

By Scott Morfitt

Spitball Saga Hits a Home Run

Chippewa Falls writer Joe Niese has a passion for baseball, which many of us do — after all, it's America's pastime. Niese's passion sets him apart from many baseball fans because it is both regionally and historically focused. He writes about baseball players who played in Eau Claire, Wis., during the dead-ball era.



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This was a time when baseball was a much different game than it is today. It was characterized by low-scoring games and very few home runs. It was not the game of multi-millionaires hitting balls out of the park as it is today.

Playing baseball on high school, college and semi-pro teams around Eau Claire along with being a diehard Red Sox fan built this love of the sport which Niese showcases in his writing. Prior to writing *Burleigh Grimes: Baseball's Last Legal Spitballer*, Niese wrote several articles on players who played throughout the area, making at least a pit stop in Eau Claire, though Grimes may be the most regionally prominent player he has covered yet.

Grimes is very familiar in the small town of Clear Lake, Wis. (population 1,070), where there is both a ball field and section of the local museum in his honor.

It isn't just landmarks in town or even his induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame that make Grimes iconic, though. Niese says, "I think he always had a fondness for where he grew up. He was just Burleigh when he went there — nothing more, nothing less."

"Even later in life when he was living there and hanging out at the museum," Niese continues, "people would just come in and talk with him. I don't know how many people I talked to who told me as kids they would ride their bikes to the museum just to talk to him."

The grandfatherly Grimes is not the one Niese talks about through most of his work, though. Throughout the book we not only get to see the career trajectory of the man, we also learn some of what drove him to succeed on some legend-



Joe Niese at his favorite pastime.

ary teams or at least pass the time through less prominent ones.

The book begins early in Grimes' career, where Niese crafts the narrative of Grimes as a hard-working farm boy who loved the outdoors, hard work and baseball, possibly in that order.

Niese describes how during this time Grimes developed his pitch that would set him apart from other pitchers — the spitball. This pitch is so unique because the pitcher applies some sort of lubricant to the fingers (usually a resin rather than saliva as the name suggests). This causes the pitch to seem like a fastball to the batter, but it drops off much quicker, making it a tougher pitch to hit.

Due to some internal team management struggles, which Niese describes in the book, this did not propel Grimes to much playing time for the Clear Lake Yellow Jackets. Niese writes, "Years later Grimes quipped that he wondered if he was good enough yet to pitch in Clear Lake."

In the body of the book Niese recounts the career of Grimes past the idyllic St. Croix and Chippewa valleys to the East Coast and then to our neighbor to the north. The Grimes in this book is not a mild-mannered midwesterner. Grimes is a player who didn't shy away from harsh words and the possibility of a brawl.

"I don't know how you could write a biography of

Grimes and not show what a jerk he was when on the field," Niese says. "He was a typical ballplayer of that time, a prickly person when he played. He said the batters stood between him and having to drive horses back in Clear Lake."

Romantically, Grimes is also a bit of an enigma from the grandfatherly character. He was married five times. In the text, Niese even shares a full-page ad that Grimes took out in newspapers across the nation describing the details of the derailed marriage while he was going through his first divorce.

Another Mrs. Grimes is called into question because she was not completely forthright with Grimes about several aspects of her life, including a previous marriage and children she had before.

"I always say Grimes had two bad marriages and three good ones," Niese says.

Yet the book does not revel in the licentious parts of Grimes' life, it merely discusses them as they chronologically occur as part of the narrative.

That's the beauty of how Niese has crafted this book. He took 40-plus years of stats, articles and personal observations about Grimes and built them

into a coherent story about a man who loved both the game and his homes in Wisconsin.

The book chronicles both Grimes on the field and his trips around the nation, including returning to Wisconsin to do dangerous work during the off season.

When you read the book, you really understand the trajectory of Grimes' career and his personality. The book is also filled with enough tidbits of other players' careers, which Grimes touched, that it will keep the baseball fan talking about the book for months.

Niese painstakingly kept folders of each year of Grimes' career in his extensive research. Then he pieced together all of the elements from each year to build the tale. Niese says, "I don't know if I'm this organized in anything else in my life, but I was for this."

To share the book with the community, Niese has been giving a series of readings and presentations on Grimes. If you are interested in learning more about Niese, Grimes or some interesting future work Niese has coming, his website, www.joeniese.com will give you all the details.

And, if you are interested in learning more about Grimes after reading the book, the Clear Lake Historical Museum is a great place to further revel in the career of a Wisconsin icon. ★

Scott Morfitt, who lives in Eau Claire, is a lover of his girlfriend, dogs and the great state of Wisconsin. He enjoys bicycling, gardening and going to as many concerts as possible. He has written several articles and enjoys learning all he can about the state he loves so much. He can be contacted at scott.morfitt@gmail.com.

