



The Baseball Whisperer: A Small-Town Coach Who Shaped Big League Dreams

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From an award-winning journalist, a real *Field of Dreams* story about a legendary coach and the professional-caliber baseball program he built in America's heartland, where boys come summer after summer to be molded into ballplayers — and men

Clarinda, Iowa, population 5,000, sits two hours from anything. There, between the corn fields and hog yards, is a ball field with a bronze bust of a man named Merl Eberly, a baseball whisperer who specialized in second chances and lost causes. The statue was a gift from one of Merl's original long-shot projects, a skinny kid from the ghetto in Los Angeles who would one day become a beloved Hall-of-Fame shortstop: Ozzie Smith.

The Baseball Whisperer traces the remarkable story of Merl Eberly and his Clarinda A's baseball team, which he tended over the course of five decades, transforming them from a town team to a collegiate summer league powerhouse. Along with Ozzie Smith, future manager Bud Black, and star player Von Hayes, Merl developed scores of major league players (six of which are currently playing). In the process, Merl taught them to be men, insisting on hard work, integrity, and responsibility.

More than a book about ballplayers who landed in the nation's agricultural heartland, *The Baseball Whisperer* is the story of a coach who puts character and dedication first, and reminds us of the best, purest form of baseball excellence.

The Baseball Whisperer: A Small-Town Coach Who Shaped Big League Dreams Details

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From Reader Review **The Baseball Whisperer: A Small-Town Coach Who Shaped Big League Dreams** for online ebook

Mark Stevens says

The story of the Clarinda A's is the story of baseball for baseball's sake. "The Baseball Whisperer: A Small Town Coach Who Shaped Big-League Dreams" is the story of the man behind the team, Merl Eberly, and some of the key major league players who learned the sport or learned about themselves by spending a season or two in the scrappy world of collegiate summer ball. This is real-life Field of Dreams stuff, sure, and the book is a refreshing read. There's almost a Norman Rockwell flavor to the Heartland setting.

But for every Ozzie Smith, who came to Clarinda as a long-shot hopeful with physical limitations and left to pursue a career that would land him in the Hall of Fame, there are hundreds and hundreds of wannabes and others who played the game because they loved it and, well, maybe. Just maybe.

Eberly worked on his dream for more than fifty years. Eberly hustled for sponsors, coached the athletes, found jobs for his prospects, and kept his coaxed his clunky "Blue Goose" bus on the road through repair after repair. More than anything, Eberly started with character development. He was the Uber Boy Scout of baseball—hard work and responsibility were taught right alongside knowing how to hit a curve ball.

Michael Tackett's portrait of Eberly and the town of Clarinda tries to make a case that the All-American values are key to the success of the program and also to the players who made it to the big leagues—a list that also included current Colorado Rockies manager Bud Black, former longtime Philadelphia Phillies outfielder and first baseman Von Hayes, and former journeyman and infielder Jamey Carroll, whose story is really the stuff of dreams. Carroll played in the minors for seven years before reaching the major leagues due to a fluke call-up by the Montreal Expos. He never returned to the minor leagues. Carroll's career ran from 2002 through 2013 and he collected precisely 1,000 hits. Carroll was known for his "intangibles," including his hustle and determination. Rod Eberly, Carroll's Clarinda teammate at the time and Merl Eberly's son, said Carroll "embodied everything my dad preached ... Discipline, fundamentals, control your effort, because the effort is the one thing you can control. You can control how you show up every day on the field. He (Carroll) was a 100 percent guy all the time. He was very competitive. He hated to lose, a lot like my dad. He didn't just say you needed to hustle, he did it."

By its title alone, "The Baseball Whisperer" suggests that Merl had some secret sauce he could splash on his players and turn them into major leaguers. Ballplayers who joined the A's were expected to take jobs and be good citizens of Clarinda (and house guests) in addition to working hard on their game. Merl wanted his graduates to be "complete" ball players and good people, too. It's impossible to miss the lesson here that character counts as much as knowing the fundamentals of bunting or how to get extension on your swing. Tackett's profile of Merl borders occasionally on reverence. "The old coach had an aura about him, a combination of fortitude, elegance, and athleticism, even as he reached his sixties and seventies. He was a player's coach, and for three months he was also like their father. He carried himself with a sense of calm, and he passed baseball wisdom down like heirlooms, hoping that his players would do the same."

But Merl's record and career—and his own hustle—speak for itself. Baseball is mythical and poetic for lots of reasons. Tackett's story is a strong non-fiction account of a town where legends are groomed and of the coach whose purposeful, character-first philosophy molded many big names. Merl Eberly died in 2011. The Clarinda A's will start their 65th season in 2019.

Andrew Campbell says

Better reported than told, and almost too sad to bear. Let's strive to be as irreplaceable as Merl.

Jeff Lamb says

Amazing story

I loved the story. I didn't like the writing style but it was just a preference thing. Very well studied. I would recommend the book. Not too long. Kindle version said I was at 80% when the book finished. Just so you know if you are trying to get a quick read, it's pretty quick and easy.

Madonna Nimmo says

Pure baseball

Excellent baseball story if you're a true fan of the game. I hope younger players take the opportunity to read this for the lessons they could learn.

Kevin says

This is an endearing story of a boy who was heading down a road to perdition when he met a coach who guided him in a different direction. When that boy grew to manhood he found a wife who was a kindred spirit and together through baseball they inspired character, responsibility and ethos in their family, community and generations of ball college ball players. This book felt as if "Field of Dreams" actually happened in a small town in Iowa and in a way it did. "I see great things in baseball. It's our game, the American game. It will repair our losses and be a blessing to us." Merl and Pat Eberly lived this quote and helped pass the purity of the game to the next generations.

Sam Sattler says

Merle Eberly, a gifted athlete from little Clarinda, Iowa, developed a deep love for the game of baseball when he was just a kid – and that love and respect for the game burned in the man's heart right up until the moment he died. So have a lot of us, you say? Well, consider this: Merle spent as much time playing and coaching the game of baseball for the Clarinda A's (four decades) as he did working the job that put food on the table (small-town newspaperman) for him, his wife, and their six children. And there is little doubt that coaching baseball was the position Merle considered to be his real life's work.

For good reason, Merle was a man who believed in second chances. If not for the coaches who saw enough in him to challenge him to use sports to turn his own lazy approach to life around, Merle's life would have turned out much differently than it did. Sports saved Merle from himself and showed him what he was capable of achieving, even in a small town whose five thousand citizens sometimes feel as if they live two hours from just about everything. What the town did have was a baseball team, a team that everyone in town was proud to call its own.

Merle, a natural catcher because of his size, was an essential part of that team, as player and coach, for over forty years, and he used the team countless times to pay forward the favor done to him by those high school coaches so many years earlier. Before it was over, Merle and the Clarinda A's were synonymous – and today a bronze bust of Merle Eberly is prominently displayed at the team's ballpark, a ballpark that sits snugly between corn fields, auction barns, and hog yards just as it always has.

An immediate goal of Merle's when he became a player/manager for the A's was to bring his team to national prominence by successfully playing against such a high level of competition that the A's could not be ignored. He succeeded in that goal to such a degree that college coaches from around the country soon felt comfortable sending Merle "projects" of their own during the summer months that the college programs shut down for the season. These "projects" were players either on the verge of breakthrough to a higher level or those who needed to be tested against better competition once and for all to determine what could be expected of them by their coaches.

Merle ran a tight ship. He expected a lot from his players, a complete dedication to the game while he coached them in Clarinda, and players unable or unwilling to live up to Merle's standards were sent packing. The second chance they got from Merle to turn their careers around was usually the only second chance he gave his players – misbehavior in a town as small as Clarinda is impossible to hide, especially since every player on the team lives with a host family for the summer. Drugs, drinking, and all-night partying were firing offenses.

So how good was Merle's program? Without the Clarinda A's, baseball may have given up on Hall-of-Famer Ozzie Smith before he had a chance to show what he could do despite his small size. And Ozzie was not Merle's only major league success story. Other major leaguers who played for Merle include: Buddy Black, Von Hayes, Jose Alvarez, Scott Brosius, Andy Benes, Cal Edred, Chuck Knoblauch, Brady Clark, and Andrew Cashner.

Many of Merle's players became lifelong friends to Merle and his wife Pat. Over the years they helped support the program with financial help and the kind of moral support that money can't buy, and when Merle died in 2011 many of them were among the 600 people who attended his funeral.

The Baseball Whisperer is much more than just another baseball book; it is a book about life - an example of how to make the most of life while at the same time giving back to the community that made it all possible. Merle Eberly was a remarkable man, and baseball was lucky to have him for as long as it did. We all were.

Shawn says

My main reason I read this book is that I'm a huge fan of baseball, and I'm from Iowa and have played on the field that was built in Clarinda by the man in this book. It was interesting reading about some of the history

in a town that isn't too far from me, and it was also interesting hearing about all the different players that have passed through there. Overall though, the book kind of repeats itself over and over, and it seems to jump around a bit from different anecdotes and stories.

Jeffrey Snell says

I thought it was an excellent book on the baseball life in a small town. Coach Eberly was as tough as nails, but a compassionate man. Reading about the college summer teams reminds me of the Valley League in Virginia. Small towns and great fans coming to support the players. Very engaging narrative.

Joyce says

It's hard for this midwestern small-town girl, who got to go to Kansas City every summer to see the Yankees play when KC was essentially their farm club, to resist another small-town baseball story. And this one is an inspirational tribute to a baseball man who spent his summers drilling college athletes on the finer points of the sport, teaching them discipline and team play, and basically making ballplayers and men of them. While it traces Merl Eberly's early life, it focuses on the years from 1961-1997 when he managed the Clarinda (Iowa) A's, a team that traveled the midwest and attracted a host of major league scouts as well as players, like Ozzie Smith, who became stars. It's anecdotal, filled with engaging characters and their stories; the tone is inspirational, upbeat, and warm-hearted (the townspeople took in the players for the summer); while it moves rather slowly at first, one quickly becomes immersed; and the language is engaging and down to earth. A book for those who believe in the place of sports--especially baseball--in American culture.

carol says

Repetitive, repetitive, repetitive.

Mark A Hoffer says

Not impressed

I love baseball and learning more insight about the development required for many to reach the major leagues. But this narrative left me feeling flat. A handful of well known players passed through Clarinda on their way to the big leagues. I got bogged down in the details devoted to fund raising and networking. I didn't see much baseball whispering divulged.

Don Gorman says

(1 1/2). I rounded this one up to two stars because goodness and morality and that kind of stuff rarely gets enough attention in today's world. I saw this book recommended in a Sports Illustrated issue quite a while

ago. You need to be sports/baseball/somewhat sappy/ feel good reader to give this anything more than two stars. A nice story about a guy in nowhere Iowa who starts a low level professional baseball team and builds it into a nationally recognized program on the strength of his own integrity, talent and principles. He produced lots of players who got a cup of coffee or more playing real professional ball (Ozzie Smith-Jesse Stone's favorite being the most notable). A short and easy read, to some it will be very inspiring.

David Sayles says

Sgt. Joe Friday would have loved this book. Just the facts, nothing but the facts. It's pretty obvious that the author had no contact with the family and little contact with the ex-players. Merle Eberly's life is documented without any of the reasons why or thoughts behind any action that wasn't obvious. This book is the equivalent of moving a life into an Excel Spreadsheet. When I think Baseball Whisperer, I read it to understand the man and how he worked with the ballplayers and motivated them. Instead, I came away not liking him because of the strict unforgiving discipline. There is was little about the man the author knew, again other than the obvious. The unforgiving way Merle Eberly is portrayed goes against what I believe. I would never tell my child if he got arrested, don't waste your call on me. That isn't discipline the way I implemented it. My son is 28 now, he has never been arrested but he knows that if he is in trouble, he can count on me to come to his aid. I finished this book not knowing a lot more about Merle Eberly but knowing a great deal about Clarinda.

Matt Simmons says

Tackett's a dull writer in places, but this is overall an okay book that does a good job of telling a story about the best ideals of what athletics can do for individuals and communities, and does some exploration of what makes communities thrive. It also focuses on the particular charms of baseball, as both a game and a perspective on life, and that's something I always find enjoyable. But the book is nevertheless flawed; it runs long and tends maudlin in places, and in many ways it's more a celebration of midcentury American civil religion (the titular "baseball whisperer" isn't a churchgoer, but "reads his Bible regularly," has a list of secular commandments he expects his players to abide by, with virtue being seen as obedience to their arbitrariness, the highest good is the ol' Weberian Protestant Work Ethic, etc) rather than the connection between baseball and community.

I'm sympathetic to many of the virtues and concerns expressed in the book, and am not shy about being a traditionalist myself. But this book ultimately presents those virtues and traditions in a flat, dull way, and what could have been a compelling story about baseball, community, redemption, second chances, duty, discipline, and virtue becomes, by the end, a "kids these days" jeremiad and work of flat Boomer nostalgia. An interesting subject, treated perhaps too sentimentally. I'm glad I read it, as the story of Clarinda, Iowa and its baseball team is quite intriguing and moving--but I only wish it would have been told by a better storyteller.

Chris Aylott says

There's a fine art to covering a long life and career, especially one that isn't defined by historic events. Tackett isn't quite up to the task here, and his biography of small-town baseball coach Merl Eberley tends to

ramble from story to anecdote.

What those stories make clear is that Eberly was one hell of a guy, a quietly charismatic figure who could bring an entire town together while teaching generations of college baseball players. Eberly seems to have excelled in bringing out the best in his players, whether they went on to be professionals or not. His combination of idealism and practicality makes his life an entertaining read, especially if you prefer a book with the relaxed pace of a baseball game.
