

It's Easy to Digest Kuenster's Passion for Game

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By Paul Ladewski

If you're a traditional seamhead, it's easier to eat Jell-O with chopsticks than to live and breathe baseball these days. From 'roids rage to the disparity in team payrolls to Bud Selig's 'do, the game has more problems than you can shake a corked bat at.

Imagine how much worse it would be if John Kuenster and Baseball Digest weren't around?

Kuenster is the 82-year-young motor that drives the oldest baseball publication in existence today. Has been since 1969, when the Evergreen Park native left the Chicago Daily News, where he broke into the business as a Blackhawks-White Sox beat writer 12 years earlier. Save for the fact that his son Bob has come aboard to lend a hand, not much has changed for Kuenster since then, least of all his obsession for the game.

“Obviously, it's something I enjoy a great deal,” Kuenster said. “As they say, it beats working for a living.”

Dude, even the players and owners tried to knock Baseball Digest out of the box. Whiffed, too. The monthly tabloid saw its circulation cut in half by the 1994 labor dispute, but here it is a dozen years later, and it's 140,000 strong.

If I'm the head honchos, I make sure Baseball Digest sticks around. At a time when the steroids mess continues to give tradition a swift kick in the asset, the game needs someone to remind us why it was the national pastime.

“I'm not one for crusades, so I can't say our intention is to save the game or anything like that,” Kuenster said. “But baseball has been my passion for a long time. Even after all that the game has gone through the last few years, I like to think a lot of us are still around.”

Launched in August, 1942, Baseball Digest is like an old Wilson A1000 glove somewhere in the crawlspace. It still feels so good in your hands, you can't possibly throw it away.

If you want in-depth analysis of the BALCO scandal, Baseball Digest isn't for you. But if you want lotsa nuts and bolts – namely, features and stats – than few if any do it better after all these years.

“The way I figure it, if people want to know about player salaries, they can buy the Wall Street Journal,” Kuenster said. “We have readers from their 20s to their 70s. If there's one thing they have in common, it's that they're die-hard fans. We try to give them what they want.”

Not that the pages of Baseball Digest are warm and fuzzy all over. In recent years, Kuenster has taken on Albert Belle, Barry Bonds and Pete Rose among others. Lately, the hot button is the Hall of Fame and which players merit the honor. Yet while Baseball Digest discusses the pros and cons of everyone from Rich Gossage to Mark McGwire, it

fails to mention the one person whose credentials are as good as most, a guy who has never taken a performance-enhancer stronger than a cup of coffee in his life.

Kuenster himself.

“I can't think of anyone who has devoted more time to baseball as a writer and editor in the last 50 years,” said former Inside Sports editor Vince Aversano, a Kuenster colleague for more than a decade. “Not only has Jack done a lot to promote the game, but he has done it with fairness and passion. It's time to forget the Peter Gammons wannabes and give Jack his due.”

Kuenster would never consider himself to be among the greats in the game. He is perfectly content to discuss the game plan with his son, write stories, edit letters, sort out photos and explain why his good buddy Jerome Holtzman isn't included in *The Best of Baseball Digest*, which was published last spring.

Hey, what would you expect of a guy who has lived the last 56 years in the same house? And still mows his own grass?

“The only thing Bob won't let me do is climb a ladder anymore,” said Kuenster, who busted a leg in a fall a while back.

Yet Kuenster isn't one of the old fogies who believes everything was better in the good, ol' days. He'll tell you the Bonds and Derek Jeters are every bit as good as the Ernie Banks and Stan Musial of his day. He even considers the Scott Podsednik walk-off home run in the 2005 World Series to be the most electric moment he ever witnessed, a few volts better than the Ted Kluszewski bomb in the Fall Classic that he covered 47 years ago.

It's just that, when you consider the sorry shape in which baseball finds itself at the moment, can there be any doubt some things were better decades ago? “The beat writers traveled with their teams back then, and that's one thing that they miss out on now,” Kuenster said. “We got to know the players and they got to know us. There was a trust level between us that doesn't exist today.”

Then again, that was a time when the players didn't live in secluded mansions but a few doors away from the guys who covered them, as Kuenster and White Sox star pitcher Billy Pierce did for years.

“As long as we didn't get friendly to the point that it affected the way we covered the team, it was a positive thing,” Kuenster said. “As I told the players, 'I don't care if you break the curfew, but if you miss it and make a mental mistake the next day, you'll be the first to read about it.'”

Kuenster is Mr. Peabody in the Rocky and Bullwinkle Show. Any extended discussion with him soon becomes a trip in the Wayback Machine. Ask Kuenster about the Blackhawks' Stanley Cup-clincher that he covered, for instance, and he'll say “April 16, 1961” before one can blurt another word.

“After the game, me and another writer went to the team party at the Leland Hotel in Detroit,” recalled Kuenster, believed to be the only living member of the local media to

have covered the game. “There was a blizzard that night, so we left on a train at 3 o'clock the next morning. I'm not sure when the players left. Some of them may still be there.”

Doesn't sound like a guy who's in the bottom of the ninth inning, does it? The lawn may have to wait awhile.