

## SPORTS

# Looking back at Cleveland Indians baseball

Two books mark glory days when fans couldn't get enough

RON KAPLAN  
Special to *The Plain Dealer*

The Cleveland Indians celebrate two significant anniversaries this year. Fifty years ago, the Tribe set the baseball world on fire as it battled its way to the best record in American League history with an amazing 111 victories on its way to the World Series (the Seattle Mariners broke that mark in 2001). Ten years ago, a new team of Indians took its first steps to Central Division domination in a brand-new, state-of-the-art ballpark, Jacobs Field.

Both events merit special consideration among the dozens of new baseball titles this season.

The current steroid craze casting a shadow over several of today's high-profile players makes us wonder how Babe Ruth, Hank Aaron, Mickey Mantle and Ted Williams — all of whom are the subjects of biographies coming out this year — managed to make their way into the Hall of Fame without pharmacological assistance.

One of the more in-depth profiles centers around the greatest pitcher in Indians history.

In "Bob Feller: Ace of the Greatest Generation" (Brassey's, \$26.95), John Sickels brings back memories of an America built on the concepts of hard work and sacrifice.

"Rapid Robert" was the by-product of such an era, growing up with the discipline of farm life in Van Meter, Iowa. His father even went so far as to build a baseball field so Bobby always could have a place to play.

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By Jonathan Knight.  
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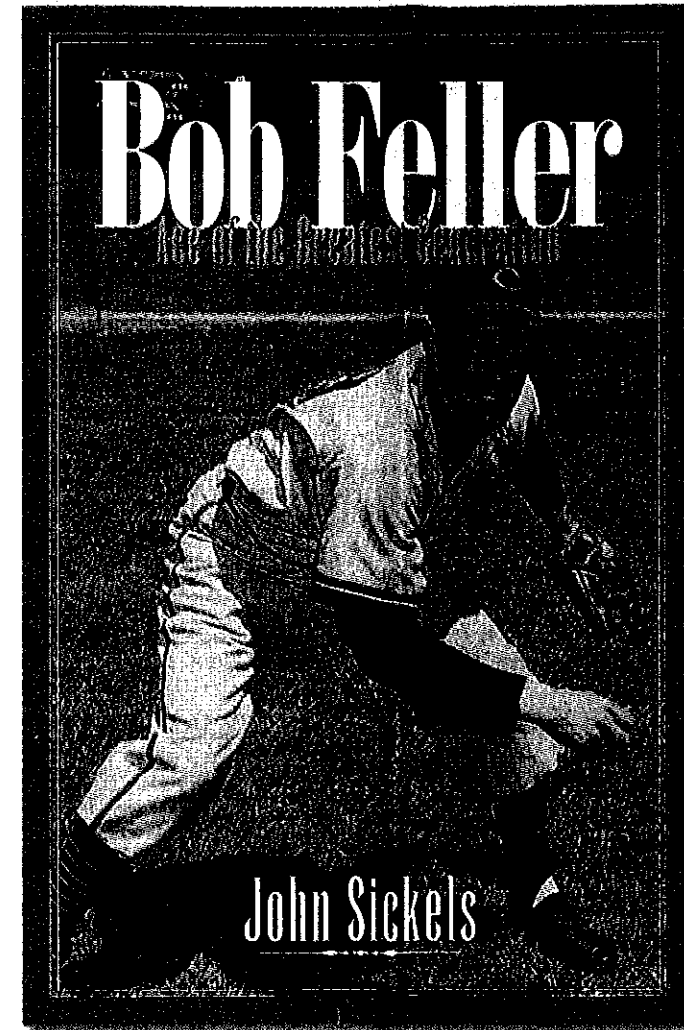
came apparent that he was more than capable of competing with the older kids.

Sickels, a writer for ESPN.com, portrays the ballplayer as a true hero. Feller could have taken an easy deferment as sole supporter of his family (his father was battling cancer); instead, he was among the first to enlist after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Feller spent almost four years in the Navy, serving as an anti-aircraft gunner and earning eight battle stars. Had he remained with the Indians during the war, few doubt he would have accumulated even loftier statistics, including the magical 300-win plateau.

Upon his discharge from the service, Feller picked right up where he left off, helping the team to American League championships in 1948 and 1954. He was a leader off the field as well, working at the vanguard of the burgeoning players movement, paving the way for the astronomical salaries and benefits that today's athletes enjoy.

Of even greater significance, Sickels credits Feller's off-season exhibition tours against Negro League opponents as helping to pave the way for the dismantling of baseball's infamous color line.

Despite all the accomplishments — the blazing fastball, the strikeouts, the victories, the lead-



ership — Sickels reminds us that Feller was nevertheless human, burdened with his share of flaws such as pride and avarice that the author considers with a refreshing even-handedness that is missing from many biographical paens.

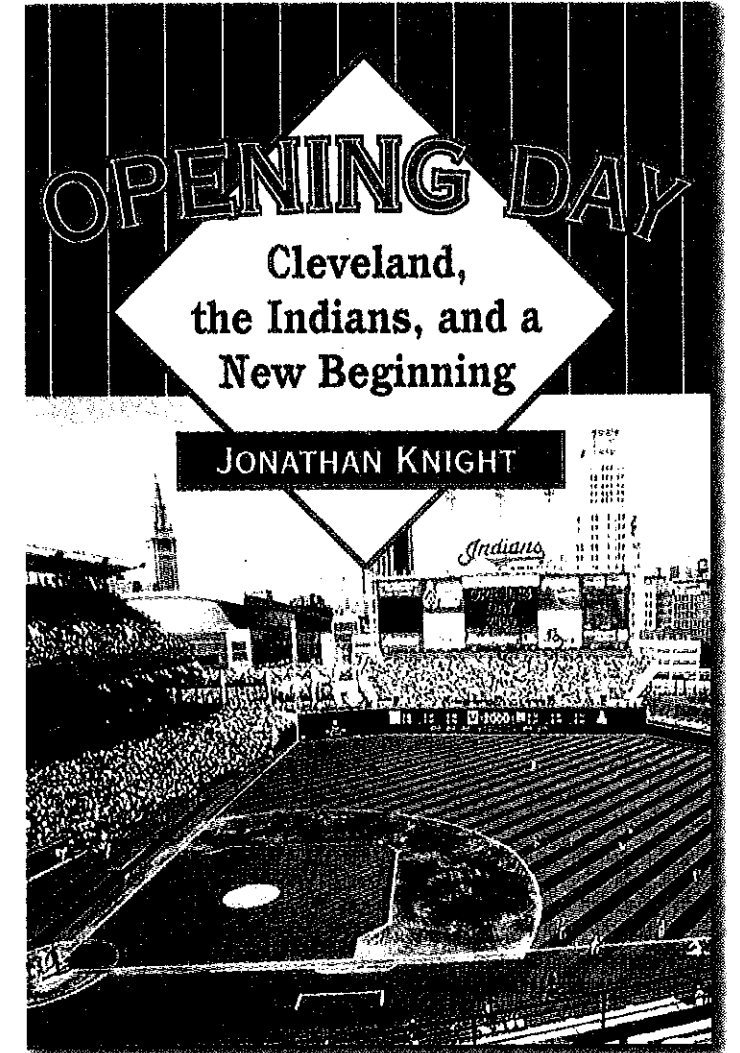
While "Bob Feller" looks at one legend's long career, Jonathan Knight, a Columbus sports reporter, presents a charming, in-depth look at a single game in "Opening Day: Cleveland, the Indians and a New Beginning."

Knight reminisces about the creation of Jacobs Field and its inaugural game with the Seattle Mariners on April 4, 1994.

Like Baltimore's Camden

Yards, the Indians' new home was a "retro" stadium, at once a throwback and futuristic setting for baseball on which the ballclub counted to bring fans back. It worked. Ignoring the anomalies of the strike-shortened seasons of 1994-95, the team drew more than 3 million fans for six consecutive years.

The opener against the Mariners (the Indians won, 4-3, in extra innings) was just a taste of what was to come. Players such as Kenny Lofton, Manny Ramirez, Jim Thome and the redoubtable Omar Vizquel gave fans something to cheer about after so many dreadful summers in the old Cleveland Municipal Sta-



dium.

Knight emulates a format employed by Daniel Okrent in "Nine Innings: The Anatomy of a Baseball Game," which examined a routine contest between the Baltimore Orioles and the Milwaukee Brewers in 1982. Knight, by contrast, knows that the christening of a new ballpark (and a new era) merits its own story.

Reading "Opening Day" is like going to the game with a good friend. Baseball, more than any other sport, lends itself to conversation, to swapping stories of favorite players or spectacular plays, and Knight peppers his account with anecdotes and expla-

nations of technique and strategy that are perceptive, informative and entertaining.

One of the endearing qualities of baseball is the ability to bring generations together. Whatever else they might disagree on, fathers and sons (and mothers and daughters) share memories of first games and favorite players. These two books no doubt will add to those memories, both older and more recent.

Kaplan is a sports writer in Montclair, N.J.

To reach Ron Kaplan:  
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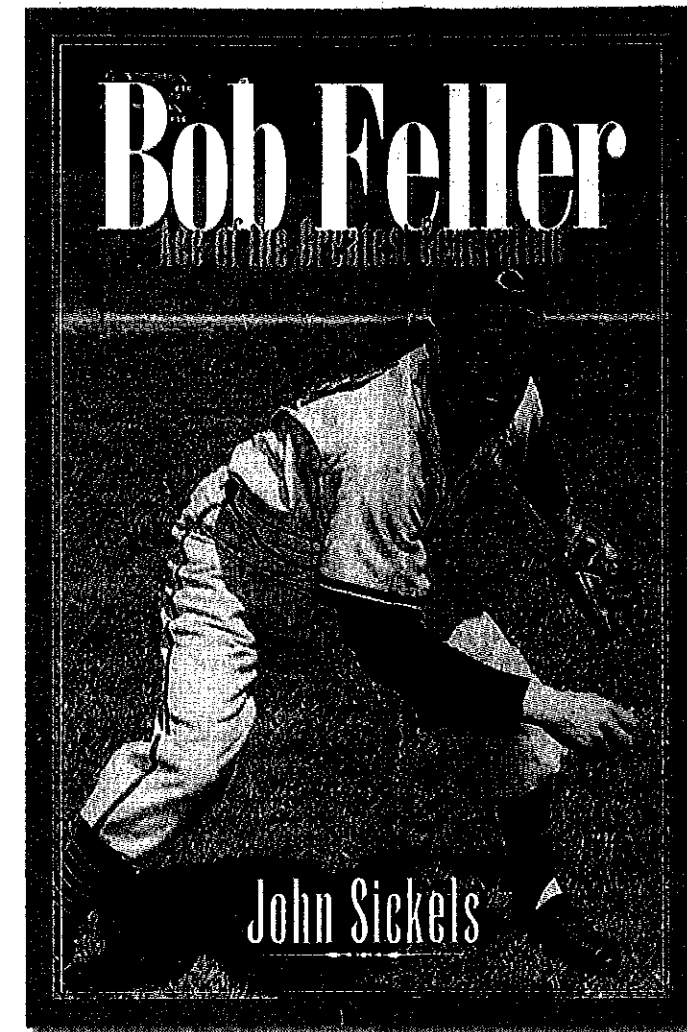
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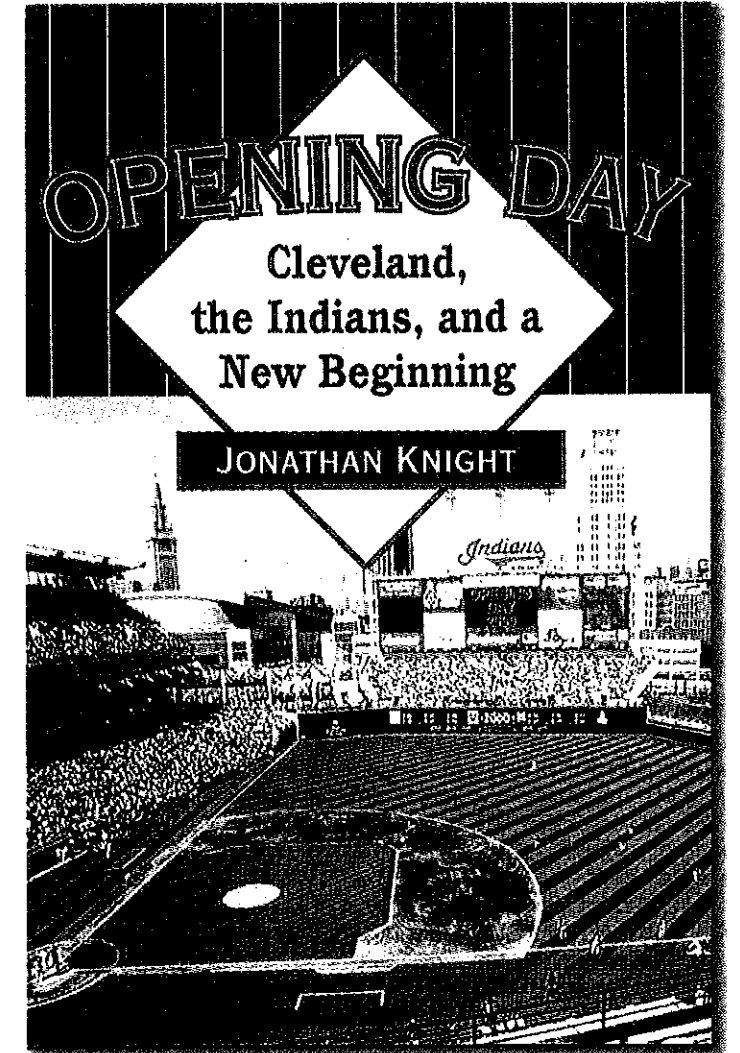
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