EVERETT

Roger Maris,
Radical of the Sixties

Who isn't suffering from aberration nowadays? You, I, all of us are in a state of aberration. There are ever so many examples of it: a man sits singing a song, suddenly something annoys him, he takes a pistol and shoots the first person he comes across . . .

—Madame Hohlakov, The Brothers Karamazov

Numbers, for all their vaunted accuracy, can be amazingly inaccurate little doodads. The era we think of as “the Sixties” is an example of this. According to arithmetic this improbable decade began on January 1, 1960, but those of us who snoozed through the years ’60 through ’62 for the most part agree that they took place during the so-called Fifties. The Sixties, as we know and love and hate them, didn’t begin in earnest till a subterranean nullity named Lee Harvey Oswald took it into his head to go hunting in downtown Dallas in the autumn of ’63. And they didn’t completely end till the year we call ’73, when another nullity, this one a penitent, secretly met with a journalist in a Washington, D.C., parking
lot and effectively did for Richard Outhaus Nixon what Oswald had done for J.F.K.

One of the great charms of professional baseball used to be that it provided us statistics-lovers with a kind of Mathematical Wildlife Refuge—a nationwide network of pairistically calibrated and manicured playing fields wherein statistics could frolic about unmolested, appearing to those of us who admired them to possess accurate, consistent and at times even mythic meanings. True, the game had been marred off and on by absurdities and injustices, but like the nation that first invented them worshipped it, our National Pastime seemed to possess an ability to cough up new rules, definitions or heroes before a crisis ever quite stripped it of all credibility and appeal. Against its early lowbrow amateurism it pitted the two-league system and the "World" Series; against the tyranny of greed-crazed owners it hurled the Players Association; against the dull superiority of pitchers it threw the live ball and the shrunken strike zone; against discrimination it pitted Jackie Robinson, Hank Aaron, Roberto Clemente, Willie Mays.

But in the mythoclasis climate of the Sixties it was the statistics themselves, the very scriptures of baseball, that were finally called into question. And once our faith in the stat was undermined—once the same irresolvable complexities that muddled our knowledge of the outside world invaded the pristine arithmetic of the Refuge—the game we'd once seen as the heroic enactment of a living American mythology seemed to devolve overnight into that branch of the Entertainment Industry catering to those unable to outgrow their grammar school fascinations with hitting, spitting and throwing.

Many factors contributed to the Sixties' dissolution of statistical precision—platooning, relief pitching, night games, a longer schedule, artificial turf, indoor stadiums, designated hitters, divisional play-offs and rampant league expansion, to name a few. But without doubt, the most infamous contributions to baseball's apocryphal new arithmetic were the sixty-one 299-foot pop-ups which a crewcutted New York outfielder managed to boink, in the year 1961, over Yankee Stadium's 296-foot right-field fence. I am referring, of course, to Roger Maris's breaking of the single-season home run record of the Homeric Babe Ruth.

In a peculiar attempt to stem the tide of numerical unmeaning, then Major League Baseball Commissioner Ford Frick conducted a one-man witch-trial against Maris that culminated in the public tattooing of an asterisk to the new record—a punctuation mark intended, I assume, to serve the same general purpose as Hester Pynne's scarlet A. But this
method of restoring credibility to the stats deserves an asterisk or two of its own. Think about it. In Frick we had a man who apparently believed that at the sight of a little black snowflake, a mere *, the myriad fans of the future would never cease to remind themselves that Maris’s sixty-one-homer season had been eight games longer than Ruth’s sixty-homer year. Never mind that due to league expansion and owner greed everybody’s ’61 season was eight games longer, and all post-Fifties’ baseball accomplishments have deserved the same asterisk; never mind that Maris not only played his home games in the same stadium as Ruth, but faced significantly better pitching due to the higher mound and the advent of relief specialists; never mind that he endured far greater media pressure, overcame the disadvantage of night games and artificial lighting, and, thanks to injuries and illness, had to doink his sixty-one dingers in three fewer at-bats than St. Babe needed to blast his sixty. Ford Frick was a man of faith in the power of the *.

The perfect justice of a Hereafter is seldom obtainable in the here, but in the Otherworldly world of baseball lore the Commissioner’s asterisk has in fact received an unusually just reward: question a crowd of baseball buffs today and you’ll find that Frick, if he is remembered at all, is remembered solely as the guy who branded Maris’s sixty-one homers with the *

Whereas everybody remembers Roger Maris.

But what exactly is it that we remember? Is it the home-run-hitting, the skinhead haircut, the greatness of his team, or even the flawed record? I don’t think so. I think it was a stranger sort of mark that Maris made on the minds of those who watched him closely that season. It was hard to articulate the disturbing aspect of his performance as it was occurring. But by season’s end there was a growing suspicion that his new record might be more a tragedy than a victory, and that the key to this tragedy might be the unsettling transformation of the record-breaker himself . . .

Because Roger Maris was, by natural gift and inclination, not a fence-basher at all. He was a stupendous all-around athlete. Blessed with good foot speed, great bat speed and a slingshot arm, he was more a high-average hitter in the Roberto Clemente/Stan Musial tradition than a slugger in the Jimmy Foxx/Harmon Killebrew mold. He won a Golden Glove and the American League MVP award in 1960, and was clearly the best all-around player on the Yankees’ pennant-winning team. But in 1961 a finger of fate seemed to reach down and diddle poor Number 9.
The proof of the fateful diddle was in his game: without knowing why he did it, Maris began to play ball like a different person. An obsessive person. A person who'd accidentally discovered and applied to baseball what the practitioners of countless modern military, industrial, economic and scientific disciplines had already learned: namely, that by jettisoning one's diverse abilities in order to condense and intensify the will like a magnifying glass intensifies sunlight, by forgetting all about being a complete person and throwing one's whole being into a single obsession, one stands a very good chance of achieving some narrow excellence. Such as an almost preternatural ability to boink 299-foot fly balls.

This brings us to a surprising definition. Insofar as the word “radical” implies a drastic departure from accepted thinking and practices, it is only accurate to say that this crewcutted all-American Midwest farm boy was in fact the first famous radical of the Sixties. Who but a radical would sacrifice all-around excellence to focus on a single, iconoclastic facet of his existence? Who but a radical could earn so much antipathy from the meat-and-potatoes populace for so little reason, but still go on choosing public misery for the sake of his cause? As this increasingly twodimensional, nerve-powered, lifetime .260 hitter mounted his anxiety-ridden assault on the most famous feat of the three-dimensional, musclepowered .342-hitting bon vivant whose bat built Yankee Stadium, even the most rabid New York fans began to feel that something odd was going on. Mickey Mantle also hit a lot of home runs in 1961—fifty-four of them, in fact. But the contrast between his and Maris's home runs was vast. The Mick was just a canonical hero on a roll—a contemporary legend in chivalrous competition with legends of the past. Maris was a new kind of creature altogether. If Ruth was the Sultan of Swat, Maris was the Technician of Boink. For the sake of these boinks he had virtually given up the game of baseball, or at least given up the all-around game he'd played better than anyone just a year before. And the trouble that resulted was, in a sense, the same trouble into which the entire industrial world has fallen: obsession works. Not beautifully, and not without tremendous costs. But for Roger E. Maris it worked sixty-one times.

Numbers, for all their vaunted accuracy, can be amazingly inaccurate little doodads. When Ruth's record finally teetered and fell, Maris found that in the opinion of many he hadn't scaled a height or conquered a legend at all: he'd become an object of dislike. Many people felt, and even behaved (*), as if he were more the assassin of a legend than a conquering hero. When the Holy Relic Manufacturers trotted out their “61 IN '61” trinkets, the stuff wouldn't sell; when the kids took to the
sandlots the following spring, they went right on pretending they were Mantle and Berra and Mays; when Maris himself began his '62 season in a slump, the fans booed his game and emotions into a complete collapse; and when the Yankees traded him away to St. Louis, instead of retiring his number, they casually handed it to Craig Nettles a few years later.

Maris was hardly the first technician to attain staggering fame through obsessive effort, only to later regret the cost. In his *Autobiography*—published a full century prior to Maris's feat—Charles Darwin made a confession that reads like a manifesto of the One-Pointed Specialist's inner condition:

Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds . . . gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare, especially in the historical plays. I have also said that formerly pictures [paintings] gave me considerable, and music very great, delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry: I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also lost almost any taste for pictures or music. . . . My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of fact, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive . . . The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect.

That an all-consuming focus on a single object of desire could achieve a quantitatively spectacular result was no surprise to any thinking person in the early Sixties: the mushroom cloud that accompanied J. Robert Oppenheimer's dissection of the atom was an unforgettable demonstration of the general principle. But that the same intensity of focus which made any great quantitative achievement possible might also render it qualitatively bankrupt—that a Golden Glove MVP could accomplish a fabulous feat and end up looking, feeling and playing, the following year, like a battle-jagged vet just back from some interior front line—this was the "un-American" surprise and the bitter public lesson of Roger Maris's life.

Technical obsession is like an unlit, ever-narrowing mine shaft leading straight down through the human mind. The deeper down one plunges, the more fabulous, and often the more remunerative, the gems or ore. But the deeper down one plunges, the more confined and conditioned one's thoughts and movements become, and the greater the danger of
permanently losing one's way back to the surface of the planet. There also seems to be an overpowering, malignant magic that reigns deep down in these shafts. And those who journey too far or stay down too long become its minions without knowing it—become not so much human beings as human tools wielded by whatever ideology, industry, force or idea happens to rule that particular mine. Another danger: because these mines are primarily mental, not physical, they do not necessarily mar or even mark the faces of those who have become utterly lost in them. A man or woman miles down, thrall to the magic, far beyond caring about anything still occurring on the planet's surface, can sit down beside you on a park bench or bleacher seat, greet you in the street, shake your hand, look you in the eye, smile genially, say "How are you?" or "Merry Christmas!" or "How about those Yankees?" And you will never suspect that you are in the presence not of a kindred spirit, but of a subterranean force.

In 1961 the best all-around player in baseball became a kind of machine for grinding out long fly balls. As he neared Ruth's record the man in Maris recognized the Technician of Boink for the inhuman force it was, and began to grapple with it, sensing that his balance—that is, his life—was at stake. He began to lose sleep, and to have trouble eating. His hair began to fall out in clumps. Near the end of the season he would break down during post-game interviews, sometimes ranting, sometimes weeping in front of reporters. Like Darwin and Oppenheimer, Maris found after attaining his end that he had little left with which to re-prove his humanity but his confusion and regret. He would say for the rest of his life that he wished he'd never heard of Ruth's record, let alone broken it. But he did break it—and radically altered our conception of baseball heroics in doing so. Millions of traditionalists never quite forgave him for this. And one such traditionalist may have been Roger Maris himself. That may explain why the Technician of '61 so soon became the Strikeout King of the mid-Sixties, the introverted beer distributor of the Sev-enties, and the cancer victim of 1985.