

THE **ACTION** ISSUE



ALL PHOTOS © NEIL LEIFER

BASEBALL'S GLORY DAYS

Legendary sports shooter Neil Leifer revisits the good ol' days of baseball in a new book by Taschen.

By Anthony LaSala

TRYING TO REMEMBER BASEBALL before multi-million dollar contracts, ESPN highlights and Nike-sponsored pre-game blitzes is like trying to conjure up images of Times Square before the advent of the electric bulb. It was a time when a whiskey and soda was the preferred post-game cocktail over steroid needles and Creatine mixes. There were decades when players stayed true to one team for their entire career. These were the glory days of baseball, when men were playing a boys' game with pride—and sometimes with a boy's aggressiveness—under the vivid light of summer, and a photographer named Neil Leifer was capturing it all.



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Decades ago, Leifer established his status as one of the greatest sports shooters of all time by spending his days digging in the dirt and the dugouts of our national pastime. His evocative photos of baseball players from the 1960s and 1970s are gathered together in *Neil Leifer: Ballet in the Dirt: Baseball photography of the 1960s and 70s* (Taschen, 2007). Originally offered as a limited, oversized edition of 1,000 last year, the book has now been released in a smaller, more 2008-economy-friendly (\$40) version. The reduced dimensions have no ill effects on Leifer's glorious imagery.

"I'm going to sound like I've been programmed by the company but I haven't," says the always-pleasant Leifer from his midtown Manhattan office. "I have had such good luck with my books—this is my 14th—and the two previous ones by Abbeville were phenomenal. But there is no one doing picture books that are even close to Taschen these days—between the variety and the quality of the books—they are just so beautiful."

Ballet in the Dirt features an all-star lineup in its 297 pages. Stars from the Sixties—Mickey Mantle, Hank Aaron and Roberto Clemente—join well-known faces from the Seventies like Pete Rose, Reggie Jackson and Carl Yastrzemski. Seeing them through Leifer's lens not only instills us with wistfulness but also a sense of intimacy that is long gone from the game. These players and coaches, with friendly nicknames like Pee Wee and Campy, seem like old friends in a photo album, not strangers on a high-def, plasma screen.

Left: A camera rigged under second base captures the fielder's foot about to step on the bag as Willie Davis of the Dodgers starts to slide, all under the gaze of the crowd in the amphitheater of Dodger Stadium.

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The book plays out with all the ups and downs of a 12-inning tug-of-war. There are relaxed pre-game moments—like Cincinnati Red Pete "Charlie" Rose playing "pepper" with his teammates. There are instants of pure excitement: Lou Piniella of the Yankees crashing into Carlton Fisk of the Red Sox at home plate igniting a brawl. There are photos of horror: Juan Marichal of the New York Giants smashing a bat down on the head of L.A. Dodgers pitcher John Roseboro. And jaw droppers—like Leifer's "how-in-the-world-did-he-do-that" image of Willie Davis of the Dodgers sliding into second base. The detailed differences between today's baseball and the old contests are also entrancing, like the players' bare hands (no batters' gloves) wrapped

Top left: Yankee stadium, packed with 63,000 fans for a World Series game, 1961. Top right: Yogi Berra follows the trajectory of a three-run blast that briefly gave his Yankees the lead in game seven of the 1960 World Series against the Pittsburgh Pirates. Above: A brawl between Bill Lee of the Red Sox and Graig Nettles of the Yankees, frame by frame. Bottom left: A young Neil Leifer using a 400mm lens, custom made for LIFE.

tightly around the handles of wooden bats. "Baseball is the hardest game to photograph because nothing happens most of the time," says Leifer, who used Nikon F cameras and a 400mm or 600mm lens at most games. "I found the concentration that baseball requires is something I wasn't really good at, and I had to work hard to become a good baseball photographer. If you think about it, during a good pitcher's duel not much happens. You really have to concentrate."

The idea for the book came from publisher Benedict Taschen. After successfully recruiting Leifer to contribute images to Taschen's 2004 tome *GOAT: A Tribute to Muhammad Ali (Greatest of All Time)*, an oversized book on the boxer, Taschen e-mailed Leifer with an idea about America's national pastime. Leifer recalls, "He wrote 'I know nothing about baseball, I've never been to a baseball game, but I think baseball would make a great book.'"

Leifer was at first hesitant—he was leaning toward doing a football book instead—but eventually he was convinced. The two men agreed to start with 1,000 limited-edition copies with hopes of doing a trade edition if the first run did well. It sold out in a heartbeat. The success led not only to an extra edition, but also to a football publication: *Neil Leifer: Guts and Glory: The Golden Age of American Football 1958-1978* debuted this November

with another Taschen book of Leifer's boxing images arriving next year.

The task of tackling his archives turned out to be one of the more enjoyable steps in the publishing process. With the help of his brother Howie, Leifer pored through forgotten memories.

"It is just fun to look back at this stuff. I never thought I would have a reason to. . . . Some of it is so dated and so meaningless. But you look at the characters that make up the world of baseball and the world of football and the world of boxing and they become interesting in the context of a book," says Leifer, who went through every football game he ever shot as well as boxing matches as far back as 1958 for the two upcoming books. "What also struck me right from the beginning was the opportunity to use all of these images that the magazine most of the time didn't publish—pictures I was so proud of. There's no need to worry about the outcome of the game or being tied to a newsworthy event or moment. The picture that I get some of the most press for in the baseball book was the photo [of Willie Davis] with the camera mounted under second base. That was never even published."

Working for a cutting-edge magazine like *Sports Illustrated* was one Leifer's reasons for creating photos that stood out from the norm but it was his simple drive to have his images seen that always



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pushed him to a higher level. "I was always trying to come up with reasons to get published," says Leifer.

A 1963 cover shot for *Sports Illustrated* of Pittsburgh Pirates pitcher Elroy Face is a perfect example. The image shows Face in four different phases of his throwing motion, all in one frame. Not exciting by today's standards, but at the time it was a fascinating image that required some research.

"I did that shot at the end of the game, on the warm-up mound, in five minutes. But I had experimented in Boston with Dr. Edgerton before that and talked to him about repetitive strobe photography—and I ended up getting the cover of the magazine," says Leifer. "Now, this picture hasn't been published since then. It's not one of the great pictures of my career but it was a cover that got me really excited."

Leifer grew up on Manhattan's Lower East Side and used to deliver sandwiches for a living as a kid. Sometimes the editors at *LIFE* magazine would tip him not with coins, but with rolls of film. He joined the staff of *Sports Illustrated* in 1972 and went on to become one of the most celebrated sports shooters of our time. Leifer's most famous image—a photograph of Muhammad Ali exulting over a horizontal Sonny Liston at their heavyweight championship fight in Lewiston, Maine, in 1965—stands as one of the most recognizable sports photographs ever taken.

Today, Leifer dedicates most of his time to filmmaking.

"I don't really miss much about shooting. I love making films now. I was recently at one of the last games at Yankee Stadium and I was watching those poor guys crammed together shoulder to shoulder," says Leifer with a smile on his face. "I'm excited about

making movies. If you analyze why you are successful, and I've always thought about those kinds of things, I think Walter looss takes wonderful pictures with his eyes closed. I think he's a genius and I've told everyone that. He works very hard now but he used to put very little effort in and come away with the most amazing shots. He is gifted. John Zimmerman, a hero of Walter's and mine, was like me. He took unbelievable pictures but he had to work very hard to do them. I never had that gift. It was always a matter of how hard I worked.

"What made me good—what really made me good—was how excited, motivated and competitive I was. I liked seeing my name in the magazine. Without that excitement I don't get motivated to do the kind of work I did. I did it with still photography; I did for a long time—30 plus years—and I did it to the best of my ability and got probably all the awards you can get out of it. And when you don't have that fire in your belly to really put all your energy into it, I don't think I would be very successful up against the guys who are out there today. I'm a huge fan of what's done today."

Leifer's latest film, *What About Sal?*, is a 28-minute short about two Red Sox fans who make a pact that, whoever lives longest will spread the other's ashes in Fenway Park. He's hoping this film finally gives him a shot at the so-far elusive Oscar.

"At this point you can't really dream about playing starting quarterback in the Super Bowl, or pitching in the World Series or fighting the heavyweight champion of the world, but you can dream about getting up on stage at the Academy Awards ceremony and receiving your trophy. Clearly I haven't come close, but the fun is in doing it." □

