

Arkansas Books & Authors

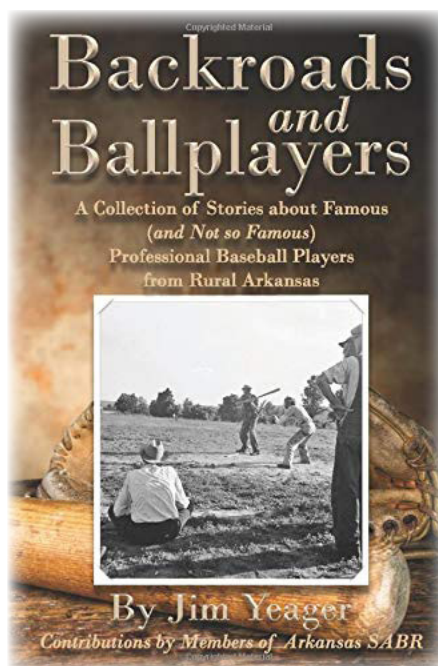
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Backroads and Ballplayers: A Collection of Stories About Famous (and Not So Famous) Professional Baseball Players from Rural Arkansas. Jim Yeager. Published by the author, \$15.00. Order from: Jim Yeager, 2350 W. 4th Street, Russellville, AR 72801; more information at www.backroadsballplayers.com.

Baseball, of course, is the American pastime. Even I, a non-baseball lover, can appreciate the thrill of a home run, the disappointment of a double-play, and the excitement that fills a stadium. Arkansas has a history of sending star athletes to the major leagues. In the new book *Backroads and Ballplayers: A Collection of Stories About Famous (and Not So Famous) Professional Baseball Players from Rural Arkansas*, author and baseball historian Jim Yeager recounts the stories of some of the Arkansans that impacted the game during the first half of the 20th Century.

If a roving reporter stopped sports fans on the street and asked them the name the most famous baseball player from Arkansas in the early 1900s, the answer most likely would be Jay Hanna “Dizzy” Dean. Dean, from Western Arkansas, played for the beloved St. Louis Cardinals and later the Chicago Cubs. Signed in the early 1930s, Dean became a household name for his pitching as well as his folksy braggadocios style. After an injury ended his career on the field, Dean became just as popular as a sports announcer. His unique take on the English language (slud into third, instead of slid), too, endeared him to most fans while puzzling others. Dizzy, of course, was not the only famous Dean. His brother Paul, known as “Daffy,” also found fame with the Cardinals. And, of course, the Deans were not the only famous baseball players from Arkansas—George Kell, “Preacher” Roe, among others, all found success in the sport. Also included in the book are players from Arkansas that are not as well-known as the others, but that does not mean their careers were any less successful or inspiring. For example, the story of Henry Eugene Bearden is especially interesting. Born in Lexa, AR but reared in Memphis, Bearden eventually ended up in Greenbrier, AR after high school. From there, under the guidance of Earl “Doc” Williams, Bearden signed with the Philadelphia Phillies and then the New York Yankees. His rising career, though, was sidelined by a shattered knee and head injury. But



like a good comeback story, Bearden’s career later ended in victory.

These are just a few of the stories captured in *Backyards and Ballplayers*. The stories are brief but provide enough information to satisfy both the baseball enthusiast and a non-athletic librarian/archivist. As an historian, it is also gratifying to see a locally-produced book such as this with footnotes. That is often not the case with self-published books. A “Final Chapter” in the book, written by members of the Arkansas Society of American Baseball Research, includes brief paragraphs on the final resting places of the deceased players. This chapter complements the rest of the book excellently. Yeager has contributed to the Arkansas bibliography by writing an interesting, informative, and highly-readable sports history for anyone interested (or not) in baseball. To stay with the baseball theme, Yeager has hit an all bases loaded, two strikes, at the bottom of the ninth home run with this book. *Backyards and Ballplayers* is a nice, concise introduction to the state’s contributions to sport of baseball and is highly recommended for all Arkansas collections.

Yeager, a former women’s basketball coach at Arkansas Tech University, has been on the speaking circuit as of late and has recently joined the team of Only in Arkansas, the blog site devoted to interesting Arkansas facts and history. Yeager contributes a monthly post on baseball history. It is hoped, though, that he will write a follow-up to this book and continue to document Arkansas’s sports greats.