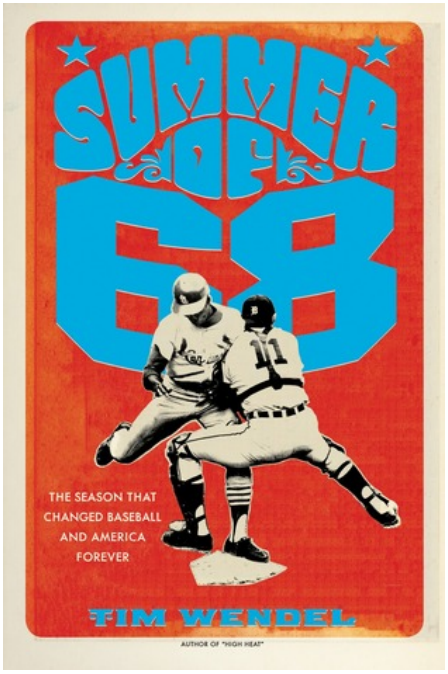

Summer of '68: The Season That Changed Baseball—and America—Forever

Tim Wendel

From Reader Review Summer of '68: The Season That Changed Baseball—and America—Forever for online ebook

Tom says

Ever finish a book, feel slightly let down, but not know why?

I can't quite put my finger on a reason, but, Summer of 68 did not quite live up to my expectations. Sure, the narrative was crisp, the characters interesting, and the subject matter entertaining. I learned a great deal about Bob Gibson, Denny Mclain, Curt Flood, Willie Horton, and more. I got a much better sense of the chronology of events that made 1968 an unforgettable year in American History. And I came away convinced that baseball in 1968 was still hanging on as uniquely reflecting a changing America.

While I still can't quite explain why I feel let down by Summer of 68, my best theory so far is that while the narratives of the baseball season and the turbulence engulfing the country were very clear, accounts of how the two intersected felt rushed and very shallow. Wendel at one point notes that Larry Dierker, a young pitcher for the Astros, never forgot the scene outside his Chicago hotel room that summer when police clashed with protestors. And Maury Wills and Milt Pappas drew the wrath of their respective clubs for not wanting to play on the day after RFK was killed. Surely these weren't the only players on whom the events of 1968 had an impact.

Did teams reflect the divisions in America at the time? How did anti-establishment sentiments among younger players impact teams' cohesion? What did management think of all of this? Did tensions from the outside world spill into major league locker rooms? What of the Vietnam War and the strong feelings it inspired? Were no players politically active? Taking part in demonstrations? Nationwide, how well were african-american players being treated by teammates, management, and communities?

Summer of 68 made for a quick read. A big part of me wish it hadn't. There was more story left to be told.

Dave DiGrazie says

I will never think of Willie Horton as just another baseball player after having read Tim Wendel's account of the 1968 major league baseball season. The author makes an admirable attempt to show the connection between events that took place on the ball diamonds of America, and the social/political upheaval that characterized 1968.

Older baseball fans will remember 1968 as "the year of the pitcher," a year when Bob Gibson's St. Louis Cardinals fell to the Detroit Tigers of 31-game winner Denny McLain in a memorable 7-game World Series that saw McLain's clubhouse rival Mickey Lolich steal the show. But in some ways it is the city of Detroit itself that takes center stage in Wendel's book. Ravaged by racial violence in the summer of 1967, citizens of the Motor City needed something that could unite and heal their community. Wendel presents the '68 Tigers, the racial harmony on the team itself, and their championship success, as an important soothing ointment to the city.

In so doing, Wendel raises an important question: What is the value of sports as a model to culture as a whole? These days, it's easy to be cynical - even our biggest sports heros are being discovered as steroid-

injecting, blood-doping cheaters. Entire leagues (the NBA) and sports (pro boxing) are under strong suspicion of fixing outcomes in the name of money. It is easy to forget that sports can also provide legitimate models of principle and courage. This is precisely where Wendel's book is at its most valuable. Consider the story of Detroit's hometown hero Willie Horton.

Horton showed up in the neighborhood of his youth in full Tigers uniform, climbed atop a car in the midst of a riot, and at great risk to his own safety, begged people to stop burning and looting. Consider also Wendel's treatment of Curt Flood, an unbelievably gifted St. Louis outfielder who sacrified virtually the remainder of his professional career - while still in his prime - to fight a perceived injustice not only on his behalf, but on behalf of all professional ballplayers everywhere (and in so doing, paved the way for many dollars to land in the pockets of players ever since). Those old enough to remember what happened will appreciate the research and insight with which Wendel brings these events back to life. Younger readers will learn, perhaps for the first time, about Horton, Flood, McLain and Lolich, Tiant, Gibson, and a host of other baseball notables from 1968 whose backstories are worth hearing.

Overall, despite success on some levels, Wendel's book falls short of greatness. I believe he's missed opportunities to translate his wonderful research and his genius idea about baseball's connectedness with the bigger history of 1968 into a tight, well-argued treatise. He has shared lots of interesting evidence to make his case: for instance, the musings of major league ballplayers looking down from their hotel windows to watch the famous 1968 Chicago disturbances outside the Democratic National Convention was interesting in itself, but Wendel did not successfully incorporate it into any overarching theme. I also felt distracted at times by Wendel's tendency to repeat a fact or an observation. In the end, he's provided us with a treasure trove of good stories and insights about the key personalities of the '68 baseball season, along with some helpful observations that suggest how culture affected sports in 1968, and vice versa. Had it been written more carefully and with perhaps a bit more depth and daring in the cultural observations it did make, it could have been a lot more.

Dan says

I enjoyed this book because I'm a big baseball fan and a Cardinal fan. Wendel's coverage of baseball in this book is very enjoyable. And that's what he should have focused on.

The baseball portions of the book are really the heart of the story. I had two complaints about this book.

First, Wendel didn't need to talk about football, basketball, the Olympics, or the events of 1968 much at all because it took away from the baseball story. It was as if he was trying to cover as much as he could but couldn't decide how much of each sport/event to put in the book. There's nothing wrong with covering the other sports and events of '68 but he gives them short shrift so you don't end up knowing much about those things at all. They are just tiny side stories in comparison to the baseball.

The other problem I had was the way it was organized and Wendel's writing style. He would jump from one thing to another quite often. One section, for example, included talking about the Cardinals, then the next paragraph was about Bob Gibson seeing MLK Jr. at an airport, the next paragraph was about what they would have talked about if they had talked, and then the final paragraph was about MLK's enjoyment of sports. The book had odd paragraph structures like that from time to time. They just didn't work.

Overall, though, if you just want a history of the '68 baseball season, I recommend it.

Steve Bennett says

I first started watching baseball in 1968 so this book has an extremely sentimental appeal to me. If I were to put sentimentality aside, I would mention that the book is sort of disjointed, jumping from pure baseball stories to non-baseball issues such as Vince Lombardi, Jim Ryun, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, and John Carlos in somewhat arbitrary fashion. The author also doesn't convincingly prove that the summer of 1968 changed baseball or America forever. But I'm all about sentimentality so I thoroughly enjoyed the book, which focuses to a large extent on the Detroit Tigers and St. Louis Cardinals 1968 seasons and their eventual matchup in the World Series. The Tigers once again come back from a three games to one disadvantage to win Game 7 against the almost unbeatable Bob Gibson. While it may not have been as good as Jerry Green's Year of the Tiger, the book made me feel like a child again, which is well worth four stars and a quick read. Docked one star for its inexcusable failure to mention the Phillies Richie Allen, whose star quality and controversial nature fits in perfectly with the theme of the book.

Chris Schaffer says

It was good and probably better than I'm giving it credit for..I just feel like it was lacking some oomph and wrote a bit too fawningly of the Tigers and Cardinals, respectively. Does chronicle the season pretty well. Some of the forays into other sports such as pro football, basketball and the Olympics felt a little disjointed. The author says it changed sports but didn't delve that deeply into how. But all in all a good quick read that chronicles a great season and great World Series.

Oliver Bateman says

a breezy read, with some detailed interviews (always key in these types of books; i hate writers who rely too heavily on published sources when they could be adding MORE primary source baseball history to the mix) forming the meat of a definitive recap of the low-scoring, low-drama 1968 season (except for the epic WS, recounted here in game summaries that somehow aren't a misery to read). that said, wendel's clearly reaching here in connecting all of this 68-era stuff...but he did find the connections, including eugene mccarthy watching a cardinals pitcher hit fungo homers and maury wills reading RFK's book in the PIT locker room. and on top of that, stretch or no, this is a nice recap of '68 that isn't halberstam-length. worth your time; won't take up too much of your time. good stuff.

Matt Fitz says

A Cardinals fan all of my life, but born in '68, this book gave me an opportunity to see my beloved "Birds on the Bat" during an incredible era. While in every other capacity (global, political, social), '68 was the year of revolution and protest (MLK/RFK assassinations/Vietnam protests/Prague Spring, etc), '68 was also "the Year of the Pitcher" as the men on the mound just absolutely dominated the game, resulting in changes often referred to as "the Gibons Rules" after STL Pitcher, Bob Gibson. While it was a refreshing book, I felt that the author merely scratched the surface of the subject and gave to much superficial treatment of it all. For

example: Detroit was rocked by riots in '67. Baseball's opening day was the same time as the MLK assassination and emotionally effected the black players in a way that deserved further attention. How Curtis Flood would alter free-agency for years to come (and get lost in the memory of it). And baseball was losing it's shine as the "National Past-time" due to the ever-increasing popularity of the Nascent NFL, the more TV-friendly sport. I'd still recommend the book because it truly is the golden age of modern era baseball.

Jay says

An enjoyable book on the 1968 baseball season, full of interesting anecdotes you would expect about the larger than life players of the year, including the always angry Bob Gibson, the media obsessed Denny McLain, Don Drysdale, Willie Horton, and more. While the author included segments on other sports, the Olympics and football, as well as the social climate of 1968, I didn't see all that much to justify the subtitle of the book. The Detroit riots took place the year before, the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Dr. King took place early in the year, and these events are well described with anecdotes about how the players reacted. But beyond these anecdotes, I didn't see a clear cause and effect tying changes in baseball to society changes (and vice versa) due to that specific year. The author did pick a year of great ascendancy of football toward the title of "America's pastime", but that is really a sidestory to what this book tries to accomplish. The writing contains a few facts that are over-repeated ("the Detroit papers were on strike" was repeated 3 times in 7 pages), but by the time the author gets to his vivid description of the World Series (hey, isn't that the "Fall" classic?) he's firing on all cylinders. Perhaps I'm being too literal... I found the book to be entertaining for the stories of the players and I look forward to reading more of Wendel's baseball books.

Eric Gilliland says

Tim Wendel's nostalgic book Summer of 68 looks at that historic year through the lens of a baseball fan. The tensions of the decade came to a crashing head with the Vietnam War, racial tension, and political assassination dominating the headlines. Baseball in the words of Terrence Mann from Field of Dreams, remained the only constant in American life.

The 1968 season was the end of an era (for lack of a better term). The NFL and NBA began to overtake the baseball in popularity. Football and basketball were much better suited for television because they were fast paced and seemingly made for the instant replay camera. Meanwhile, baseball seemed seemed slow . . . and boring.

Even the style of the game in 1968 looks archaic by today's standards. Pitchers were still obligated to bat and were not relegated to pitch counts. Most games were still played during the day And there was no extended post-season as we know it today, the best two teams from the American and National League advanced immediately into the World Series. Free agency still loomed on the horizon, as players usually remained the property of their owners.

Baseball historians remember the 1968 season for one thing: dominant pitching. Bob Gibson (St. Louis Cardinals), Luis Tiant (Cleveland Indians), Don Drysdale (L.A. Dodgers) put up record breaking statistics. Denny McClain won 30 games for the Detroit Tigers.

Wendel brings all these personalities to life. Bob Gibson finished with a 1.12 ERA and struck out 17 batters

in Game One of the World Series. Wendel wrote of Gibson's World Series heroics:

For there is something in the way Gibson pitched that perhaps wasn't simply directed at the hitters he faced, but rather at the world in general . . . Gibson unleashed pitches as if he were a man on fire.

Wendel devotes most of the book to the 1968 Detroit Tigers, a motley group who ended up winning the World Series against the powerful St. Louis Cardinals. Starting pitcher Mickey Lolich, who served in the National Guard during the 1967 riots, won three games for the Tigers, including the climatic Game Seven.

The heroics of the Tigers helped assuage a city on the edge. Baseball gave everyone in Detroit a much needed respite from the challenges their city faced.

Weidel's writes with a novelist touch, providing a acute perspective. An educational trip back in time for any baseball fan.

Mike says

Tim Wendel is a modern baseball writer who taps into the American vein that David Halberstam, Roger Kahn, and Charles Einstein access in their work. No sport better tells the history of this country than baseball. Using baseball as a spring point, Wendel spins a marvelously compelling tale, weaving the assassinations of Dr. King and RFK, the Vietnam War, the birth of the Superbowl, and the '68 Olympics into his narrative seamlessly.

As he does this, Wendel brings us up close to Denny McClain, Bob Gibson, Luis Tiant, and Mickey Lolich, while also taking us on a fascinating side trip to modern Detroit. A skilled storyteller, Wendel excels in writing about race in America, using sport as a mirror to hold up to the face of the nation brilliantly.

I could not begin to recommend this book enough. "Summer of '68" is a touching, exhilarating, and compulsively readable piece of social history.

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marcus miller says

I wanted to like this book. I enjoy baseball and the other sports Wendel mentions, and I teach high school history, so I was hoping this would be a book I could recommend to high school boys obsessed with sports, who don't necessarily like to read.
The book is at its best when Wendel writes about the Tigers and the Cardinals. When he jumps between football, (something I paid more attention to as a ten year old in 1968) and basketball, then mixes it in with the social and political events of the day the book loses a bit of focus, or its narrative.
If you are a Tigers or a Cardinals fan you will likely enjoy the book more than most. If you are looking for insightful historical analysis and a focused story line you may need to look elsewhere.

Steven Voorhees says

1968 has been called many things. "The year the dream died" and "[t]he year everything changed" are but two sobriquets. Several old school institutions ended that year. One was the voting coalition Franklin Roosevelt built and sustained in the Democratic Party. A second was the fumigation of the party's smoke-filled back rooms, where its presidential nominees had been chosen for eons. A third demise was the two top teams in baseball winning their respective league pennants and going straight to the World Series. The latter forms the narrative spine of Tim Wendel's book. Its account of how '68 was the year of the pitcher strengthens this backbone. The number and sequencing of historic no-hitters in the '68 season serve as a prelude to the pitching confrontations the World Series served up: the Detroit Tigers' Denny McLain and Mickey Lolich versus the St. Louis Cardinals' Bob Gibson. From reading SUMMER, I'm left with the impression Gibson was his era's most intimidating pitcher. He evidently channeled his anger into an unassailable pitching tool. Conversely, McLain was effective enough to corral 31 victories. Lolich nailed three wins in the World Series -- an accomplishment that negates the deep internal envy, even bitterness, he felt toward Denny. Yet in the end resentment was no match for resilience. The year before, in 1967, Detroit exploded in devastating riots. The Motor City needed a "psychic balm" to help heal itself. The colorful, ragtag Tigers, under the leadership of manager Mayo Smith, poured the balm in spades. Rallying from a 3-1 deficit in the Series against the rainbow machine that was the Cardinals (racially diverse and the winner of two Series earlier in the decade), the Tigers took the momentum generated from the Cards' Lou Brock being thrown out at home plate to win the series' remaining three games and thus their first championship since 1945. Wendel goes into great detail in recounting the series, taking all seven games apart and then reassembling them for the reader. His is an entertaining and informative book with an inspiring moral: never give up.

Justin Douglas says

Depressed by the end of the 2014 baseball season I searched the shelves of the Lawrence Public Library for an interesting book about baseball. Tim Wendel's "Summer of '68" chronicles the intersection of sports, politics and culture in 1968. The central story compares and contrasts the St. Louis Cardinals and the Detroit Tigers as each team clinches the pennant and face off in the World Series. Along the way, Wendel introduces readers to the three central characters of the book: Denny McLain, Mickey Lolich and Bob Gibson. Though the first two pitched for the Tigers and the last for the Cardinals, each confronts one another at different places in the book. McLain, who tallied a record of 31-6 in 1968 (a record not topped since then) but fizzled in the World Series due to a sore shoulder, losing games 1 and 4, though he did win game 6 on short rest, is brash and arrogant. He attempts to parlay his pitching success into a night club act in Vegas, featuring himself playing the organ (I am not making this stuff up!). Bob Gibson, an African American from Omaha, Nebraska, channeled the racism and prejudice he endured into an intimidating persona that would not back down from or even speak with any batter. He beat McLain in games 1 and 4, but (SPOILER ALERT!!!) lost game 7 to Mickey Lolich. Lolich, the portly and unsung everyman, who asked his catcher for cheeseburgers on the mound, did not enjoy the accolades of McLain or Gibson. During the season he was sent to the bullpen for a time. Still he won games 2, 5 and 7, beating Gibson in St. Louis in the final! Other important characters emerge. The author clearly has a soft spot for Tigers OF Willie Horton, a Detroit native who went out on the streets during the riots of '67 to try to calm the violence. Horton is also responsible for the iconic, series defining play illustrated on the front cover!

Any book about 1968 must comment on several events that summer that changed the landscape of the United

States: the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy; Race Riots (though not in Detroit, which had seen horrible riots in 1967. The city was distracted by the success of the Tigers); the Democratic National Convention in Chicago; Additionally, tectonic plates in the sporting world were shifting beneath the feet of the players that winter. The National Football League, poised to challenge baseball as the dominant sport in the US, made its major leap in 1968, culminating the famous Colts-Jets Super Bowl. Wendel also discusses the Summer Olympics, held in Mexico City in October 1968, most famous for the "Black Power" salute by Tommy Smith and John Carlos and the NBA finals.

A fun book about a serious time, Summer of '68 captures the magic of the baseball season and the World Series in 1968, while offering insight into the monumental changes in the United States during the late 60s. I have to admit after reading this book I am a little less sad about the Royals.

Jason Horvath says

Very good book for someone who born in the 70s who didn't experience 1968 but heard lots about it.

Brad Hodges says

There is no question that 1968 was a momentous year in American history: the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the riots at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Tim Wendel, in his book Summer of '68, suggests that it was a pivotal year in baseball as well, as the subtitle is The Season that Changed Baseball and America Forever.

The latter argument isn't stated as clearly. Certainly there are milestones to the 1968 season. It was the "Year of the Pitcher"--Bob Gibson set a record with a 1.12 ERA, while Denny McLain was the first pitcher to win over 30 games in thirty years, and is the last pitcher to do so (it is unlikely, given the five-man rotations of today, that it will happen anytime soon). This was also the last year before the first expansion, and the breaking up of the leagues into divisions. Given that the Tigers and Cardinals, the pennant winners of '68, had comfortable leads and thus no pennant races, this might be seen as something a long time coming.

Wendel touches on the events of non-baseball America, such as King's assassination and Robert Kennedy's speech that night, and of the encroachment of football on baseball's reign as the most popular sport in America (we hear a lot about the Heidi game, which has been written about ad nauseum). These digressions are awkward and written mostly without transitions, like an old man telling a story who keeps losing his train of thought.

When the talk is about baseball the book is better, though Wendel assumes nothing, letting us know what RBI and ERA stands for. His prose is not sparkling and leans toward the pedestrian. He certainly conducted a lot of interviews, but the quotations (some of which are taken from the players' memoirs), are mostly routine and obvious.

But, as a Tiger fan, I reveled in this book. 1968 was a bit before my time--I remember my dad being in a lather during the series, and my sister was born just after it concluded, but all the players were still around when my Tiger fandom blossomed.

Wendel spends most of the book talking about the Tigers and Cards, with a few other players thrown, mainly Luis Tiant, who had a great season with the Indians. The dominant characters are Gibson, who was so no-nonsense that he came off as surly (he refuses a request from Tiger Willie Horton for an autograph during spring training). For the Tigers, the main character is McLain, who was something of a loudmouth and attention-seeker. He played the organ, and actually had a stint in Vegas after the season was over.

In contrast to McLain was Mickey Lolich, who spent part of the year in the bullpen but ended up the World Series hero, winning three complete games, including the clinching game seven. It was clear that the two Tiger hurlers didn't care for each other: "On paper, McLain and Lolich remain a baseball combination for the ages--an awesome one-two pitching punch. But off the field, in the Tigers' clubhouse, their relationship was based more on envy and competitive jealousy than friendship or team loyalty."

Wendel also cleverly foreshadows events. Detroit manager Mayo Smith, in order to get Al Kaline, who had been hurt much of the year, into the World Series line-up, moved centerfielder Mickey Stanley to shortstop, where he had played all of nine games. In late innings with a lead, he would move Stanley back into center, removing Horton from the game, because Horton supposedly had a weak arm. But Stanley and Horton talked strategy, mainly about Cardinal speedster Lou Brock. They noticed that if he was on second and scored on a single, he would slow down rounding third, and rarely slid into home.

This ended up being important information. The Cardinals took a 3-1 series lead. Gibson fanned a record 17 in game 1, and after Lolich won game 2, the Cards won games 3 and 4 easily. It's interesting to note that "The fourth game of the World Series, the one played in a downpour in Detroit, became the highest-rated sports event in television history at the time. The Nielsen Television Index indicated that more than 78.5 million people tuned in that afternoon. World Series games continued to outpace other sporting events, including Super Bowl II and the NFL championship, holding an overall seven-to-three edge in the TV's top ten."

Game five saw Detroit behind, their season slipping away. But they battled back, and a key play, perhaps the play of the entire series, had Brock trying to score on a single. Horton heaved a perfect toss to Bill Freehan at home, and Brock did not slide and was called out (the photo is on the cover of the book). The Tigers hung on to win, and then won game 6 in a laugher.

Game seven was Gibson vs. Lolich (the latter on two days rest), that went scoreless late. With two on, Jim Northrup lined the ball over Curt Flood's head. The usually adept centerfielder initially came in on the ball, and when heading back stumbled slightly, allowing Northrup to triple. The Tigers would win 4-1 and take the title.

Gibson would go on the have a Hall of Fame career, while McLain's career petered out after suspensions for associating with gamblers. He would later serve two stints in prison.

So I'm still not sure how this season changed baseball. I guess it did in that the pitching was so dominant that the mound was lowered, but I don't think the game was altered in any fundamental way. It was more the social conditions of the game that changed. In any event, though this book is wanting in many ways, it's a quick read and especially recommended for Tiger fans.
