



Bill Reynolds

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Bill Reynolds: Penders pens a worthwhile read

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Three books for any sports fan's summer reading list ...

DEAD COACH WALKING by Tom Penders, with Steve Richardson

At a time when the NCAA is coming under increasing scrutiny for everything from the mess at Ohio State to USC being stripped of its 2004 national championship in football, maybe it's only fitting that Tom Penders is out with a new book.

He was a head college basketball coach for four decades, including two memorable years at the University of Rhode Island, a tenure that ended with the Rams going to the Sweet 16 in 1988.

The book is called "Dead Coach Walking," it's written with Dallas sports writer Steve Richardson, and it's an account of Penders' incredible coaching career, a journey that began in the Connecticut of his childhood and included head coaching college stops at Tufts, Columbia, Fordham, Texas, George Washington and Houston, in addition to URI.

Suffice it to say he's seen it all.

He played at UConn when the Huskies played in the old field house and one of its biggest games of the season was against URI. He has seen the game go from college gyms to downtown arenas. He has seen coaches' salaries explode through the roof. In short, he's seen the game change in ways that once would have been unimaginable.

From a local standpoint, he talks about his two years at URI, the time the Rams went from a program that was struggling in the beginnings of the new basketball world to the landscape they occupy today. He talks about his health issues, ones that required having a defibrillator implanted in his chest in 1977.

And he's come to have some strong thoughts on his amazing basketball journey, namely the pervasive influence of AAU basketball and the ramifications of that.

"The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) is a totally out-of-control organization that is running college basketball," he writes. "The whole system is totally out of whack."

Penders knows.

And he writes about it in this very interesting book about a very interesting coaching career.

BRANCH RICKEY by Jimmy Breslin

This is the best baseball story I know, and it comes on page 65 of this book that came out in the spring.

The idea of integrating baseball was Branch Rickey's, a man who had grown up in the Midwest, had been a visionary as owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, and saw the future before anyone else in baseball saw it.

One day, his scouting director brought a young player then called Jack Robinson into his office.

"Their eyes cast across a moat of deep silence," Breslin writes.

Robinson thought he was in the office to play in some new Negro league, because everyone knew then that black players were not allowed in the major leagues. Now he knew he was sitting on the precipice of history.

Only Rickey had to know if Robinson was the right man to break baseball's color barrier.

"I don't know if you have the guts," Rickey said to him.

"I'm not afraid of anybody," Robinson said.

So Rickey threw off his jacket, and in a big-booming voice, tinged with emotion, got right in Robinson's face. He was the clerk at the hotel's front desk telling him we have no room for you, boy. He was the waiter telling him there was no room for him, even if there were aisles of empty seats around. He was the player who screamed vile racial epithets at him. And at one point Rickey threw a punch that stopped an inch from Robinson's face.

"What do you do now?" he growled.

"Mr. Rickey, do you want a ballplayer who is afraid to fight back?" Robinson asked.

"I want a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back," Rickey said.

Robinson finally understood.

THE SPHAS: The Life and Times of Basketball's Greatest Jewish Team by Douglas Stark.

It's been long forgotten, but once upon a time basketball was considered a Jewish game, especially in the cities of New York and Philadelphia, back when many of the ghettos were filled by Jewish immigrants. The SPHAS were the greatest Jewish team, and for years they played in the American Basketball League, one of the leagues that morphed into the NBA into 1946. For a while they even traveled with the Globetrotters, back when much of professional basketball was barnstorming.

The SPHAS official name was the South Philadelphia Hebrew Athletic Association, and they began in 1918. By the 1930s, they were one of the best basketball teams in the country, coming of age with the rise in popularity of professional basketball.

Those days are as gone as the two-hand set shot now, but they've been brought back to life in this book by Stark, who in real life is the museum director at the Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport. It is an extremely well-researched book, one that captures in detail a bygone era, and belongs on the bookshelf of anyone with an interest in basketball history.

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