

## LIFE IN THE U.S.

## HEALTH CARE

## Whether you want him or not

By Patrick Owens

Roman Bown, as I shall call him, was struck in his late 40s by multiple sclerosis, a disease of the brain and central nervous system that commonly reduces its victims to inert atrophy over some two decades of pain and suffering.

MS patients, as they are called, vary greatly in their response to their affliction. Bown's response, which was not unusual, was to become increasingly childlike. He laughed easily and cried a lot. Unable to postpone gratification, like many children, he loudly demanded attention and threw temper tantrums. As he contemplated a future filled only with continuing deterioration, his emotional equilibrium disappeared.

Unable to work, Bown stayed at home for five years while his wife, Rita, shuttled back and forth between their apartment in Queens and her job as a secretary in a sizeable corporation. The Bowns' four children went through adolescence in this period.

The youngest, Danny, was 16 when Mrs. Bown finally threw in the sponge and took her husband to the Veterans Administration Hospital in Manhattan. She was physically exhausted, partly from helping her 190-pound, six-foot-plus husband from bed to bathroom. He had become incontinent and wet his bed consistently.

Bown was in the hospital for about nine months. He got no better but his wife recovered strength and composure. Then a social worker, Elinor N. Polansky, told her Bown would have to leave; the hospital could do no more for him and could use his bed. He must return home or go to a nursing home.

Mrs. Bown recoiled at both suggestions. The nursing home meant that the few thousand dollars the family still retained in assets would swiftly be expended. The other choice, caring for Bown at home, meant that she would have to quit her job, sink onto the welfare rolls, and devote perhaps 15 years to caring for an increasingly unmanageable patient.

Mrs. Bown liked her job. Though she loved her husband she felt hopelessly inadequate as his nurse; she was already guilt-riddled because her husband's illness had drained her of time and energy for her children; she did not want to become a pauper. So she told the hospital to keep her husband.

**No choice.**

Polansky said that Mrs. Bown had no choice; the hospital's doctors had made their decision; Bown would be discharged whether his wife wanted him or not.

That was not, Polansky made clear, a decision with which she was in agreement. She urged Mrs. Bown to fight it.

Mrs. Bown left the hospital profoundly troubled but feeling defiant. She stuck to her refusal.

A few days later an ambulance pulled up in front of the two-family house where the Bowns lived. Attendants rang the bell. No one answered. They tried the door. It was locked. They broke a window, reached in and unlocked the door, carried Bown inside, deposited him on a bed, and left.

He stayed four months. Mrs. Bown did not quit her job nor did she invest her limited savings in nursing-home care. She hurried frantically between office and house. She appealed to politicians for help in her crisis.

After the four months, Bown was readmitted to the hospital without controversy. He had become actively psychotic and was much more debilitated physically.

Not every woman who finds herself nursing a helpless relative has suffered



Ken Firestone

does not seem that way to Polansky.

**Help needed.**

She is angered that women involved in the care of the disabled must soldier on with limited expertise and despite their personal preferences, or be cast as shirkers and poor examples of womanhood.

"Most of the women I dealt with at the VA wanted to nurse their relatives at home," she says. "But they needed help. They needed backup services, child care, transportation for the patient's visits to clinics and hospitals. They needed supportive counseling to help them adjust to their new role. They needed legal assistance in dealing with Medicaid, insurance companies and so forth. They needed to be able to ask the doctors about their husband's conditions, but doctors were often suspicious and treated the concerns of wives as nuisances, or implied that the wives were trying to shirk their responsibilities."

Polansky's views on these matters are radical. She believes women who choose to care for their loved ones at home should be paid for their work, that nursing homes should be nationalized and that Medicaid eligibility rules should be liberalized so that a spouse does not have to choose between medical support for her husband and financial self-sufficiency for herself.

She also contends that visiting nurses, homemakers and transportation services should be routinely available to the chronically disabled.

She is talking about a lot of money. But this money would buy services that are now routinely, if often resentfully, provided by women who would, given free choice, make other uses of their lives.

**Refusing the burden.**

And, regardless of what judgment anyone may have on women who resent the role of full-time caretaker, these women are actually volunteers who can, if they choose, walk away from their demanding responsibilities or seek to lodge them elsewhere. One woman, whom Polansky calls Mrs. Lewis, turned the tables on the VA in dramatic fashion. As Polansky recalls it:

"Mr. Lewis, aged 49, had a brain tumor removed in the hospital and was taken home by his wife. Mrs. Lewis willingly quit her job to take care of her husband. She received his sick pay but she could not afford home visits by professionals.

"Mr. Lewis' condition became worse. He became incontinent, lost his sense of balance and became unable to speak clearly. Mrs. Lewis asked the hospital to readmit her husband. They refused. A nursing home would have cost the family between \$1,500 and \$2,000 a month.

"The children were young and the prospect of turning over all the family's assets was terrifying to Mrs. Lewis... [Finally] she brought him to the hospital and left him in the emergency room, forcing the hospital to readmit him."

It's possible to conjure up scenarios in which over-crowded public hospitals and fed-up wives bounce bedridden husbands back and forth like shuttlecocks.

Such refusals may seem outrageous now. But the real outrage surely lies in the bland assumption that any and all women owe a higher duty to an incapacitated relative than they do to themselves or, in many cases, to their children.

Ultimately, society will have to take a look at a medical system that has made it possible for more and more people to live longer and longer in various states of helplessness—and that has made almost no provision for their care.

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so dramatically. But many have. And, whether dramatic or not, hundreds of thousands of women are now full-time attendants of family members or close friends who are chronically disabled. Miracle drugs and other medical advances since WWII increase this number constantly and dramatically.

**Free care given by women.**

Polansky left the VA in a great row over cases like the Bowns. She simply refused to dump patients on wives and other relatives. She is now a psychotherapist in New York City and a teacher at the School of Social Welfare of the State University of New York at Stony Brook on Long Island.

But Polansky is still a crusader for freedom of choice for women faced with Mrs. Bown's problems. If anything, Polansky is more radical about the problems of such women than she used to be.

At least 1.8 million chronically disabled people are now confined to their homes in the U.S. No one knows how many of these are receiving the full-time

attention of family members and how many are suffering in virtual solitude, receiving only an occasional visit from a landlady or relative. One survey Polansky cites indicates that fewer than 15 percent of the chronically disabled who are discharged from hospitals go into settings where they receive consistent professional health care.

Polansky argues that the great bulk of care received by sick people in this society is given, free of charge, by women. These women are usually members of the family of the afflicted. Throughout history, they have abandoned their own preoccupations to nurse and nurture the men, children and other women with whom they have blood or marriage ties.

In a world of sexual equity, Polansky argues, women should have to be paid when they tend the sick in their families. Furthermore, women should have the option of continuing their own careers and other pursuits—just as men have always done—while the sick are given professional care.

All this sounds visionary, distant and, at least to many males, subversive. It

## SPORTS

# The unrepentent joy of baseball

By Marc Gunther

There are those who say the American baseball fan today is a beleaguered citizen. He may even be oppressed. Just listen to Peter Gruenstein, an attorney, associate of Ralph Nader and former Dodger roofer who is now forming a national fan organization called Fight to Advance the Nation's Sports (FANS).

"Sports fans comprise the largest, the most unrepresented and the most abused segment of our population," Gruenstein says. "Outside of voting in the baseball all-star game, I don't know of any other time when the average fan is ever consulted or asked his opinion."

Nader himself says there's a "massive ripoff" going on in sports, and characterizes fans as powerless consumers. A fan organization, Gruenstein says, could begin to pressure owners and government agencies such as the Congress and the Federal Trade Commission to control rising ticket prices and shifting franchises. One article on the organization even complains about the nutritional value of the ballpark frank.

Then there's the typical radical analysis of the sports establishment, which goes beyond Nader's critique to declare that sports are Big Capital. The sports industry reflects competitive capitalism's racism and sexism, drives exploited players to unionize, dulls the minds and saps the energies of passive spectators. Working people, says radical critic Paul Hoch, "are being asked to identify with every team but the real team, the only team in the contest that can really make a difference—workers versus capitalists."

Such assertions, though somewhat exaggerated, are largely true. Fans are relatively powerless, and professional sports are often needlessly violent and competitive. As participants and fans, men have derived pleasure from the exclusion of women from sports. Television's need to make sports entertaining, blatant commercialism, artificial turf, the designated hitter, etc., may be destroying our games.

## Unrepentent fans.

Yet many of us—capitalists and workers, Naderites and socialists—remain unrepentent fans. This year more people than ever before will attend major league baseball games and hundreds of millions will watch on television. Most will "participate" in some way: we will literally jump for joy when our teams win and despair when they lose.

Critics need to think about why we remain fans and how we watch the game, at the park or on television—that is, to treat baseball as culture rather than industry. This approach may tell us more about two worlds—the world inside and the world outside the stadium—than an economic analysis of the sport.

This summer Phil Rizzuto was telecasting a New York Yankee game when a TV camera crew getting into position for a certain shot appeared on the screen. The "cameraman" turned out to be a woman, and there was a confused and embarrassed moment before his broadcast partner, Frank Messer, suggested gently that she be designated a "cameraperson." "Oh yeah," said Phil, brightening. "That's that women's lib they got out there."

Out There. Sixty-year-old Phil Rizzuto, still called The Scooter, has since his teenage days earned his living as a player and broadcaster. In Here, where political trends and natural catastrophes usually go unremarked. Only the events from Out There deemed upbeat and noncontroversial—a space walk or bicentennial sail—are permitted. The fans wouldn't have it any other way.

This is one of the strongest appeals of baseball, and of all games. It is admittedly an escapist one; fans seek refuge in the ballpark, and this offends some social reformers out there.

The world of baseball, they say, is adolescent, trivial and, worst of all, useless.



UPI

The world of baseball is one where excellence is rewarded and fairness the rule...a world of surprise and beauty.

But the world of baseball is also one where excellence is generally rewarded and fairness the rule. It is a world of courage and surprise and occasional beauty.

## A clash of worlds.

Sometimes the two worlds clash, and the results are troubling. New York Mets president M. Donald Grant, a stockbroker, feuds over money with Tom Seaver and soon afterwards the brilliant pitcher's stay in the city ends. Considerations external to the game have won, making this much more difficult for us than an ordinary trade, and that hard, rising fastball no longer belongs to New York.

As much as any other pitcher today, Seaver's *modus operandi* when he is in a jam is to reach back and fire the old apple as hard as he can. This is called "challenging the hitter"—pitting your best against his—and it is courageous, dangerous and much marveled at by fans.

And so with other players too: Mark Fidrych's antics and Reggie Jackson's swagger may entertain us for a while but, finally, they must perform. Bobby Brown's degree in medicine is as irrelevant as Yogi Berra's reputed reading deficiencies, and no slugger's family ties ever helped hit a home run. This is how it should be, and how it is in the world in here.

The sense of apartness from the outside world seems strongest in baseball, that rural game played in our cities. It is more satisfying to watch the game in Fenway Park or Yankee Stadium, grass green oases in urban neighborhoods, than in suburban coliseums surrounded by parking lots. The anticipation can be unbearable on the city streets outside the park before the game begins.

Once inside the ballpark time moves differently. The clocks we watch all day at work, where time is money, and the clocks that control football and basketball are absent. No other spectator sport is played on weekday afternoons, when most of the world is working.

Absorbing us, the game moves at its own peculiarly measured pace, and as fans we sense this. Witness the responses

to a recent article in the *New York Times* that called the game boring and recommended that it be speeded up.

"What the author misidentifies as the defects of baseball are the very virtues of the game," one fan wrote. "It defies the frenetic pace of the age." Another said that "demands for action, action, action are only too typical of our impatient society."

## A link to the past.

Roger Angell talks about time in *The Summer Game* and suggests that baseball's rhythms link us to the past. "This is the way the game was played in our youth and in our fathers' youth and even back then—back in the country days—there must have been the same feeling that time could be stopped," he says.

Old Timers Day at the ballpark—an institution unique to baseball—celebrates the game's history, a communal past that has been experienced and can be shared by fans. Baseball's history is written in a special language, and recorded in a special mathematics. It is taught by fathers and older brothers and friends. Through it, we may become closer to one another, almost as if we have joined an enormous family.

"I have always been surprised at how angry some of my friends get when they announce that they don't like baseball—the ones who insist that it is boring and empty-headed," says Angell. "They criticize it with such venom that it sometimes occurs to me that they feel left out.... excluded from something in which membership is a privilege and a source of joy."

The ballpark, of course, is open to all comers, and there is a kind of healthy democracy inside. Fans talk to one another without an introduction, and give little heed to race or class. They are opinionated and knowledgeable about baseball and those with advanced degrees have no particular insight into a squeeze play or the double steal with runners at the corners.

Detached and objective observation is little valued in the fan's world. Admired is the diehard who roots and is rooted to the successes and failures of the team.

No value-free science in here: he will argue until red (or blue) in the face that Carlton Fisk is a better catcher than Thurman Munson—despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

## Caring deeply and passionately.

In some way these experiences become part of our personal histories, our roots. Yankee fans in Boston are like brothers, Dodger fans in New York despair: how to get the late scores from the coast. This is foolish and childish, some say, to tie oneself to anything so insignificant as a baseball team. But listen to Angell:

"What is left out of this calculation, it seems to me, is the business of caring—caring deeply and passionately, really caring—which is a capacity or emotion that has almost gone out of our lives. And so it seems possible that we have come to a time when it no longer matters what the caring is about, how frail or foolish is the object of that concern, as long as the feeling itself can be saved."

And so our team has won or lost, and we leave the stadium to reenter the world out there. What have we learned? Have our desires been stimulated by the courage and fairness and passion within or are we sated? Do we miss the community of fans or have we had enough?

The answers to these questions are complex and worthy of further thought, and that is itself a partial answer. There is no simple transfer of the values learned in here to the world out there. And, the values themselves are far from simple.

Those who have assumed that sports do nothing more than stamp working people with capitalist values reveal only their own patronizing ways. Sometimes, in fact, the racism and sexism of sport that outrages radicals outrages fans too, maybe even as much as rising ticket prices. But that depends on what we bring to the ballpark.

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