



Intangiball: The Subtle Things That Win Baseball Games

By Lonnie Wheeler

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A unique and refreshing ode to the “little things” that represent baseball’s heartbeat—the player who, in countless ways, makes other players better.

Intangiball tracks the progress of the Cincinnati Reds through five years of culture change, beginning with the trades of decorated veterans Adam Dunn and Ken Griffey, Jr. It also draws liberally from such character-conscious clubs as the Atlanta Braves, St. Louis Cardinals, San Francisco Giants, New York Yankees, and Tampa Bay Rays. Author, sportswriter, and eternal fan of the game, Lonnie Wheeler systematically identifies the performance-enhancing qualities (PEQs) that together comprise the “communicable competitiveness” that he calls “teamship.”

Intangiball is not designed to debunk *Moneyball*, but rather to sketch in what it left out: “What order is there to a baseball world in which a struggling rookie benefits not a bit from the encouraging words of the veteran who drapes his arm around the kid’s shoulders; in which Derek Jeter’s professionalism serves none but him; in which there is no reward for hustle, no edge for enthusiasm, no payoff for sacrifice; in which there is no place for the ambient contributions of David Eckstein, Marco Scutaro, or the aging, battered Scott Rolen; in which shared purpose serves *no* purpose?”

Intangibles, as it turns out, not only ennoble the game; they help win it. And this is the book every fan must read.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Wheeler's been writing outstanding books for nearly 30 years. . . . [*Intangiball* is] a well-sourced, well-researched, well-reported, largely anecdotal treatise on the importance of important qualities that can't be, or haven't yet been, measured. As such, I believe it's the only book of its kind." (Rob Neyer)

"An absolute must read for any fan of the beautiful game. . . . Wheeler's knowledge of and great affection for the storied denizens of the dugout make this book a grand slam." (*The Christian Science Monitor*)

"If you've been around the game long enough, this is how you see it. Physical tools get you there, but intangibles help make the difference." (Bob Gibson, Hall of Fame pitcher)

"Lonnie Wheeler, who himself has all the intangibles, has written a relentlessly entertaining inside look at what makes the game of baseball so fascinating. He unlocks the secrets of winning that most fans aren't even aware of. If you liked *Moneyball*, you'll love *Intangiball*." (Peter Golenbock, author of *THE BRONX ZOO* and *BUMS*)

"Offers a strong counterbalance to the culture of sabermetrics that has all but kidnapped Major League Baseball." (*Booklist*)

"Baseball writer Lonnie Wheeler isn't opposed to sabermetrics, the application of sophisticated (and often recondite) statistics to professional baseball. But he does object to a habit that stat-hounds sometimes fall into: disregarding the sport's old-fashioned virtues. . . . Entertainingly garrulous. . . . A most enjoyable book." (Dennis Drabelle *The Washington Post*)

"Splendid sports writing. . . . Throughout this fine book, Lonnie Wheeler demonstrates the fun and excitement of the game well played. Wheeler's work demonstrates the same winning level of passion and intensity." (Roger I. Abrams *New York Journal of Books*)

"In his new book, *Intangiball*, Wheeler, a veteran baseball writer, identifies the kind of ball players who make good teams winning teams. . . . In sports – or in the workplace – the catalyst is a team player who sets the tone for how to behave as a teammate. Call it the 'one for all, all for one' type of leadership brings peers together for a common cause. Intangible yes, but it sure does work." (John Baldoni *Forbes*)

"For both the pure-numbers crowd and those who prefer their baseball with a little more heart, mystery and soul, pick up a copy of Lonnie Wheeler's *Intangiball*. . . . Data-driven baseball fans who could use a little fresh air in addition to the allowance for 'narrative' thinking could benefit from keeping an open mind to Wheeler's approach." (Michael Silverman *The Boston Herald*)

"Wheeler explores how intangibles matter by tracking the Cincinnati Reds' transformation from a struggling team . . . to champions of the National League Central Division in two out of three seasons. . . . A thoughtful companion to Michael Lewis' *Moneyball*." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"*Intangiball* doesn't diminish the importance of statistics in determining a player's worth. *Intangiball* simply suggests that intangibles matter. . . . You pick your side. I'm in the middle, with Wheeler. Numbers matter.

They do not matter completely." (Paul Daugherty *Cincinnati Enquirer*)

About the Author

Lonnie Wheeler's numerous books include collaborations on the autobiographies of Hank Aaron (*I Had a Hammer*), Bob Gibson (*Stranger to the Game*), Mike Piazza (*Long Shot*), a baseball dialogue between Gibson and Reggie Jackson (*Sixty Feet, Six Inches*), and reflections on a summer at Wrigley Field (*Bleachers*). The author of *Intangiball: The Subtle Things That Win Baseball Games*, he lives in New Richmond, Ohio.

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Intangiball

INTRODUCTION

IT WAS DURING THE SUMMER of 2008 that I became a baseball fan again. The old newspaper I'd written for, the doomed Cincinnati Post, had bowed out on the final day of the year before, and while its demise put a crimp in my prospects, it did liberate my rooting interest, which was no longer muted by objectivity's shushing index finger. At the same time, our twentysomething daughter was between jobs and hanging at home for a little while—long enough, anyway, to catch some ball games on the basic cable package. She was relatively new to that diversion, and while she was not caught up in the statistical subplots that captivate so many modern-age fans, her enchantment soon became keen enough to take her to the ballpark on a frequent basis. She would also, when necessary, receive automated updates by text messages. Mostly, she got a kick out of the characters—the good-natured grief that Jay Bruce took from the veterans, the eloquent facemaking of Johnny Cueto, the squatty switch-hitting of Javy Valentin, the Mountielike manhood of Joey Votto, Laynce Nix's resemblance to a komodo dragon, and so on. My wife, whose interest in the games had traditionally taken her up to bedtime but never postponed it, began to linger longer in the late innings. Baseball became, for the first time, a family thing. Watching it in that light, unencumbered by twenty inches of editorial burden to follow, was downright pleasant.

The local team had something to do with that. For the better part of a decade, the Reds had slogged to the beat of their big-swinging sluggers, Adam Dunn and Ken Griffey, Jr., successful, likable fellows who had the misfortune of outranking the rest of the clubhouse. Dunn, a six-foot-six, self-deprecating country boy, wielded a humor so potent that less accomplished players didn't want it hurled in their direction. Meanwhile, to many of the rank and file, Griffey had once been the poster on the wall next to the bed. The two of them, with no such intention, established the tone in Cincinnati's clubhouse, and while it was not disagreeable, neither was it particularly inspiring. Griffey's failing legs had filched his former sizzle, and Dunn's passion, while not entirely absent, was concealed somewhere between the edge of his deadpan and the preponderance of his 285 pounds. Both players struck out a lot with men on base, of which there was a shortage to start with. The club had losing records for eight straight seasons. As theater, it wasn't much.

When first Griffey and then Dunn were traded for younger players late in the 2008 season, the Reds began to morph. The floor recognized Votto and Bruce. The clearing of the shadows revealed the sparkle in Brandon Phillips's smile. Pitchers prospered. And through it all there escaped a teamwide enthusiasm—even an efficiency—that was simply nice to see. The new crew made you look. All the while, the organization, for the first time in a generation, was raising highly regarded players on its farm clubs in substantial numbers, and there was a compelling constant among the prospects. Almost to a kid, they were diamond rats. They were backers-up of throws and runners-out of ground balls, hard-trying athletes whose want-its and work

ethics were all a partisan could ask for. They had me.

Sensitized in such a way, I began to notice, as the 2009 season approached, short and lengthy articles about a subtle change in the way Major-League franchises were fashioning their rosters. One column, written by Buster Olney of espn.com, observed that “increasingly, it seems, makeup is regarded as a pivotal factor on whether a player is acquired or dumped—and this might be part of a broader evolution in Major League Baseball.” Olney quoted a manager and a club official about the benefits of removing smug, downbeat individuals from their teams and constructing teams, instead, out of players willing to pull hard in the same direction. Another story, posted on Insidethebook.com, went so far as to assign a dollar value to a player’s leadership qualities. It did so by noting that the San Diego Padres had signed weathered outfielder Cliff Floyd for \$750,000, in spite of the fact that Floyd, diminished by his battle scars, was expected to play very little and offered nothing more, statistically, than would a minimum-salary rookie who could be had for \$400,000. San Diego general manager Kevin Towers acknowledged that Floyd had been acquired mostly for his intangibles, and it required only a short reach to conclude that the Padres had paid an extra \$350,000 for those.

The previous year, Floyd had been a valued member of the Tampa Bay Rays, who had soared to the American League championship by virtue of a remade roster emphasizing, in addition to defense, a team-first mentality. Under the progressive stewardship of manager Joe Maddon and general manager Andrew Friedman, the Rays set up their breakout season with gutsy personnel decisions, trading a pair of supremely talented young outfielders, Delmon Young and Elijah Dukes, in part for their exchange rates and in part because of their demeanors, which were perceived as detrimental to the esprit de clubhouse. When all was said and redone, the Rays, coming off three straight last-place finishes, and in spite of a payroll that left them financially dwarfed by such division rivals as the Red Sox and Yankees, had assembled a team that mussed the hair and reddened the faces of the redoubtable AL East.

Hardly coincidentally, they had, at the same time, become an outfit that Maddon could do his thing with. “We believed that we stayed pretty much status quo talentwise,” he observed in retrospect, “but there was a quantum leap in regard to personality, character, and interaction inside the clubhouse. I’d like to believe that teams are looking more at character these days in making their decisions.”

Of course, it wasn’t as simple or idealistic as all that. The Rays were required to flash some killer glove work. A skillful new starting pitcher, Matt Garza, needed a shove from his catcher, a long talk from Maddon, and a visit with the club psychologist. A gifted young outfielder, B. J. Upton, was handed a benching for lack of hustle. As it happened, Charlie Manuel, the manager of the Philadelphia Phillies—the team that ultimately would defeat the Rays in the World Series—made similar moves during the course of the season, twice sitting down Jimmy Rollins for conduct unbecoming an All-Star shortstop. Old school, it seemed, was back in session.

The development of the Phillies was not as sudden as Tampa Bay’s and, designwise, not as tangibly intangible, but forensics revealed the same chemical traces at the scenes. There was a heartening circumstance here: The game and some of its more traditional admirers had come together at a crossing of common interests. Pluck, soundness, and winning spirit had, at last, in this advanced and exhaustively quantified stage of the sport’s evolution, been acknowledged, even embraced, as strategically vital. The day—or the season, as it were—had been won by the respectful, enthusiastic observance of the so-called little things.

I can’t speak for every baseball watcher out there, but I can affirm that here in the hills and humidity of Cincinnati, where the professional game got its start and Pete Rose is still revered in spite of it all, the folks

like players who like to play, who like to play right. Not entirely or deliberately but methodically, since the end-of-day sports shows became so tediously preoccupied with long flies arcing over pinched-in fences . . . since steroids stepped up to the plate . . . the sport had rendered increasingly rare the Roses, the Cobbs, the Jackie Robinsons (as if they're plural), the Pepper Martins, the Phil Rizzutos, the Luis Aparicios, and the gritty grinders of lesser stripe but fundamental excellence and irreproachable heart. Maybe the steroid scandal was like a stock-market correction. Maybe baseball's bloated muscles simply burst. Maybe the great game so indulged its excesses, so distorted the natural order, that it just had to crash.

One manager, in Olney's column, remarked that we were witnessing a major change in the game, right before our eyes.

Might the national pastime have, perhaps unwittingly, but in its own interest, rediscovered its innate, endearing essence? Could this be a purification that we were witnessing, a renaissance of the noblest, winningest qualities that sports can bring to public attention?

As a captivated fan once again, I was compelled to look into that.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Charles Killough:

The book *Intangiball: The Subtle Things That Win Baseball Games* has a lot associated with on it. So when you make sure to read this book you can get a lot of advantage. The book was published by the very famous author. The writer makes some research previous to write this book. This particular book very easy to read you can get the point easily after scanning this book.

Doris Rice:

As we know that book is essential thing to add our knowledge for everything. By a reserve we can know everything we want. A book is a group of written, printed, illustrated or blank sheet. Every year ended up being exactly added. This reserve *Intangiball: The Subtle Things That Win Baseball Games* was filled regarding science. Spend your extra time to add your knowledge about your scientific disciplines competence. Some people has diverse feel when they reading some sort of book. If you know how big selling point of a book, you can truly feel enjoy to read a publication. In the modern era like today, many ways to get book you wanted.

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