A Baseball Buff's Brief Memoir
Bernard Meltzer

I was a boy in Philadelphia in the late 1920s—the glory days of the Philadelphia Athletics. They sparkled with stars—Lefty Grove, Rube Walsberg, Al Simmons, Mickey Cochrane. In 1929 they went all the way to win the American League pennant and the World Series. In second place were their big rivals, the New York Yankees, with their awesome Murderers' Row—Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Bob Meusel, and Tony Lazzeri.

For a time—a very brief time—I had my personal dreams of baseball glory, but a weak arm and bat brought me down to earth. That was also the time when the members of my gang were walking encyclopedias of baseball statistics.

It was a dangerous time; one could lose face by missing on Rogers Hornsby's batting averages. With that kind of information and a newspaper reporter's ability to second guess managers, I mused about becoming a manager. But reality again intervened, and so I went to law school and, after a while, became a law teacher, with a special interest in labor law and labor arbitration.

In 1981—a little more than 50 years after those youthful baseball dreams—I played a role that involved me with the real thing. To end the suspense, let me say that I served as a salary arbitrator for the 1981 season.

You may already know how that arbitration works. The player gives the arbitrator one salary figure, and the team gives him another. The arbitrator picks one figure or the other—no splitting the difference. In addition, the arbitrator is not to give any reason for his award and is supposed to keep the proceedings secret.

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The one-or-the-other idea—which in a different context I helped popularize—is, of course, to put pressure on both parties to be reasonable so as to narrow and then eliminate the gap between them and to avoid the need for arbitration.

When negotiations don't work out that way, the arbitrator is on the hot seat. One side typically thinks that he has hit a home run, the other that he has struck out (and broken his bat while doing so).

I shouldn't and won't tell you what happened during the hearings. But I will tell you what happened after I gave my award. Some reporters said I was ignorant; others said I was dumb. I preferred the first batch.

I thought about all this flak and the fact that, for the first time in my professional life, I had been told to state only my conclusion and to skip any reasons. I smiled as I realized the position that I had somehow achieved. I had—for one golden moment—become an umpire.

Mr. Meltzer is Distinguished Service Professor of Law and a 1937 alumnus of the Law School. These reflections first appeared in the Chicago Tribune's column "The Observer," April 19, 1981, when baseball buffs thought they had a whole season before them.