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Tallahassee baseball buff writes with authority

By Gerald Ensley

DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER

"Beating The Breaks." Rick Swaine. McFarland & Co. 219 pages. \$29.95. Available from mcfarlandpub.com and amazon.com.

You would think that a book about major league baseball players with disabilities would not be much fun to read.

You'd be wrong.

Because in the hands of local first-time author Rick Swaine, "Beating The Breaks" is a fascinating look at players who overcame physical and mental debilities to play in the major leagues. And if you thought the list pretty much consisted of Pete Gray and Jim Abbott, you're in for a surprise.

In this soup-to-nuts tabulation of disabilities that runs from mental illness to lost limbs to epilepsy, blindness and Tourette's syndrome, Swaine profiles 30 players who qualified to park between the blue lines - yet went on to star between the white lines.

The list includes Hall of Famers whose disabilities are little remembered by modern fans: Red Ruffing (four missing toes), Tony Lazzeri (epilepsy) and Grover Cleveland Alexander (epilepsy). It includes long-forgotten players with major disabilities: Bert Shepard (artificial leg), Hugh Dailey (no left hand) and Lou Brissie (war-damaged leg). It includes players whose disabilities seem quaint in today's world: the first non-pitcher to wear eyeglasses, George "Specs" Toporcer, and the first batting champion to wear glasses, Chick Hafey.

Swaine offers readers balanced stories of players often chronicled in cliches: one-armed Pete Gray, one-legged Monty Stratton, deaf mute William "Dummy" Hoy and one-armed Jim Abbott. He details the career-long struggles of Jimmy Piersall (mental illness), Jim Eisenreich (Tourette's syndrome) and Ron Santo (diabetes). He refreshes the stories about modern players who were driven from the game by medical problems, such as Dave Dravecky (cancer in his pitching arm) and Bo Jackson (hip replacement). In addition to the profiles, Swaine identifies dozens of other major leaguers with disabilities who still made the major leagues.

One of the book's charms is that Swaine writes with great economy. Most of the profiles are only three to four pages long and include a photo. Yet each profile is meaty, with descriptions of the player's background, the story of his baseball challenges and his career statistics.

But its best quality may be that Swaine knows his baseball. A recently retired state official, he is a longtime competitor in Tallahassee adult baseball and softball leagues. A member of Society for American Baseball Research (SABR), he is a baseball statistics and history buff who has written numerous articles for SABR. He is already working on his second book, about the first generation of black players in the major leagues, a group that runs from Jackie Robinson's debut (1947) through Elston Howard's career (1955-1968).

Thus "Beating the Breaks" is a confidently written, quickly paced book that will entice the baseball novice, satisfy the lifelong fan and serve as an inspiration to anyone with a disability. And any fan who skips the book thinking it a sop to political correctness is missing a bet:

This is an instant baseball reference classic.