



One Last Strike

Tony La Russa (Reading)

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The team that refused to give up
their manager in his final season
A comeback that changed baseball

After thirty-three seasons managing in Major League Baseball, Tony La Russa thought he had seen it all—that is, until the 2011 Cardinals. Down ten and a half games with little more than a month to play, the Cardinals had long been ruled out as serious postseason contenders. Yet in the face of those steep odds, this team mounted one of the most dramatic and impressive comebacks in baseball history, making the playoffs on the night of the final game of the season and going on to win the World Series despite being down to their last strike—twice.

Now La Russa gives the inside story behind this astonishing comeback and his remarkable career, explaining how a team with so much against it was able to succeed on baseball's biggest stage. Opening up about the devastating injuries, the bullpen struggles, the crucial games, and the players who made it all possible, he reveals how the team's character shaped its accomplishments, demonstrating how this group came together in good times and in bad to become that rarest of things: a team that actually *enjoyed* it when the odds were against them.

But this story is much more than that of a single season. As La Russa, the third-winningest manager in baseball history, explains, their season was the culmination of a lifetime spent studying the game. Laying bare his often scrutinized and frequently misunderstood approach to managing, he explains his counterintuitive belief in process over result, present moments over statistics, and team unity over individual talent. Along the way he shares the stories from throughout his career that shaped his outlook—from his first days managing the Chicago White Sox to his championship years with the Oakland A's, to his triumphant tenure as St. Louis's longest-serving manager. Setting the record straight on his famously intense style, he explores the vital yet overlooked role that his personal relationships with his players have contributed to his victories, ultimately showing how, in a sport often governed by cold, hard numbers, the secret to his success has been surprisingly human.

Speaking candidly about his decision to retire, La Russa discusses the changes that he'd observed both in the game and in himself that told him, despite his success, it was time to hang up his spikes. The end result is a passionate, insightful, and remarkable look at our national pastime that takes you behind the scenes of the comeback that no one thought possible and inside the mind of one of the game's greatest managers.

One Last Strike Details

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From Reader Review One Last Strike for online ebook

Jason Russell says

I'm a huge Cardinals fan, so perhaps fans of other teams might not rate it so highly. It tells a great story, even one whose ending is known beforehand. It could perhaps be a little shorter, and sometimes La Russa's storytelling thread gets tangled up a bit when he looks back to other moments during his career. There were also a few head scratching items that seem like errors (for example, right at the end, he seems to say Tim Lincecum won the Cy Young in 2010, when actually Roy Halladay won). A very fun read for people interested in the inner workings of a baseball team.

Cedric Hendrix says

Full disclosure: When it comes to anything and everything St. Louis Cardinals, I am an unabashed "homer." My bias is deeply ingrained, and cannot be removed.

Perhaps that is why it pains me to say that while Tony LaRussa's "One Last Strike" certainly has its moments, it is by and large a disappointing read.

My reasoning is simple: there simply is not enough "there" there.

TLR is a remarkably intelligent man, possessing perhaps one of the greatest baseball minds of his generation. But that doesn't always come across in the book. If anything, he seems eager to gloss over some of the things that 1) Make him more human; and 2) Would add remarkable depth to his recounting of the 2011 Cardinals.

I'm not a fan of "tabloid" reading, by any stretch of the imagination. Still, it would have been nice to hear TLR speak about his DWI arrest during spring training, the breakdown of contract talks with Albert Pujols (who ultimately left the team for allegedly greener pastures in Anaheim), or his endless issues with phenom center fielder Colby Rasmus, who was ultimately traded away for the parts that helped make up this championship team. Alas, TLR blew right past these issues.

"One Last Strike" is not a bad book. It's just not as good as it could be. Given the level of expectation that comes from being a Cardinals devotee, that is disappointing. Feel free to read it, but lower all levels of expectation beforehand.

Lisa Kilbride says

As much as I think I will always hate the St. Louis Cardinals, this book is so good I am sure I will read it again. In it he answers all the questions I'd had that Don Mattingly caused me to wonder re what is it a manager is supposed to do, anyway. He tells so much about the thought that goes into how to order a line-up, pitchers, catchers and how they think, and what he calls the "dance" between them, that my understanding of the game of baseball has grown exponentially. He also tells some spicy tales about on-field conflicts between players of opposing teams, and when it is appropriate for a pitcher to aim at a hitter. He weaves all this information and more as he tells how his team advances from heading to the Wild Card spot to winning the 2011 World Series. It's a wonderful book. I just wish it were written about a team I like.

Dennis says

An excellent book both on baseball and on leadership. There is a ton of detail around decisions he made on and off the field, and definitely shows a lot of light onto the game and how a manager thinks (see also Buzz Bissinger's Three Nights in August, also written around La Russa).

Jim says

This is a must-read for fans of the 2011 St. Louis Cardinals. It is a great way to re-live that almost-storybook. I say "almost" because nobody would believe the story if it was only written in a book. To believe it, we had to live through it.

If you're not a fan and/or didn't live through it, I'm not sure that this would be that meaningful to you. There are gaps to be filled in and nuance that you might not catch. Overall, it reminded me of one of the author's post-game news conferences. Okay, interesting to watch . . . but only if you had seen the game.

The writing was also seemed more like the writing of the author rather than his professional co-writer, with a little Rick Hummel play-by-play tossed in for accuracy. If you're looking for flowing prose, this isn't the place to look. If you're wanting to know what happened, from the viewpoint of a participant, that's what you're going to get - mostly - but even some of that was missing.

I'm glad I read it and many others will be too, but it is certainly not for everyone.

Dmitri Chambers says

One Last Strike is a must read for any Cardinals fan, any baseball fan, and really any fan of a good underdog story.

Now, I may be biased with my review being that the 2011 Cardinal's season will resonate in my memory for the entirety of my life, I can only hope to experience the emotions felt that year again which this book helped rekindle the rollercoaster of emotions all Cardinal's fan endured that year. The book walks you through the season, highlighting key moments as well as giving you some needed behind the scene stories, hidden to the public at the time.

But, this book gave an insight into one of the game's most successful minds. A treat for any baseball fan, and allowed us to view the game through a totally different lens, truly an eye opening experience as I now have a more appreciated view on both the tactical and human decisions that can change a game's outcome.

Al Snyder says

Insightful perspective into the mind of the former Cardinals Manager. It still surprises me that so many of my close friends and loyal Cardinals fans despise Tony La Russa so much. Perhaps if they read this book, they

might appreciate the great care that Tony took into his profession.

blakeR says

I have two obsessions: reading and Cardinals baseball. So this book is a guilty pleasure for me, especially given that I had heard it wasn't that great. I wouldn't have read it except that my uncle gave me a copy, which made me feel obligated. But hey, I don't need to defend myself to you!

In any case, the book lived down to its critiques. It was flat, uninspired, disorganized and trite. A red flag came less than twenty pages in when he said "I'm not going to . . . talk here to any great degree about specific incidents involving particular players as they relate to this issue of a decline in team cohesiveness. . ." Why not? That's why people read these books: to get the inside dirt!

You then know, by his own admission, that the book won't contain much beyond platitudes and generalizations. He even admits it later on, talking about the Cubs series that summer: "Cliches are born of truth." Yes, we all know that, but that doesn't make them interesting to read, so please find another way to describe your experience.

Perhaps there's no easy way to do it in prose, but to turn something as amazing as the Cards' 2011 World Series run into this boring account is a pretty remarkable feat. I have to think that ghost writer Rick Hummel deserves plenty of blame as well, for not eliciting a more interesting story. I'm not sure what makes someone a Hall-of-Fame sports writer, but whatever it is isn't on display here. Knowing what I know of Tony, it wouldn't surprise me that he wouldn't allow it to be more interesting. But still, a good writer has either got to find a way or let a bad writer do it.

Here, for example, is the passage concerning David Freese's now-legendary walk-off homerun, a moment that every baseball fan is aware of, which occurred in the 11th inning, after the Cardinals had come back from two-run deficits TWICE on their very last strike of the game, once each in the ninth and tenth innings:

David Freese led off for us against Mark Lowe, who mixed a mid-nineties fastball with a very sharp breaking slider. . . I watched Lowe intently, looking to see if he was around the plate, trying to figure out if the hit-and-run would be a good option. Descalso was in the hole, and he was our best chance to drive in a run if we got the man to second. Yadi liked the hit-and-run, and so that worked in the favor of hit-and-run. After Descalso was Jay and Westbrook. If it came down to it.

Three pitches later, David Freese did a solo version of the hit-and-run. He was soon joined by every one of his teammates in doing that. He hit a fastball on the inner half and crushed it to straightaway center field onto the grass of the hitters' backdrop. p377

Not real exciting, is it? He barely even addresses how such an incredible feat made him feel. To be fair, the narration of Freese's ninth-inning game-tying double is much better. But still, so much of the book is like the above, giving the impression that Tony is just going through the motions to relate a story. Part of it is that Tony's notorious surliness is omnipresent, like he's condescending to us and he wants to make it as unpleasant for us as it is distasteful for him.

Or, as he puts it: "I know that the anger and frustration sometimes surfaced more readily than my more positive attributes. Whether I should be criticized for that, I can't really say." Except that you did just say, indirectly, that you think it's bullshit.

He does the same thing with the Ozzie Smith episode (Paraphrase: "I'm not here to judge, but: JUDGE JUDGE JUDGE). In fact he does this throughout, apparently convinced that just by saying "I'm not (BLAH)," that makes it true, despite of whatever he follows or precedes it with. Or maybe he knows that he's obfuscating and just thinks that little of his audience.

But this is the way that he defends himself from criticism and indirectly attacks other players, managers, or media members, all while claiming to do the opposite. In a bizarre sequence, he even detachedly addresses his 2007 DUI and offers the lamest, least probing analysis of what happened: ". . . the police in Jupiter, Florida, found me stopped at a red light, napping. Evidently, I'd had too much wine and failed the breath test."

Yes, evidently.

You could have, you know, told us what YOU did, rather than explaining what happened to you, as if you were some passive bystander that was forced at gunpoint to consume alcohol and then drunkenly drive. You were, you know, the one who decided to do that, for reasons that should have been clearer after reading that passage but certainly aren't.

So yeah, disappointing not in that I expected much more, but just that he couldn't be more open, honest and relaxed. Hey Tony, you're retired, you can lighten up now!

Or maybe, despite all his brilliant analysis of baseball, Tony is just incapable of self-analysis. Maybe that cold exterior, that aloofness, is just his way of not having to deal with his own issues. An interesting idea, totally unconfirmable, but probably the most compelling part of this book. For a book about how La Russa REALLY thinks, *Three Nights in August* is much better (see my review).

Not Bad Reviews

@blakerosser1

Robert Sparrenberger says

A look at the 2011 cardinals championship season through the eyes of their manager, Tony la Russa are explored in this sort of memoir.

Tony goes into detail about some of the big games during the season in great detail and also explored some Of the big moments in is long baseball career.

This is definitely for a baseball fan or a fan of the cardinals. It's interesting for sure.

Reid McCormick says

“There's no metric that can adequately measure the size of a guy's heart.”

Once upon a time, the manager was king. He made the decisions. He was the general. The team was his soldiers. His coaches were his trusted lieutenants.

The days of the authoritarian baseball manager are gone. Blame it on sabermetrics. Blame it on free agency and the big business of baseball. No longer do billionaires give complete control of their millionaires to a

single manager. More than ever, baseball has become a team sport, from the general manager down to the bat boy.

Tony LaRussa was a game changer that brought baseball into a new age. He was the last of the influential captains but also the first of the highly intelligent diamond strategists. He was the link between the old school and the new school.

One Last Strike tells two amazing stories simultaneously. On the surface, LaRussa recalls the improbable season (and post-season) of the 2011 St. Louis Cardinals. On a deeper level, LaRussa reflects back on his amazing journey through baseball from a mediocre player to a naïve skipper to a humble veteran manager.

This is an amazing book written by a true baseball man. Managing a team is not science, it is an art. Keeping 25 prized athletes focused for 162 games is no easy task, but Tony LaRussa did it with such ease and determination. If you are interested in the inner workings of a Hall of Fame manager's brain, then this is the perfect book for you.

Grant says

This is a great book told by a great baseball mind. It gives you insight into one of the best manager's thoughts, feelings and strategies of the game. Excellent read. Really a must for any baseball fan. A must for Cardinals fans.

Brad says

Over the weekend I read Rick Hummel and Tony La Russa's book One Last Strike: Fifty Years in Baseball, Ten and a Half Games Back, and One Final Championship Season, recently published by William Morrow. I gave it 5 out of 5 stars over on Goodreads.

Before you start blasting me for just being a Cardinals homer, hear me out. :-) I will readily admit that this excellent rating is in part more as a baseball fan than as a straight-up book reviewer, but I honestly say that from the perspective of a baseball fan, and not just a Cardinal fan. Getting this kind of perspective from someone who has been around the game as long as TLR was really enjoyable. Even as a lifelong Cardinal fan, I've never been slow to criticize or question a coach's or manager's decision (see my Twitter feed during Tennessee games to catch some of my thoughts on Derek Dooley), and it was no different with La Russa. But in this book he allows the reader into his head for some of those difficult decisions. He even classifies some managerial decisions in his career as "didn't work out but I think it was the right decision" vs. "didn't work out and I know it was the wrong decision." He talked a lot about not letting just the result make that kind of delineation for you, but honestly examining all the variables and asking whether the decision was the right one. Very late in the book, I think in the epilogue, he points out that it really is a book as much about leadership as it is about baseball, and I would certainly agree with that assessment.

The book is written in four parts: Part one is the end of the regular season and the great comeback from 10 1/2 games out, part two is the NLDS, part three the NLCS and part four the World Series. One thing I loved was that TLR would interweave stories from throughout his career into the narrative of last year's postseason. In the book he addresses virtually every controversy he was involved with in his career, including Mark McGwire, malfunctioning bullpen phones, Dusty Baker's dissatisfaction about the 2012 All-Star roster, and more. I already respected La Russa, but this book made me appreciate his leadership style

even more. He certainly has an ego, but he is beyond loyal and is willing to take responsibility for everything that he knows was his fault and even a lot of stuff that probably wasn't. I think it's safe to say that, regardless of your feelings about La Russa, all of us would do well to create environments like the one he helped create in St. Louis during his tenure there.

If you're a Cardinal fan or ambivalent toward the Cardinals but a baseball fan, I would very highly recommend this book. I'd understand the reluctance of those who dislike the Cardinals or TLR to read it, but I still think it's worthwhile.

Shannon Lovejoy says

I love baseball and I score every game I attend. I love the statistical part of the game. I also enjoy the physical and mental aspects of the game. However, I am not a Cardinals fan. To enjoy and understand this book, you have to love all three - baseball, statistics, and the Cardinals.

It is interesting to get into the head of a MLB manager because sometimes you watch a game and wonder what he was thinking when he makes a substitution or doesn't let a pitcher stay in the game longer. One Last Strike gives the reader a very detailed description of La Russa's last season...his every thought, his every emotion, his every move. If you are a Cardinals fan and you want to relive the season, this book is for you.

Jane Patterson says

Tony LaRussa talks about the last year of his career ending in a World Series title. He looks back to the other teams he has managed talks about various players and coaches. Full of stats and believe me he keeps "Notes". If your not into stats this may bore you, but if your a true fan or at least a Cardinal fan this is a keeper.

Shelly says

Okay, so I am a die-hard, utterly devoted St. Louis Cardinals fan so obviously I was going to love reliving the AMAZING 2011 Championship season. It is not just a loving rehashing of that great season and postseason; it is also very much a memoir of Tony LaRussa's life in baseball. While it is a great read for other Cardinal fans, hardcore baseball lovers, or anyone who wants to learn more about coaching or managing a baseball team, it might not be the right read for the casual baseball fan. The writing is often cold and clinical when talking about game, and often goes off on tangents in the midst of telling the tale of a particular game or incident, which is a bit distracting. Some parts, however, are very funny or heartwarming and being the Cardinal fan that I am, I have to admit that reading about the events of Game 6 of the World Series gave me goose bumps. Two years later, it is still a bit unbelievable.
