



Heart of the Game: Life, Death, and Mercy in Minor League America

S.L. Price

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“Genuine and raw...a heartfelt work of despair, triumph, and redemption.”

—*Boston Globe*

The critically acclaimed *Heart of the Game*—subtitled “Life, Death, and Mercy in Minor League America”—explores the pure roots of a sport that is stained by scandal at its highest level. S.L. Price, award-winning writer for *Sports Illustrated* and author of *Pitching Around Fidel*, gives a tragic but ultimately uplifting account of the death of minor league baseball coach Mike Coolbaugh, and in doing so, illustrates the many reasons and myriad ways in which baseball still has a hold on America. A *Friday Night Lights* for baseball fans, *Heart of the Game* reveals the classic heart of small-town America.

Heart of the Game: Life, Death, and Mercy in Minor League America Details

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From Reader Review Heart of the Game: Life, Death, and Mercy in Minor League America for online ebook

Amy Palmer says

"Heart of the Game" follows two "lifers" in baseball: Mike Coolbaugh and Tino Sanchez. Their paths became forever entwined on July 22, 2007 when Tino hit a foul ball that struck Mike in the neck, killing him almost instantly. On that day, Mike was coaching and Tino was playing for the Tulsa Drillers, a Texas league team and AA affiliate of the Colorado Rockies.

Each chapter discusses first Mike, then Tino. The reader learns about their youth, their road to professional baseball and about their lives outside of baseball. The book gives an inside glimpse into the world of baseball and what it's like for most of the men who play it, like Mike and Tino. Along with telling about the ups and downs of a lifer's career, some eerie coincidences are revealed.

If you are a baseball fan, especially a minor league fan, this is a great book to read. It has it's happy moments, but it is a melancholy tale of what life is really like when you're trying to break into the majors or fighting to stay there. I feel like by reading it I was let into a secret club where I got to know what is really happening on the field when I'm cheering on my favorite team.

Chris Witt says

Once again shows off the abilities of a strong writer for Sports Illustrated.

"Heart" alternates coverage of both of the key figures in a fatal accident, both leading up to and away from the moment.

The excerpt that was published in SI in advance of the book left me teary-eyed, and the full book did the same.

Price also does a nice job here showing what life is like for a career minor leaguer. Probably the most interesting look at that lifestyle I have read since Dick Hayhurst's "The Bullpen Gospels", though clearly these are two entirely different books.

RIP Mike Coolbaugh and prayers to your family.

Nancy says

The full title of this book is Heart of the Game: Life, Death, and Mercy in Minor League America. The book is the story of Mike Coolbaugh, a minor league coach who was killed in July of 2007 by a line-drive foul ball during a AA baseball game. It is a fascinating look at baseball's minor leagues as told thru the baseball careers of both Coolbaugh and Tino Sanchez, who hit the fatal ball. Insightful, heartbreaking, and hopeful, this is a story that helps define baseball and the unique hold it has over the hearts of so many Americans.

Amber says

This is a very interesting book, highlighting some interesting findings I was familiar with--such as that NFL teams "go for it" on fourth down way too infrequently, that there is little evidence for systematically "hot" players, and that draft picks later in the draft are undervalued relative to top picks--but also introduces several interesting new pieces of research.

The authors do a lot of work on home-field advantage, finding that players do not actually perform better or worse at home versus on the road (looking at things like shooting percentage, how many swings make contact, etc.), but that the referees favor home teams in judgment calls. The data showing how large the strike zone is for home versus visiting teams is particularly informative. (Interestingly, non-judgment calls, like whether a player steps out of bounds, do not favor home teams.)

Another interesting piece of analysis is that NBA teams perform significantly better at home in part because the schedule is such that the home team is less likely than the visiting team to be playing for the second night in a row--something I hadn't realized but that makes a lot of sense.

The authors also dispel the myth that the Cubs have been unlucky--really, they have just been bad. And their attendance, contra other baseball teams, is relatively inelastic to the team's performance, so ownership/management has much less incentive to build a winner. One related piece of data that made me laugh--Cubs attendance is relatively elastic with respect to beer prices. And the team has among the highest ticket prices in the league, but the third-lowest beer prices. Ha!

A great book, highly recommended to anyone interested in an analytical approach to sports. Better written, and more new material, than the books by David Berri.

E.J. says

This is the story of the life and death of Mike Coolbaugh, coach for the minor league Tulsa Drillers, who was struck and killed by a foul ball. My daughter and I were in attendance at Dickey-Stephens Park in North Little Rock, Arkansas for this game and witnessed this tragedy. As an avid baseball fan, this was one of the darkest days of the sport for me.

This book puts into perspective, the struggles, the ups and downs that a player in the minor leagues goes through in trying to make it to the big leagues. It also tells of a mans love for the game and the love of his family.

This is one of the best books on the game of baseball that I have ever read. Anyone who follows the game of baseball should read this book . It gives a good example of how tough it is for a ball player to break into the major leagues.

R says

An interesting story basically about two players in the minor leagues who catch a quick glance of the major leagues (the field of dreams for minor players), but are not quite good enough to remain there either because

of their abilities, quirk of fate, or the minor league game itself. Unfortunately, the story takes a turn for the worse when Coolbaugh decides to quit as a player in the minors, but stays on as a coach and ends up getting hit by a foul ball which kills him -- a very unusual event to happen in baseball history. Price describes the lives of Coolbaugh and Tino the minor league player who hit the foul ball killing him, and gives us a look into organization of minor league baseball - a place generally left out of the mainstream consciousness.

Nikki Stafford says

I have never read a non-fiction baseball book before, despite the fact my husband has an entire bookshelf full of them. But we were on vacation recently and this one brought him to tears, and he said I had to read it because it was such a great story. So I did. This is the story of Mike Coolbaugh, his life in the minor leagues, getting called up to the majors for one game, then back down, then back up for a month, then back down, and it's the story of the real grind that ball players go through. The Bautistas and Aaron Judges and Cespedeses? Flukes. Baseball is mostly about those guys who are so close to touching the ring, they can taste it, but they're only given a glimpse before they're sent back down. It's also the story of Tino Sanchez, a Puerto Rican player who didn't have the money the Coolbaugh family did, but whose father similarly pushed him to get to the majors, and who also ended up chugging around the minor leagues and various bush leagues, constantly in pursuit of something that always seemed just out of his reach. The book culminates (and you know this in the opening chapter) with Tino Sanchez stepping up to bat in a minor league game, shortly after Coolbaugh had quit the game as a player and had become the batting coach, and hitting a line drive straight down to first... hitting Coolbaugh in the head and killing him instantly.

This is the story of what ball players go through just to get close to fame and fortune, but find other ways to love the game and play it, and it's the story of the sacrifices both they and their families make on the way. I loved the storytelling — guys make fun of "sappy romances" but honestly, the sappiest, most treacly and overwrought writing you'll find these days are usually in the sports pages, where sports writers are allowed to use hyperboles and flowery language and bring other men to tears (and I say that wholeheartedly embracing that sort of unabashed writing). There were aspects I didn't love — Coolbaugh's father comes off as a jerk and is never really taken to task for it, and the very right-wing Christianity that's pervasive throughout the book can get in the way at times. Also, as a woman reading the book, I was irked at times by the way Coolbaugh was upheld as a pinnacle of manhood and parenthood for being such a doting father, and nothing was said about the long weeks and months where his wife was the single parent to two very young boys (with a third on the way). Women are pretty much relegated to the sidelines of the story throughout the book, but perhaps that's just a hallmark of sports writing as well. These are very minor complaints, because Price's sense of description is amazing — in the scenes at the ballpark, I swear you can smell the beer and hot dogs, it was so realistic — and when he describes the various family members getting the phone calls about what had just happened to Mike, I couldn't see the pages, I was crying so much. My son dreams of being in the MLB and even though he's very young, he's already training quite seriously as a ball player, so I'm surrounded by this dream of glory every day of my life. This book brought home the reality of what dreaming big is all about, and in the end, shows us that maybe not walking onto the field of Fenway every night... is okay. I loved this book.

Tom Gase says

You might need a tissue for this book at times, but it's a good read. It's the story of Mike Coolbaugh, who

was struck by a foul ball off the bat of Tito Sanchez and was instantly killed in a minor league game during the 2007 season. It was first an article in Sports Illustrated and then S.L. Price made it into this book. This book does a good job of doing a quick preview of what happened that July night in 2007, then flashes back to tell the story of Coolbaugh's and Sanchez's lives up to the fateful night. The book also details how dangerous the game can be, as it talks about Champman's death in 1920 and Tony Congalario's (spelling?) beaming in 1967, as well as a few others. Shortly after this incident, it was made required for first and third base coaches to always wear helmets. This book surprised me and I actually finished it in about three days. It IS a very sad book, and be prepared for that, but if you like minor league baseball or just baseball in general, you'll probably like this one. An important read.

Chris Munson says

If you think the politics in your job are difficult to deal with...try being a minor-league baseball player. Price does a masterful job of telling the story of several minor-league lifers who come together in one life-altering event on July 22, 2007. Follow the story of two heartbreaking baseball careers that collide in the tragic sequence of events that resulted in the accidental death of Mike Coolbaugh. The author does a wonderful job of detailing the life of a minor-league baseball player – including the politics, false hope, small victories and great tragedies of life in baseball. See how several lives are forever changed by an act that took less than a second to unfold. You will gain a whole new respect for what baseball players go through to achieve their dreams. I will definitely be thinking about this book the next time I want to boo someone at Coors Field. Warning: The last quarter of the book is a real tear-jerker.

Will Byrnes says

Death is something we do not usually associate with the playing of baseball. It usually comes up when we consider the passing of greats, like Lou Gehrig, from illness or time, or off-the-field misadventure. But when a small, hard ball, whistles through the air at speeds over a hundred miles an hour the human body is at risk. *Heart of the Game* looks at a terrible event, the death in 2007 of minor league coach Mike Coolbaugh from a sizzling foul ball to the neck, how he got to be there on that dark day, and how it came to be that Tino Sanchez, a journeyman minor league utility player, came to be the instrument of Coolbaugh's untimely passing.

Author S.L. Price - from KSJC.com

Price uses the biographies of these two men to paint a portrait of what it means, in cold, hard detail, to be professional participants in the great American past-time. The focus is on the minor leagues, for neither Coolbaugh nor Sanchez ever achieved significant major league experience. Coolbaugh brought an athletic passion to playing that had been reinforced by a very focused and very demanding father. Sanchez took longer to reach his cruising altitude, beginning as a kid with a chip on his shoulder, but developing, under the tutelage of a gifted, sensitive coach to a mature player-coach.

Mike Coolbaugh - image from DickAllen15.com

This is a book about how frustrating it can be to forever watch the shimmer of The Show ahead in the distance, always to see those less talented, less dedicated, less unlucky cruise past. True to its title, the book looks at what constitutes actual heart, respect for the game, and pokes its nose here and there into the appeal of minor league ball to our public perception.

After having offered bios of Coolbaugh and Sanchez, Price veers off into another tale of pitching prospect Jon Asahina, who was creamed in the head by a line drive. It struck me (no, not intended) at first that this was a diversion, that Price had exhausted his core material and was casting about for supporting filler. But it turns out that there were many individuals involved in the game on the day that Coolbaugh died who had been touched by such events, whether as the victim of a speeding ball, or a close personal witness to a prior on-field horror. More such connections follow.

Tino Sanchez - image from MiLB.com

Once the broad background has been prepared, the back third of the book returns us to the death of Coolbaugh, the specifics of that day, and the impact of his death on both participants and relations. Keep a box of tissues handy.

Price's is not the first, nor will it be the last book to offer a close look at minor league sports in America. It is not the first, nor will it be the last to peer past the romantic image many of us have of the sport to some of the seamier aspects. His look at how harsh it can be to be a minor league lifer is very detailed and rich. His look at the personal impact of Mike Coolbaugh's death is very moving. His writing is mostly reportorial, but with occasional bursts of poetry. Heart of the Game is a worthwhile addition to the library of anyone interested in sport or in life in America beyond the big cities.

=====EXTRA STUFF

Links to the author's personal, and Twitter pages

Price's writings for Sports Illustrated

Another set of articles from Longform.org

James says

It's a clichéd ambition to pass out of this life doing what one loves: the fisherman with his fly rod, the golfer in the tee box, the baseball lifer on the diamond. Mike Coolbaugh—a survivor of 17 years in the bush leagues—met his end on a ball field in North Little Rock, Arkansas. His passion for baseball, however, provided scant consolation to those who knew and loved him—and even less to the man who hit the foul ball that dropped him stone dead in the first base coach's box two years ago.

In Heart of the Game, S.L. Price does much more than tell the story of Coolbaugh's death at the age of 35. He celebrates Coolbaugh's life, which revolved around his family every bit as much as it did his long career in professional baseball. Price intertwines this with the story of Tino Sanchez, who lives with the undeserved guilt as the author of that deadly line drive.

Both men were baseball lifers, with Sanchez putting 11 years into the minor leagues before bowing out after the 2007 season. Their stories, in many ways, parallel those of hundreds of other young men who follow their dream from small town to small town, occasionally losing sight or hope of reaching the big leagues. Coolbaugh made a couple of brief stops in the majors, hit a couple of dingers. Sanchez never did. Quite possibly his playing career would have drawn to a close anyway after the '07 season based on his .175 average in 57 at-bats at Double-A Tulsa. Had he hit .300 that year, it would have made the decision to walk away more difficult, but Sanchez's passion for playing the game died on that Arkansas field when Coolbaugh hit the turf.

Coolbaugh's playing career concluded the season before, after a frustrating and injury-plagued year at Triple-A Omaha. He didn't get to make the call himself. It was made for him. When spring rolled around without a single contract offer, he stayed home with his expectant wife and two young sons, playing a new role as a full-time dad. When a rare midseason coaching opportunity arose at Tulsa, he jumped at the chance, returning to the Texas League, where he had spent parts of two seasons as a player. His older brother Scott, who played 13 years, was the hitting coach for the Frisco RoughRiders, and they looked forward to their first head-to-head meeting as coaches in early August.

They never made it to that matchup. On July 22, in his 18th game as a minor league coach, Mike Coolbaugh made a rookie mistake of watching the runner instead of the hitter. Sanchez's liner caught him behind his left ear, just above the neck. He fell without even reaching up his hands. Though he wasn't pronounced dead until later at the hospital, that was a mere formality. Coolbaugh's life came to an end before the trainers rushed out of the dugouts.

As Price posits more than once, Coolbaugh's death wouldn't likely have been so universally mourned had he died in a car wreck. Maybe the Texas League wouldn't have taken up a collection for his widow and kids. Maybe his sons wouldn't have thrown out the first pitch at the Rockies' first home playoff game that fall. And that would have been a shame, because the Coolbaugh we meet in Heart of the Game is an everyman underdog with a twist: He's a better person than we are, but we like him anyway. He did things right, on and off the field. He wrote love notes to his wife and cherished his time with his children. He maximized his potential, even though he didn't spend much time in the big leagues, hitting 258 minor league home runs and collecting nearly a thousand RBIs. And he deserves to have been immortalized in these pages.

Credit Price for having the courage to dive headlong into this story. He steps respectfully through the aftermath, eliciting yet-smoldering heartbreak from the families of both Coolbaugh and Sanchez. This isn't the 5 O'Clock News camped out on the family's doorstep. In fact, Coolbaugh's widow Mandy shares such personal items as poems and letters written by her husband during their 11 years together. Someday, when her children are much older, she may even be proud for them to read this book.

Here they will see their father as they never got the chance in life. While it's not as personal a story to the rest of us who never met Mike Coolbaugh, it's a compelling read all the same. Highly recommended, and not just for baseball fans.

Ann says

In 2007, minor league baseball player Tino Sanchez Jr. hit a foul ball that struck his team's first base coach, Mike Coolbaugh, killing him instantly. Their separate, parallel stories of baseball players who spent years in baseball's minor leagues life struggling to make it are the core of this book, but readers also learn about how

major league baseball works, safety issues, and above all, the emotional heart of the sport. S. L. Price is one of the best sports journalists around, and a tremendous storyteller.

If I were more of a baseball fan, I would've rated this higher.

Philip says

I'm not sure what I expected from this book, it's essentially a biography of two minor league baseball players involved in a terrible tragedy. The insight into the life of minor league baseball is quite interesting, especially since I have a son who aspires to play pro baseball. The author does a good job of telling this story in an honest, yet considerate way. He really showed the dignity of the people so deeply affected by this tragedy. An incident like the one this book is based upon calls us to reflect on our humanity, and the brevity of it. I firmly believe that the only way to live this life is in the daily realization that it will one day end. S.L. Price's book is a rich story with a lot of food for thought.

Spiros says

At 8:53 PM, July 22, 2007, Tino Sanchez, utilityman for the Tulsa Drillers, the Colorado Rockies' AA affiliate, sliced a ball foul down the firstbase line at Little Rock's Dickey-Stephens ballpark. The ball struck neophyte batting coach Mike Coolbaugh just below his left ear, killing him instantly. This book traces the tortuous paths which brought both men, minor league "lifers", to that fatal spot.

At first, I found myself a little put off with what I perceived as special pleading in Price's account of Coolbaugh's vicissitudes; there are only 1200 spots on MLB's 40 man rosters, and the minors are chock-a-block with men of great talent, drive and determination, who only got a cup of coffee in the Show. Simply put, there is no evidence that would lead one to believe that Coolbaugh, given better opportunities, would have been more than a very marginal big leaguer; the inordinate number of times he was hit by balls on the hands would indicate that, while he was very good at waiting on pitches, he was not especially good at turning on them. His first Home Run in the Show was an opposite field job at Miller Park, in Milwaukee. Where I feel he would have made his mark would have been as a minor league coach, moving up to the Show as a bench coach and, who knows? maybe even a manager.

All in all, this was a very moving portrait of two lives, one cut short, the other derailed, by one freakish accident. It also paints a vivid picture of the struggles gone through by men trying hard to keep their dreams alive.

Ron says

This book is based on an article that Price wrote for *Sports Illustrated* about the death of Mike Coolbaugh, a minor-league baseball coach struck down by a foul ball to the head. It expands to tell the story of Coolbaugh's entire professional baseball career -- years spent toiling in the minors, a brief shot at major-league glory, followed by more gruntwork and the eventual shift to coaching. But this is also the story of teammate Tino Sanchez, who hit the foul ball -- and spent nearly as long trying to prove himself in the sport, landing at nearly the same point on the career arc.

Price lays the melodrama on a bit thick at first, but once he gets into the lives of his two central figures, he

does a better job of letting their story speak for itself. When it does turn heartbreaking, it's because Coolbaugh and Sanchez have become real people for readers, and because their tragedy is human rather than iconic.
