are free agents this year; which of the Mudvillians' 14 buys are keepers for this year? Which of the 17 Benches are? Who has the better freeze list? It's up to you to figure this out. You have to pencil in your own estimates of what the frozen players are going to earn, and caculate the profits.

A little closer to home, it's not a bad idea to use someone else's estimate of what players are going to earn. The prices in the next chapter, whatever their deficiencies, have the great merit of being completely unbiased about what happens in *your* league. When there are a lot of freezes, the bad predictions will

balance out; you should get a fairly accurate inflation factor; if it's a lot higher or lower than 13 percent, the effort was worth it.

Table 2, last year's Appendix B, remains the backbone of the book, as far as I'm concerned. Rod Beck was worth more, a lot more, in ERA and ratio than Greg Swindell. Terry Leach earned more than Kevin Tapani. Roger Clemens had a better ERA and ratio, effectively, than Mike Maddux. Kenny Lofton stole almost as many bases as Marquis Grissom. Fred McGriff hit as many home runs as Juan Gonzalez and had more RBIs.

Scott Cooper earned more than Kelly Gruber and Jeff Kent more than Gary Gaetti. Bill Doran cost his team more in batting average than he helped in stolen bases. Roger McDowell wiped out his saves with his qualitative numbers. Orel Hershiser and Doc Gooden earned a total of $7. Mike Bordick earned more than Cal Ripken.

Mere curiosities? Not at all. To be sure, you poke around in the ashes of the previous season primarily because it's fun, but you're always on the look-out for that one hidden ember with which to build a fire. When you find it, you bank it, you cover it up again. You don't want it to burn too soon, and you know it will burn out if anyone else finds it.

As a warm-up to the tables this year, a new feature: the Leader And Loser Boards. At least, the compact, orderly presentation is new; they used to be strewn somewhat at random among the player profiles. Each board shouldn't need much explanation. "Earned" means the top 10 earners. How much did the 10 best hitters and pitchers in each league earn in 1992, how much did they cost, what was the profit or loss? (Two out of the 40 in this category did, in fact, lose money.) "Cost" means the 10 highest average salaries in Table 1. "Profit" is what the players earned minus what the players cost, and so is "Loss."

The single most important number in all the boards is the average under "cost." Quite simply, this is the number that indicates predictability. If the 10 best hitters cost $24 on average in the National League and the 10 best pitchers cost $14, it's fair to say that the best hitters were more predictable last year; one might even say, about 70 percent more predictable. The important thing is the relationships. Take a look at what was paid on average for the ten best hitters and pitchers in the American League.

The best pitchers cost *more* than the best hitters last year? That could be very significant, and it could, of course, be a one-year blip on the screen, an aberration of consistency.

However, in the next boards down, notice that the market, which in both leagues paid virtually the same amount for the 10 most expensive hitters, paid $6 more in the American League for the 10 most expensive pitchers. Apparently, AL owners do feel more confident about their ability to identify the best pitchers, perhaps 25 percent more confident (30/24), and they do get a higher return: $27 vs. $23.

On the other hand, the *rate* of return on the 10 highest-priced NL pitchers is phenomenal: $23 back on $24 spent. Incredible! Not a single bomb. Whereas the AL is rocked by explosions, almost all of them relief pitchers.

Big coals here, brightly burning.

For example, what *is* this salary cap all about? On players, I mean? The average salaries for Eckersley and Harvey and Jose and Rocket and Rickey and Barry and HoJo and Sandberg and BoBo and McGriff . . . Too low, much too low! Stage Three doesn't work if everyone's in it. Another way to say it is, if everyone else has left Stage Two, go back to it.

But I'm still of the opinion that there is no Stage Four.