



## A WINNING SEASON? IT'S TIME TO TAKE SPORTS WRITING SERIOUSLY

Cait Murphy at Book Expo 2007 – New York City

KENNEALLY: And I want to turn now to Cait Murphy, and a book which promises a lot of fun, but really goes beyond the baseball field. Cait, your new book is called *Crazy 08: How a Cast of Cranks, Rogues, Boneheads and Magnates Created the Greatest Year in Baseball History*. That's perhaps one of the best titles of the year, I would say. And it promises a tremendous amount. What was it that attracted you to that particular season for the Chicago Cubs?

MURPHY: Well, I've been a life-long baseball fan. I'm actually a Mets fan, just for a full disclosure. And it was about 2003 – I was just – I wanted to write a book. I've been a journalist my whole career, and I wanted the experience. So I started looking for book ideas. I was by no means necessarily looking for a baseball idea. But then my father suggested, oh, why don't you look into the 1908 season, I think that was an interesting year. And then I began to research it, and I realized that was quite an understatement. I spent a lot of time just reading the newspapers of 1908. And as I started reading about the baseball season, I mean just every once in awhile, after going through the microform, I would just start.

I mean, there's things like – and this is the origin of the title, Crazy 08 – in August, the fans of the Washington Senators – known as the Nationals at the time – give their manager a gift, which is improbable because they were a terrible team anyway. But they give him a gift at home plate before a game – big ceremony. The gift was a wolf. He opens up this big, and out bounds a wolf. Now, things like this don't happen anymore. There were numerous cases of fans sort of trying to engage in the play – so after a great play, fans would run out and do handsprings around the bases. There's a great story of Matty being fished out of the showers – quite literally out of the clubhouse shower – to come in to save a crucial game against the Cubs. And so I began reading all this stuff, and I said this is too much fun. This needs to get out there.

And then the other thing about going through the newspapers of 1908 that I tried to do, as David tries to do, is to set it in the context of the place and time. No sport

ever takes place strictly between the lines. The kinds of people who are playing, the cities in which they're playing, the nature of the stadiums in which they're playing – all that is affected by things outside the lines.

KENNEALLY: And though 1908 – of course, century ago and a different world entirely – and yet, there are elements of it which we would find familiar. Tell us about those.

MURPHY: Well, one of the things I concluded was that if any of us could go back to a ballgame in 1908, we would be totally at home. I mean we probably wouldn't want to get pig's knuckles at the ballpark.

GOLENBOCK: You don't know.

MURPHY: Maybe a shot of whiskey. But, again, between the lines, the game would be utterly familiar. And I think we would also be very impressed with the quality of play.

KENNEALLY: Well, that's something you were telling me – that a lot of people have an impression that the play wasn't that great – this was the dead ball era. And yet, what you learned was that they were really committed athletes.

MURPHY: Totally committed athletes. Clearly, there was no African-Americans playing, there was very few foreigners – maybe zero. And also, scouting was very unsystematic. So I think there was probably a lot of talent left in the Central Valley of California, or the plains of Idaho or whatever. But clearly, the players who did make it to the major leagues were very, very good. The rules of baseball were more or less first laid down in 1845, so you had sort of 60 years of glossing the rules. This was not an unsophisticated game. And one of my favorite examples of this comes from Johnny Evers – or Evers – either, either – in his 1912 book. Tells the story of using a watch – a stopwatch – to time the pitcher to catcher, the catcher throw to second base for a stolen base. Which I thought was pretty sophisticated stuff. I mean George Will has like a whole chapter on that, in *Men at Work* 90 years later. So it was highly sophisticated.

KENNEALLY: Well, I should have mentioned when we started chatting that your work as a journalist has taken you around the world. You worked for *The Economist* in London, the *Wall Street Journal Asia* in Hong Kong. And I wanted to ask – for you, as you wrote the book – did you think that the book may have an audience beyond America? Is this something that is translatable, if you will? Do we really need to have lived with baseball all of our lives to grasp the importance of it to this culture?

MURPHY: Sadly, I think overseas sales are going to be slim. Although I told my friends in England, I'm watching.

KENNEALLY: Well, I wasn't thinking England, but certainly Asia has come to be a baseball powerhouse.

MURPHY: Yeah, it is. But I think the thing is – I mean, Japan has a pretty rich baseball tradition. But it's a rich Japanese baseball tradition. I mean, I loved *You Gotta Have Wa*, but that was really about the cultural – I wouldn't call it clash, but –

GOLENBOCK: Differences.

MURPHY: Differences of American and Japanese baseball. I think the reason that the people who have read the book seem to enjoy it is because there's so many things we, as Americans, know about baseball without even knowing we know it. And I don't think you actually have that anywhere else. So, sorry, Beth, my marketing person is here. But I don't think overseas is big market.

KENNEALLY: And one of the things, as we look back on the past, is we think somehow, things were better. Perhaps the play wasn't better, maybe the characters were better. Certainly, there were tremendous characters in the book. But one thing that has stayed the same is that money has always mattered in baseball.

MURPHY: Money has always mattered, and until recently, people have always denied money has mattered. The players in 1908 were paid, on the average, about \$2500 a season. Which doesn't sound like a lot to us, but it was an excellent wage. It was about triple what a teacher was making in 1908. The reserve clause and other economic restrictions were already in place – they had very little leverage negotiating the terms of their work. But there were regular hold outs, there were regular attempts to unionize. When the American League emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, over a hundred players jumped, chiefly for higher salaries. And when I sometimes give talks at bookstores and things, people seem disappointed when I say this. But you know, for heaven's sakes – these are young men, a lot of them with families. And they took baseball very seriously, this was their profession. And they deserved to be paid for it.

KENNEALLY: And the other thing is that we have an image of them as hayseeds, and yet you uncovered an interesting fact that would lead us to believe they were probably reasonably smart about what they were doing.

MURPHY: Yes. I mean, some of them were hayseeds. But research by a sociologist found that about 25% of baseball players had some college education in 1910. And that compared to 5% of the U.S. population. So a considerably higher proportion of players had – were college educated than in America. Now, that does leave the other 75%. And I'm not even saying college is a proxy for being civilized or educated, it's just a metric that I think people can grasp. There were a lot of people off the farms, out of factories – from extremely humble backgrounds. But the point is, that I try to make in the book, this is America in 1908. The average American had six years of education. So to – we look at them and we say, they look pretty

crude and uneducated. In 1908, they actually didn't look that way at all. And they were actually – by 1908, they were frequently featured in advertising. They were held up as heroes, they're invited to the White House – their social status is pretty good. Now, you do have freaks like Rube Waddell that would prove everything I just said wrong. But as a whole, they were not uncivilized hayseeds.

KENNEALLY: Well, if the portrait of the athletes in 1908 is a little more uplifting than we might imagine, the portrait of the journalists covering the game leaves something to be desired. Tell us about their relationship to the players, and to the businesses that were the baseball teams.

MURPHY: Well, they were essentially wholly-owned subsidiaries of the clubs. The clubs paid their travel and expenses, and in return expected a very soft shoe, and they generally got it. One of the frustrations of researching this book is I get used to going to the newspaper the next day and getting quotes from the managers and the players, and things like that – doesn't happen. They turn a blind eye to some serious issues. Well, for example though, a key pitcher for the White Sox walks off the team for a month in June in the middle of the pennant race that the Sox eventually lose by a single game. I've never been able to figure out why. And so things like that, I think, are just astonishing.

GOLENBOCK: Who was the pitcher?

MURPHY: Frank Smith. Piano-Mover Smith.

GOLENBOCK: Yeah.

MURPHY: And another case, which is – I couldn't believe it when I came across this thing. And again, this is the intersection of sport and not sport. The teams would frequently play exhibition games on off days. It was just a money-making thing for the owners. So again, even in the pennant race, even when you're injured and tired. In August, 1908, the Giants play an exhibition game in Springfield, Illinois, and the sportswriter covering the game doesn't mention that the city is under martial law. Springfield has just had three days of – I called it white-on-black mob violence – I don't think they're race riots, it was totally one-sided. Doesn't see fit to mention it. And the *Sporting Life* mentions that McGraw and the team were in Springfield, and notes he got a piece of rope used to lynch someone as a good luck thing. So it's pretty different.

On the other hand, some of the language I find kind of fun. You never just hit the ball – you pound the pellet on the proboscis, and things. So –

KENNEALLY: Well, they were being paid by the word, so they tried to drag it out. Perhaps that was it. Well thank you, Cait.

MURPHY: Thank you.

