



The Bullpen Gospels: A Non-Prospect's Pursuit of the Major Leagues and the Meaning of Life

By Dirk Hayhurst

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"After many minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years spent in the bullpen, I can verify that this is a true picture of baseball."--Tim McCarver

"There are great truths within, of the kind usually unspoken. And as he expresses them, Dirk Hayhurst describes himself as 'a real person who moonlights as a baseball player.' In much the same manner, while The Bullpen Gospels chronicles how all of us face the impact when we learn reality is both far meaner and far richer than our dreams--it also moonlights as one of the best baseball books ever written."--Keith Olbermann

"A bit of Jim Bouton, a bit of Jim Brosnan, a bit of Pat Jordan, a bit of crash Davis, and a whole lot of Dirk Hayhurst. Often hilarious, sometimes poignant. This is a really enjoyable baseball read."--Bob Costas

"Fascinating. . . a perspective that fans rarely see."--Trevor Hoffman, pitcher for the Milwaukee Brewers

"The Bullpen Gospels is a rollicking good bus ride of a book. Hayhurst illuminates a baseball life not only with wit and humor, but also with thought-provoking introspection."--Tom Verducci, Sports Illustrated

"Dirk Hayhurst has written a fascinating, funny and honest account on life in the minor leagues. I loved it. Writers can't play baseball, but in this case, a player sure can write."--Tim Kurkjian, Senior Writer, ESPN The Magazine, analyst/reporter ESPN television

"Bull Durham meets Ball Four in Dirk Hayhurst's hilarious and moving account of life in baseball's glamour-free bush leagues."--Rob Neyer, ESPN.com

"If Holden Caulfield could dial up his fastball to 90 mph, he might have written this funny, touching memoir about a ballplayer at a career--and life--crossroads.

He might have called it 'Pitcher in the Rye.' Instead, he left it to Dirk Hayhurst, the only writer in the business who can make you laugh, make you cry and strike out Ryan Howard."--King Kaufman, Salon

"The Bullpen Gospels is a funny bone-tickling, tear duct-stimulating, feel-good story that will leave die-hard baseball fans--and die-hard human beings, for that matter--well, feeling good."--Bob Mitchell, author of Once Upon a Fastball

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Editorial Review

Review

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Hilarious, Poignant, a really enjoyable read. --Bob Costas

A true picture of baseball. --Tim McCarver

Dirk Hayhurst has written a fascinating, funny and honest account on life in the minor leagues. I loved it. --Tim Kurkjian, Senior Writer, analyst/reporter ESPN television

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Bull Durham meets *Ball Four*. --Ron Neyer, ESPN.com

Fascinating. . . a perspective that fans rarely see. --Trevor Hoffman, pitcher for the Milwaukee Brewers

He has a message to deliver about the things that matter in life--and those that don't. And he offers sage observations about the nature of celebrity and ambition, forgiveness and family. . . . Mr. Hayhurst is already a writer, maybe even a major-league prospect. --*Wall Street Journal*

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From the Author

Best Baseball Autobiography Since Bouton?

Dirk Hayhurst's description of himself for the author's ID in his upcoming book *The Bullpen Gospels* reads in part, "Dirk is a former member of the San Diego Padres, and after this book gets printed, a former member of the Toronto Blue Jays."

I'm not sure he's correct. In fact, I'm not sure that in these times when so many fans feel like they're constantly having the wool pulled over their eyes by athletes ill-equipped for the attempt, if Hayhurst's constant honesty, his remarkable candor, his drumbeat of unadorned confessed self-doubt, and his seamless writing, won't resonate through the sport like the first true wonderful day of spring when the game and the weather finally reassure you that winter has been beaten back, at least for a season.

In fact, I'm not sure that he hasn't written the best baseball autobiography since Jim Bouton's *Ball Four*. For Hayhurst, who bombed as a starter for the Padres in 2008 and then showed promise out of the Jays' bullpen the season past, has written what Bouton wrote, and what a decade before Bouton, what Jim Brosnan wrote - a book that is *seemingly* about baseball but which, as you read further and further into it, is obviously much bigger than that. These are books about life: struggle, confusion, purpose, purposelessness, and the startling realization that achievement and failure are nearly-identical twins, one which gnaws and deadens, the other which just as often produces not elation but a tinny, empty sound.

Brosnan's achievement, in *The Long Season* and *Pennant Race*, was to introduce to a world which previously had no information of any kind on the subject, the concept of athlete as human being. What did he have to do when demoted, or traded? What happened when management changed? Was there a Mrs. Athlete, and could they share a martini now and again? (answer: You bet).

Bouton's breakthrough was to show the concept of athlete as *flawed* human being. Too many martinis, some of them shared with women other than Mrs. Athlete. Athletes who might not have been geniuses on the field or off, but who seemed invariably managed and coached by men even less intelligent. The struggle to self-start as one's team sank from optimism, to contention, to inconsistency, to irrelevance, to embarrassment. And yet, were they enjoying themselves, did their lives change for the better, was being an athlete fun? (answer: You bet).

And now here is Hayhurst, who may single-handedly steer baseball away from the two decades-long vise grip of Sport-As-Skill-Development. Since my own childhood, we have ever-increasingly devalued every major leaguer but the superstar. Late in the last century we began to devalue every minor leaguer but the top draft choice. If you don't make it into somebody's *Top Prospects* list, you might as well not exist. Dirk Hayhurst is writing of his days, his months, his years, as far away from the *Top Prospects* lists as imaginable. He is, in *The Bullpen Gospels*, often the last man on an A-ball pitching staff, and trying to answer a series of successively worsening questions cascading from the simplest of them: Why?

This, of course, is why the book transcends the game. It's not just Dirk Hayhurst's existential doubt about whether he'll reach the majors or why he's still trying or if he shouldn't be helping the homeless instead of worrying about getting the last out of a seven-run inning. He is experiencing the crisis of reality through which we all pass, often daily: when our dreams about life crash head first into its realities, what the hell are we supposed to do then?

Thus *The Bullpen Gospels* is a baseball book the way "Is That All There Is?" is a Leiber-Stoller pop song by Peggy Lee from 1969. It is the primordial battle of hope and faith and inspiration versus disillusionment and rust and inertia.

Sounds pretty grim, doesn't it? But of course therein lies the delightful twist: like Brosnan and Bouton before him, Hayhurst repeatedly rediscovers the absurd hilarity of it all, and the book is consistently laugh-out-loud funny. And like all great artists, he pulls back curtains we never thought to investigate: from how assiduously minor leaguers debate which "Come-out songs" they will choose or which numbers they will wear, to the pecking order of seat locations on the ever-infamous bush league bus trip.

My favorite is probably the mechanics of something the average reader will have never heard of before, let

alone have contemplated. It's "the host family" - the living arrangements by which the non-first-rounders survive their seasons in the minors. Hayhurst hilariously defines such temporary homes as ranging from Wackford Squeers' Dotheboys Hall, to the visitations from *In Cold Blood*.

It doesn't hurt that Hayhurst is a fluid and gifted writer, whose prose can take off like a jet and compel you to read for half an hour more than you have. He populates the pages of *The Bullpen Gospels* with teammates, some identified, some amalgamated, some under aliases - and if the book takes off, ripping the Hayhurstian masks off the more colorful ones may become a low-key hobby after the book is published on March 30th.

The reaction will be fascinating to see. In 1970, my father endured my clamoring and bought *Ball Four* and read it himself before handing it to me: "I know you know all these words. Just don't use them around the house. Read this carefully, there's a lot of truth in here." But ever since, we fans have been bombarded for decades by altered versions of truth, all of them writ large and desperately trying to impress us with their essential-ness. Baseball books have tended to focus only on the big, and to try to make it bigger still. We've gone from the unlikely accuracy of Jose Canseco's slimy indictment of the steroid era, through the analyze-all-the-damn-fun-out-of-the-game-why-don't-you tone of *Moneyball* and its imitators, through what may in retrospect be seen as a Hayhurst-precursor in Matt McCarthy's fraudulent *Odd Man Out*, through dozens of historical works insisting everything that has ever happened in baseball has re-shaped the nation - Jackie Robinson (yes), the 1951 N.L. pennant race (very possibly), the 1912 World Series (no way).

Here, instead, will be a modest book by a modest relief pitcher who has appeared in the modest total of 25 major league games presenting what the modest author thinks (incorrectly) is only modest truth. He has yet to get his own major league baseball card and as I write this there are exactly two of his souvenirs available on eBay and one of them is a photo for \$6.99 ("Or Best Offer"). His preface warns you if you seek scandal or steroids, look elsewhere, and the only bold face name in the whole 340 pages, Trevor Hoffman, comes across as a low-key gentleman.

And yet there in the prologue Hayhurst offers a key to what he has written and why, self-guidance to which he sticks pretty neatly: "I also believe there is more to the game than just baseball. For all the great things baseball is, there are some things it is absolutely not. And that is what this story is all about."

Of course, just as Bouton's exposure of the real flaws of the real men who played baseball in 1969 made them even *more* appealing than the phony deities into which they'd been transformed, the great things are made somehow greater by how well Hayhurst contextualizes them, how honestly he tells his story, and how vividly he takes us inside his world.

-- Keith Olbermann

(edited by author)

From the Inside Flap

Hayhurst, who pitched quite credibly for Toronto last season, was kind enough to send me an advance copy of his book, *The Bullpen Gospels*, which is due out at the end of March. With stellar reviews from Keith Olbermann, Rob Neyer, Tim Kurkijan, Tom Verducci, and Trevor Hoffman, among others, the book hardly needs my seal of approval to cement its place in baseball's literary canon.

But it sure has it. *The Bullpen Gospels* is hilarious, touching, unflinching in its honesty, and unapologetic in its basic decency. Major league athletes are expected to be confident to the point of arrogance - in fact, we think of it as essential to their success -- but in *Gospels*, the author turns a hard, narrow focus on his own self-doubt. The hilarious minor-league antics and touching tales of stepping out of his uniform to act like a real person, I had come to expect from Hayhurst's "Non-Prospect Diary", but I wasn't prepared for the raw honesty regarding offseason life back in Ohio or the nagging self-doubt that regularly accompanied the pitcher everywhere, including the mound.

I was even less prepared for the extent to which I related to that part of the story and how many of the same experiences I had myself had - the messed-up family life, the sometimes crushing self-doubt. And, most of all, the way that those things cause the desperate need to prove oneself by succeeding to the fullest in one's career - how that drive for success leads to ever-greater outward success without ever fixing the problems that caused that desire for success in the first place - because, how can it?

But, in a way, that's the point - strip away the media persona and the trappings of the professional baseball player, and what is a minor-league player? A young man, probably in his early-to-mid 20s, with sporadic but near-crippling self-doubt, equally intermittent feelings of invincibility, a desperate need to prove himself without a full understanding of why, little money, and, playing the percentages, serious father issues. And here I thought that all Dirk and I had in common was our love for comic books.

None of this is to take away from the fact that *The Bullpen Gospels* is very much a baseball book. The ball scenes are exciting, the moments of team camaraderie genuine and memorable, and the bullpen hijinx hilarious. I have no doubt that the former and current players who have extolled how accurately *Gospels* captures the essence of playing baseball for a living are completely right. But I thought the book was much more than that. As Hayhurst himself mentions in his conversation with Trevor Hoffman late in the book, it's not only about what baseball is, but also what it's not.

It's difficult to write an autobiographical book in which you are fair about yourself. I speak from experience - although I was a biochemistry major in college, I lacked the scientific inspiration to do my honours thesis in that field, so I fell back on my other major, English, and wrote a book of creative autobiographical non-fiction. I had the stories to tell but not the willingness to make myself look bad, nor the dishonesty to make myself look good, so I ended up writing as little about myself as possible. But full credit to Dirk - *The Bullpen Gospels* tells the stories that make him look good and doesn't shy away from the ones that make him look bad. I can't believe I spent the 2009 season rooting for a guy who yells at his grandmother to shut up!

As a lawyer, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the unbelievably hilarious Kangaroo Court scenes -- some of my favourites in the book - where players bring one another up on "charges" -- ranging from the effects of eating too much Mexican food to talking about oneself in the third person to rank stupidity -- and try them before a jury of their peers.

I can't encourage you enough to pick up a copy of *The Bullpen Gospels*. You will speed through it and, if you are like me, gain a new appreciation for ballplayers, not for the work that they do, but for the men that they (at least, some of them!) are. You will laugh your tail off on one page and, quite possibly, tear up on the next. Most of all, laughing with the guys on the team, suffering through uncomfortable bus rides and fleabag motels, experiencing the agony of letting a game slip through your fingers, the despair in getting busted down a level, and the joy in victory, you'll feel like you - an ordinary person - are a ballplayer. But you'll also feel like the ballplayer is, for once, an ordinary person.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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