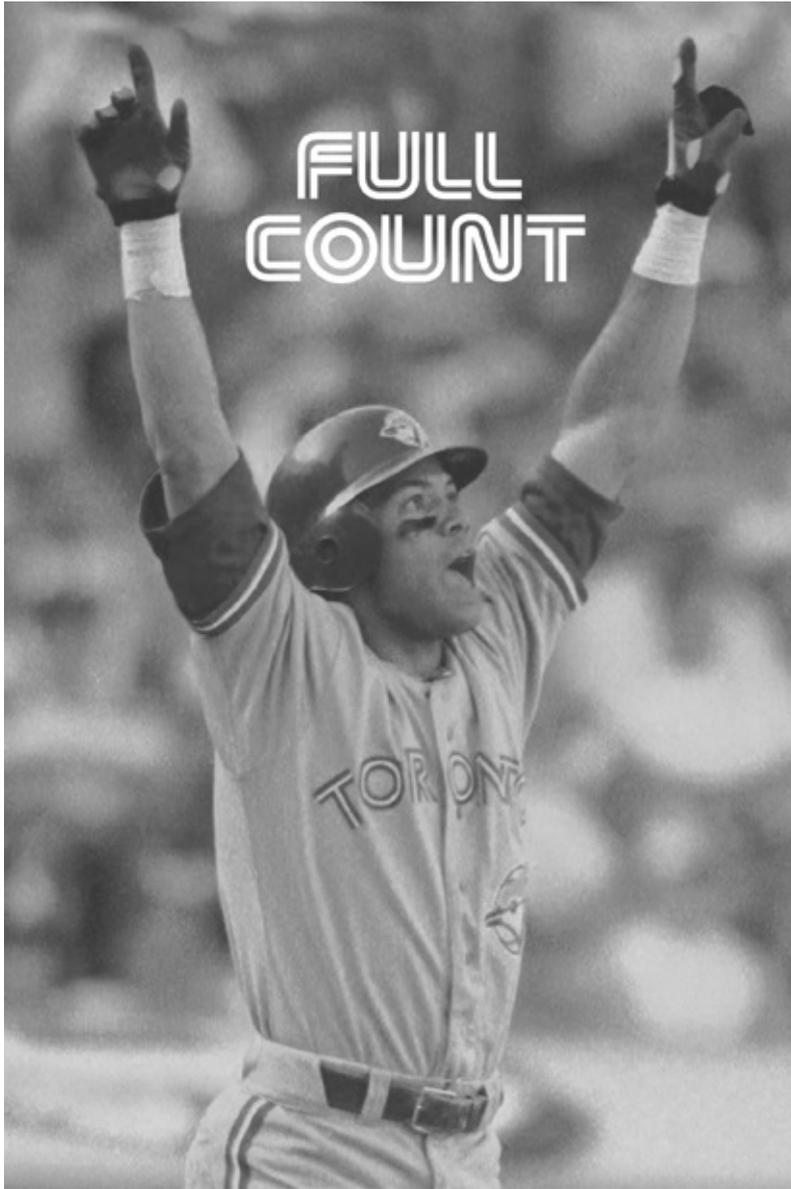




FULL COUNT

FOUR DECADES OF
BLUE JAYS
BASEBALL

JEFF BLAIR



FULL COUNT

**Four Decades
of Blue Jays
Baseball**

JEFF BLAIR

Random House Canada



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*To family, for their understanding and support
To Hal Sigurdson, for being the first to believe*

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INTRODUCTION

HOW TO EXPLAIN THE 2012 SEASON TO CANADIAN baseball fans? Has there ever been one that tried your soul as much? That made you wonder if the baseball gods had it in for you? In Toronto, the promise of a young, go-go team and the return of a popular logo and jersey energized a once-dormant fan base and put a charge into television ratings across the country. Third baseman Brett Lawrie was one of the biggest stories in Canadian sports. He was one of our own, this tattooed, hyperkinetic bundle of muscle, playing for us on our own soil. And the names he evoked! My goodness. Pete Rose? George Brett? A bit of both?

But the promise of the best spring training record in the majors was no more than a faded memory by the All-Star break, the result of too many pitching injuries, and injuries to key players, including Jose Bautista. As the schedule wore on, the club tumbled into last place and took on an air of dysfunction. A two-week period near the end of the season seemed to put everything in context. In mid-September, the club handed shortstop Yunel Escobar a three-game suspension after pictures popped up on-line, showing him on the field during a game with a homophobic slur written on his eye-black tape. Not long after, future Hall of Famer Omar Vizquel, an otherwise benign presence while taking an end-of-career victory lap with the team, skewered John Farrell and his coaching staff for a clubhouse culture that lacked accountability and for an overall sloppy approach to the game.

The clubhouse implosion and disappointing end to a season that had begun with such promise were capped off by the defection of manager John Farrell to the Boston Red Sox. Farrell's departure was just baseball business, a "perfect storm" of circumstances, in the words of Toronto Blue Jays general manager Alex Anthopoulos. But it was taken as a slap in the face, as evidence of the team and its fans getting short shrift. All in all, it was some way to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Jays' first World Series title—but then the organization itself never bothered to celebrate its 1992 team in any ceremony. In retrospect, it might have seemed like marketing prescience. The truth?

"As an organization, I think there was a sense that we lived too much in the past," said Blue Jays president and chief executive officer Paul Beeston a little more than 24 hours after Farrell's exit had been formalized. "You could see people feeling that way. We talked about doing something about the anniversary. But there really was a sense we had to move on."

It could have been worse. The Washington Nationals could have gone on to the World Series, something they never managed to do as the Montreal Expos.

While that city has torched whatever ties it had to the team, there is little doubt that old wounds would have been reopened, for a number of reasons. First, the man who helped expedite the Expos' departure from Montreal, Miami Marlins owner Jeffrey Loria, finally got his new ballpark in Miami—in time for Opening Day 2012 and just weeks after Gary Carter, the first player to go into the baseball Hall of Fame with an Expos cap on his plaque, passed away from a particularly vicious form of brain cancer. Baseball fans with sympathies leaning toward the Expos looked on with mixed feelings as the Nationals turned into the best story in the game, clinching their playoff spot at a canter and doing so with a combination of precociousness—teenager Bryce Harper, electric-armed pitcher Stephen Strasburg—and an incredible sense of self.

The club rolled to a 98–64 record, the best in the majors, before losing to the St. Louis Cardinals in the deciding game of the best-of-five National League Division Series in cruel fashion, but the Nationals' sudden exit didn't detract from the perception that everybody involved with the Expos had received some kind of return. Loria got his, winning the 2003 World Series with an improbable team and beating his childhood team, the New York Yankees. John Henry got his, owning the Boston Red Sox when they finally ended the 86-year-old “Curse of the Bambino” by winning the World Series in 2004, in the process establishing the hugely successful New England Sports Network—as well as purchasing Barclays Premier League soccer club Liverpool through his New England Sports Ventures. Meanwhile, commissioner Bud Selig got to keep all the politicians happy and add another star to his legacy by shepherding the game back to the nation's capital.

But what about Canada? Even leaving the Montreal mess aside, the story of baseball in this country has been at best mixed since Joe Carter touched 'em all in 1993. Triple-A franchises in Ottawa, Calgary and Edmonton have disappeared—the only remaining affiliated minor league franchise in the country is the Vancouver Canadians, the Blue Jays' short-season Single-A affiliate in the Northwest League—and in their place independent league teams in Winnipeg and Quebec City have established themselves in niche markets. The Canadian Baseball League was founded in 2003. It died that year too. At least 70 Canadian cities and towns have been the home of minor league baseball teams down through the years, with the high-water mark coming in 1913, when no less than 24 towns and cities had minor league baseball. We are nowhere near the high-water mark now. Not even close.

The Blue Jays did not escape damage from the 1994 players strike, even though the impact in Toronto did not seem as immediately profound as it appeared to be in Montreal. Attendance began a slow, steady decline as the club settled into a kind of middle-class hell. Once the biggest spenders in the game, the Blue Jays saw American League East rivals the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox dwarf their payroll. At the same time, the sale of the team's owner, John Labatt Limited, to Interbrew SA, a soulless Belgian-based brewery with no interest in a sports franchise, started to soften the strong

leadership structure that had made the Blue Jays the Cadillac of franchises. The inevitable player exodus was followed by an exodus of management, including general manager Pat Gillick and president Paul Beeston. The SkyDome became an empty shell on many nights, and the sense that the team was spinning its wheels grew. Attendance, which had peaked at 4,057,947 in 1993, fell below 3,000,000 in 1995. By 2002 it was down to 1,637,900.

The Blue Jays have finished in second place just once since 1993, in 2006, and have seldom threatened for a playoff spot. In fact, the Expos came closer than the Blue Jays during that time, with the 1996 Expos of 36-homer Henry Rodriguez, Moises Alou, David Segui, Pedro Martinez, Jeff Fassero and F. P. Santangelo finishing just two games out of the National League Wild Card—unable, as usual, to get over the finish line, even as the Los Angeles Dodgers lost their final four games en route to stumbling into the playoffs. A day late and several million dollars short, *Nos Amours*.

And so there is much at stake in this 2013 season. Baseball keeps bringing us back after breaking our hearts. If the 2012 season tried a fan's soul, the buildup to 2013 was something different entirely. A 12-player deal with Loria's Marlins, pulled off by Blue Jays general manager Alex Anthopoulos (a charter member of the Expos diaspora as a native of the Town of Mount Royal), addressed long-standing pitching issues and brought in Jose Reyes, the most exciting player to don a Blue Jays jersey since Roberto Alomar. Another trade landed knuckleballer and National League Cy Young Award winner R. A. Dickey. Perhaps celebrating the 20th anniversary of Joe Carter's walk-off home run against the Philadelphia Phillies' Mitch Williams would make up for that decision to not celebrate the 20th anniversary of the first World Series win.

In some ways, after all, Paul Beeston is right: history has often been a burden for the Blue Jays. The club's marketing department said a reunion held in 2009 to celebrate the career of Cito Gaston pretty much sufficed for the 1992 team. Besides, there had been criticism levelled frequently in recent seasons over the fact that the club seemed locked in a schmaltzy time warp, with "Flashback Fridays" that continually brought back the same old faces, trotting them out to be introduced during the game to the theme song from *Welcome Back, Kotter*. One season, some of the team's veteran players wore T-shirts emblazoned with "Turn The Page Tuesdays." A clear message, you'd have to think.

And for all the significance of that first World Series win, it is 2013 that will mark the 20th anniversary of one of the seminal moments in Canadian sports history. Such moments are indelibly stamped on our consciousness. One could argue that other than Paul Henderson's memorable performance in the 1972 Summit Series against the Soviet Union (the crash behind the net, the stick-to-it-iveness of jumping back up into the play and heading for the crease), the only act that comes close is Carter's World Series-winning homer off Williams.

Those were the heady days of four million fans per year packing the SkyDome to see a team that crossed the \$50 million threshold before any other club. In 1992–93 the Blue Jays were, according to Beeston, “at the head of the game’s big-market caucus,” putting more money into revenue sharing than any other team—all while playing a brand of baseball that was not only exciting but exquisite in its professionalism. Four players from those World Series teams would go on to the Hall of Fame—Paul Molitor, Dave Winfield, Rickey Henderson and Alomar—and the manner in which Pat Gillick put the team together is the standard against which subsequent Blue Jays general managers are measured.

Carter and Williams have been videotape twins since that homer, and in mid-August last year the former Phillies pitcher took part in Carter’s annual charity fundraising golf tournament at Eagles Nest Golf Club in Maple, Ontario. They have developed something of a friendship and are at ease in each other’s company, in the manner of most professional athletes after time erodes the rough edges of competition.

Still, as Carter rounded the bases on that October night, few of the 52,195 at the SkyDome or the millions more viewing the game around the world would have detected the dying embers of a remarkable franchise or grasped hold of the reality of the upcoming players strike. “Touch ’em all, Joe. You’ll never hit a bigger homer in your life,” was the call of the late Blue Jays broadcaster Tom Cheek and, like most signature calls, it rang true.

Carter never did hit a bigger home run. Nobody in Canada did. But something else happened in the aftermath of Carter’s heroics—something that has, despite some appearances to the contrary, made the game in many ways as strong as ever in this country. In 1997, a former member of the Montreal Expos and a native of Maple Ridge, British Columbia, named Larry Walker won the National League’s Most Valuable Player Award with the Colorado Rockies. And things kept happening. In 2003, relief pitcher Eric Gagne from Mascouche, Quebec, pitched for the Los Angeles Dodgers. He was one of the biggest deals in Hollywood, winning the National League’s Cy Young Award as part of a three-year run of dominance that saw him convert a major league-record 84 consecutive saves. In 2006, a slugging first baseman from New Westminster, British Columbia, won the American League Most Valuable Player Award. Justin Morneau of the Minnesota Twins was, in fact, considered the heir apparent to Walker until 2010, when a first baseman from Richview Collegiate Institute in Etobicoke, Ontario, flirted with the Triple Crown en route to winning the National League Most Valuable Player Award. Joey Votto, a cornerstone of the Cincinnati Reds, came within one vote of being a unanimous selection.

In and around all that, Canadian players started being chosen in the first round of the amateur draft—high up in the first round. The first Canadian-born player chosen in the first round was David Wainhouse, a pitcher selected 19th overall in 1988 by the Montreal Expos. By the time the Texas Rangers selected Langley, British Columbia-born catcher Kellin Deglan with the 22nd

pick overall in the 2010 draft, a total of eight other Canadian-born players had been selected in the first rounds of various drafts. The 2012 draft was not considered particularly outstanding for Canadian-born players, yet 27 players were chosen by 17 different teams.

The game's growth at home translated into international success at competitions such as the Pan Am Games, and, on one memorable afternoon in 2006, a team of Canadian players that included major leaguers and minor leaguers beat a team of US stars 8–6 in Phoenix, Arizona, sending shockwaves through the inaugural World Baseball Classic. When major league teams reported for spring training this February 2013, there were 35 Canadian-born players among their ranks.

As Beeston points out, it is “one helluva story: the game gets better in Canada, regardless of how we do. Almost in spite of us.” And it has: the history of Canadian baseball no longer stops with discussion of Hall of Famer Ferguson Jenkins, the Chatham, Ontario, native who was one of the most dominant pitchers in the majors at a time when domination meant throwing 300 innings in a season and not missing a game with injuries. Nor does it stop with Melville, Saskatchewan's Terry Puhl, a mainstay of some very good Houston Astros teams of the 1970s and '80s. It no longer means padding the discussion with references to the first Canadian big leaguer, Bill Phillips, who came from Saint John, New Brunswick, and made his debut for the Cleveland Forest Cities on May 1, 1879. We're talking about a time when pitchers still threw underhanded, until 1884, and Phillips, like all players, was allowed to call for a pitch.

No, there's much more that Canadian baseball fans can talk about. Speak, by all means, in reverential tones the name of Tip O'Neill, whose moniker graces the award given by the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame to the Canadian player judged to have had the most outstanding season. O'Neill hit over .300 in seven of his 10 big league seasons and finished with 1,385 hits. And why not also celebrate cameo appearances by some of the sport's biggest names on Canadian soil: Babe Ruth hit his first professional home run (his only minor league home run) on September 5, 1914, at Toronto's Hanlan's Point, in the midst of throwing a one-hitter for the Providence Grays against the Toronto Maple Leafs; Nap Lajoie and Wee Willie Keeler spent the dusk of their careers wearing Maple Leaf colours, while Ed Barrow managed and was part-owner of the Maple Leafs before becoming one of the architects of the New York Yankees dynasty; and everybody knows that Jackie Robinson broke the professional colour barrier playing with the Brooklyn Dodgers' Montreal Royals affiliate. We can take pride in these achievements without feeling as if we are talking about something borrowed from another country.

Not that that should have ever been the case. There are published accounts of games in southern Ontario as far back as 1838, albeit a game played with a unique set of Canadian rules. It was in cities such as Hamilton (home to the first organized team in Canada), London and Guelph, and—of course—Toronto where much of the game's early history was written. But baseball is a

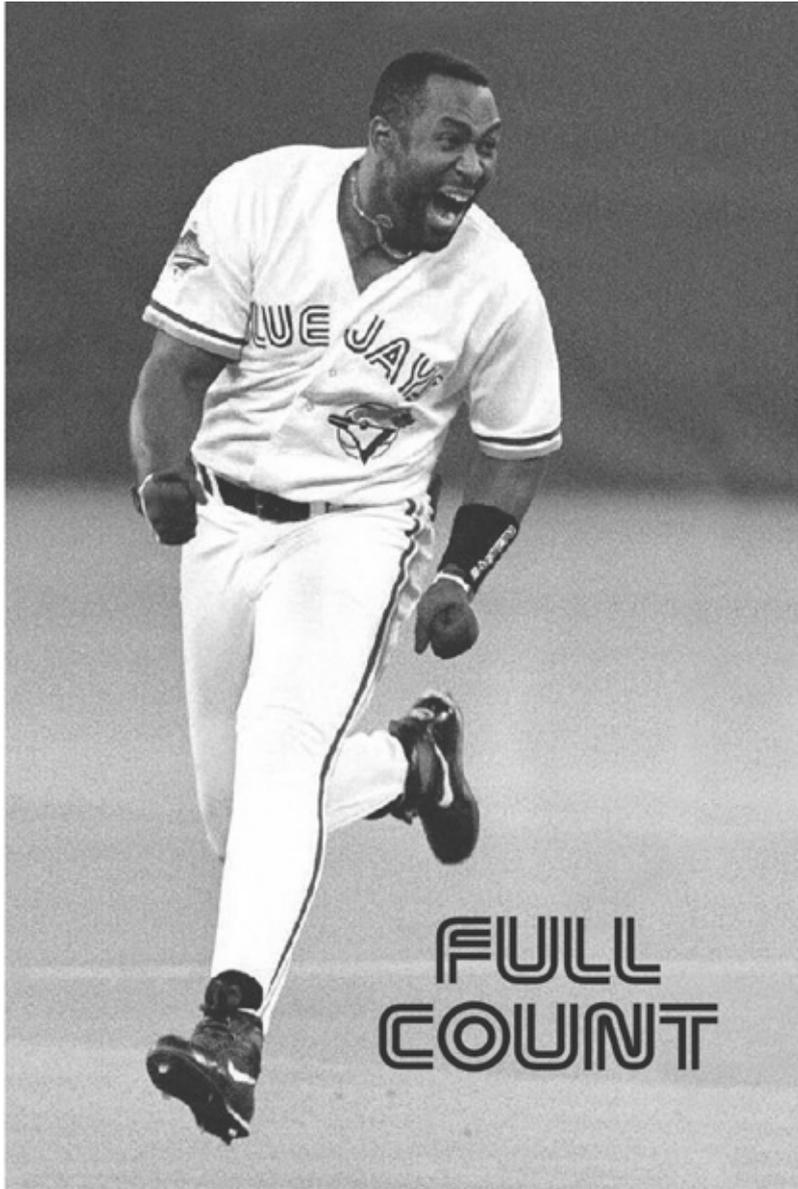
game played across the country: in the Maritimes, where senior men's baseball is still a going concern; in the Prairies, where Canada Day hardball tournaments were a small-town staple; and in British Columbia, where the BC Premier League vies annually with the Ontario Baseball Association, and takes turns churning out the year's top-ranked Canadian prospect.

They have played for pay for decades across Canada. Just ask Gillick, the architect of those Blue Jays championship teams, who played in the Foothills-Wheatbelt League in the 1950s as a left-handed pitcher for a team based in Vulcan, Alberta. Gillick earned \$250 per month, plus room and board, and that was enough to entice him to hitchhike from California to Alberta.

Better yet, ask Walter Lee Gibbons, who went by the nicknames "Dirk" and "Bubblegum" and kicked around the Negro Leagues from 1941–49 before heading north to play in North Dakota and Manitoba. Gibbons, who now lives in Tampa, Florida, was honoured in 2008 when the Tampa Bay Rays made him their "pick" in a special draft of Negro League players held in conjunction with baseball's entry draft. Two years earlier, Gibbons was inducted into the Manitoba Baseball Hall of Fame. Robinson's breaking of the colour barrier was an event of profound historical significance, but it had a flip side too: as major league teams (grudgingly, in some cases) opened their doors to the better players from the Negro Leagues, older or less-accomplished Negro League players were left with a game facing financial hardship due to the loss of its stars. Gibbons was one of many who came north to play—for better money, in some cases. After playing for the Brandon Greys in 1949, he returned to the US to serve in Korea, before travelling back to Manitoba to play four more years in the ManDak League, including stops in Brandon and with the Winnipeg Giants.

On every night of the major league season, there is tangible evidence that Canada is a country that does more than play hockey. This often surprises our American brethren—there are writers who raise their eyebrows in surprise whenever Votto admits that not only was he never much of a hockey player, he can barely skate—and you will still hear babble about baseball being played with a hockey mentality. Those stereotypes will never die, but the sport stands very much on its own in Canada, even as the Blue Jays try to rekindle the glory of those two years when they were the best in the game.

There is a saying about baseball: the game waits for no one. There's certainly evidence to support the theory. While the Jays and their fans have been biding their time (waiting, it seems, for the waiting to end), baseball in Canada has indeed moved on. Twenty years after that second World Series win, the Blue Jays are, in some ways, playing catch-up to Canadian baseball, instead of the other way around. Who would have imagined that as Joe Carter was touching 'em all?





THE FOUNDING PRINCIPLES

IT IS ONE OF THE LEAST REMEMBERED MEMORABLE moments in the history of the Toronto Blue Jays, but for Paul Beeston it is crucial to understanding what made the team special even before it won back-to-back World Series and became one of the game's defining franchises through the '80s and mid-'90s. The moment? The day that Peter N. E. Hardy, *paterfamilias* of the club, seized control.

On this, the 20th anniversary of Joe Carter's walk-off World Series home run, and after a winter in which the Blue Jays saw their manager's head turned by "a dream job" with the archrival Boston Red Sox, it is timely to remember the day that Peter Hardy came to own the Dream Team. It was certainly something Beeston was fond of talking about on October 23, 2012, the day after the Blue Jays announced that they had released John Farrell under cover of a trade. Forty-eight hours after he'd hung up with the Red Sox, Beeston was, shall we say, not particularly happy with events. He worked over an unlit cigar feverishly in his Rogers Centre office and urged his visitor to go find the 1985 "Dream Team" edition of *Sports Illustrated*. These were happy times he was talking about. Better times.

"They got all these guys in the picture—George Brett, Cal Ripken, all of them—and there's Peter Hardy. They're calling him the 'Dream Owner' or the 'Dream Executive' which was funny as hell because he didn't even own the fucking team," Beeston said, laughing. "I mean, these were the days of Steinbrenner. The Yawkeys. Ewing Kauffman. Those people. And there's Peter. The best owner."

It was the damnedest thing. The Blue Jays were owned largely by John Labatt Limited, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce and Howard Webster, who came from a well-heeled Montreal family and was publisher of the *Globe and Mail* newspaper. It was a serious-minded group, yet there was also a raffish quality about it, best summed up by Beeston, the chartered accountant from Welland, Ontario, who was known for wearing loafers with no socks, and Hardy, his bearded, fellow cigar smoker. There was a hail-fellow-well-met quality to the pair, and that quality gradually put its imprimatur on the team, though not before it suffered through some early growing pains under the first president, Peter Bavasi. Hardy was chairman of the board of Labatt, and was on the ground floor of the successful bid to bring the Blue Jays into existence in 1976 before going on to become the team's chief executive officer and chairman of the board.

It was no wonder people thought he was the owner. In point of fact, Hardy and Beeston did for the business end of the operation what people such as Pat Gillick and the venerable Bobby Mattick and Al LaMacchia did for the on-field part of the club. The Blue Jays had lean years—they finished dead last for the first five years of their existence—before taking a leap forward in 1984, when they finished second in the American League East, 15 games back of a Detroit Tigers club that started the season 35–5 en route to winning 104 games and taking the World Series. Until then, the Jays had been known mostly as an

organization that did things the right way, that treated people properly up and down the chain of command and employed shrewd judges of talent. The classic example of that proficiency was found in the manner in which the Blue Jays used the Rule 5 draft—where players who aren't protected on 40-man rosters within three to four years of their original signing are made available to teams for \$50,000, with the proviso that the player has to stay with the major league team or be offered back to his original club for \$25,000. In those early years, the Jays used the Rule 5 draft to bring in core pieces such as Willie Upshaw (1977) and George Bell (1980). Later, Kelly Gruber and Manny Lee would join the team by a similar route. Gruber was very much a key piece of that first World Series-winning team.

Former Blue Jays catcher and manager Buck Martinez understood very early in his Blue Jays tenure just how attuned the minor league system was to the needs of the major league team, and how vital it was to become in building a sustainable club. Current bullpen coach Pat Hentgen—in some ways the patron saint of Blue Jays pitchers—remembers looking around him during his first couple of spring trainings and “wondering if I wouldn't be better off in another organization, the pitching was so deep.”

Martinez knew the feeling. “We'd see guys in spring training and go, ‘Who the hell is that?’ Pedro Hernandez? These guys are everywhere,” he said. “And when Gillick brought up a guy who'd been under Bobby Mattick's tutelage, he could play baseball. I mean, Bobby would not let you leave the field until you'd learned something. Now, you have guys getting days off in the minors. Hitting in shorts. All that nonsense.”

Martinez paused. “We have let standards slip in this game. I still believe the team that brings back infield drills during batting practice will dominate baseball, because you want outfielders and catchers who can throw, and too many times now it seems that guys go into a game not knowing what base to throw to. I didn't do that as a manager, and I regret it.”

DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

But there was another aspect to the foundation the Blue Jays were laying in those early years, and it explains why the organization enjoyed such favourable reviews within the industry. As Hardy explained to Stephen Brunt in *Diamond Dreams*: “Baseball over the years had a master-servant relationship—the idea that you do, or you're gone. It would be abusive. Scare tactics kept people in line. That was fine, I guess, when the twentieth century started out, but baseball was still living with that tradition. That's the way it's done, that's the way we'll continue to do it, and that was their method of operation.”

The Blue Jays did it differently. They dealt with players differently and even dealt with agents differently, developing relationships that often blurred what could have been battle lines.

“We had this thing that we would do everything face to face,” said Gillick,

the team's general manager from 1978 to 1994. "I mean, we were going after Goose Gossage one year as a free agent. He was represented by Jerry Kapstein, who was based in San Diego then, and as part of the negotiations we had to change the offer two or three times. On each of those occasions we flew to San Diego from Toronto to give them the change. Not by phone or anything else. We did it face to face. It was just our way."

There was an openness to the Blue Jays and a respectful approach from ownership that stood out at a time when the game did not enjoy the degree of labour peace with which it is now blessed. Each year, Hardy would speak to the players and tell them whether the team made money or lost money. Martinez was acquired by Pat Gillick on May 10, 1981, in a trade with the Kansas City Royals for outfielder Gil Kubski. He was told that he was being brought in to help the pitchers pitch and help Ernie Whitt catch. He also received a car—a Honda, to be exact. In the beginning, the cars had Blue Jays emblems on the doors. Then, they were removed. "I'm sitting there when I hear this, and I'm thinking to myself, 'A car? Really? Haven't had that happen to me before,' " Martinez said, chuckling. "But that's the way the Blue Jays did things.

"It was a rainy, dreary day when I got there, and I was at old Pearson Airport thinking, 'What the hell have I gotten myself into?' I remember Gillick saying 'We are going to be a good organization. "You came from Kansas City and Milwaukee and know what a good organization is all about.' The thing that always stood out in my mind was Peter Hardy and Peter Widdrington [the former Labatt CEO who was chairman of the board when the Blue Jays won their back-to-back World Series] and how they took six of us—players and wives—out to dinner to a place called La Scala. He would sit us in a private room and just ask us, 'What can we do to make this a good place to play?' Wives too. That was the big difference, because wives had always been excluded. They wanted to make it a destination. I mean, Lenny Bramson [president and CEO of Telemedia, the network that had Blue Jays radio rights] would have a media party and you'd have 25 players climbing all over each other to go to it. They had those promotional caravans, and it was a big deal when the Blue Jays came to town. Come to the Brandon Wheat Kings game, the Jays are in town.

"They built up a following. But it also made the players believe there was a long-term commitment. To me, that's the challenge of getting it all back: to make the players believe they're a part of it. That's why continuity is so important; it creates an identity and stays with it. That's what Widdrington and Hardy insisted on."

Attention was paid to detail even at the minor league level. Beeston and Hardy would make two trips each year to each farm team. "The thing is," Beeston said, "a guy would see us when he was in Single-A, then in Double-A and then in Triple-A. That's how you establish a culture. It was all part of the way Peter did business."

Adds Gillick: "It was a great ownership group and it started with Don

McDougall [president of Labatt when the Blue Jays were founded], down to Mr. Widdrington and everyone else. They were not involved in ways that cut into your autonomy. But at the same time, you knew that if you needed anything they were there.”

Duane Ward and Tom Henke were an effective bullpen tag team during the franchise’s glory years, and Ward is still an active member of the Blue Jays alumni, overseeing baseball camps throughout Canada. Born in a small oil-and-gas town in New Mexico and now living in Las Vegas, Ward still tells people that his “heart lies north of the border.” He wasn’t always so certain. Acquired in a trade for Doyle Alexander in 1986 from the Atlanta Braves—who’d chosen him with the ninth pick overall in the same 1982 amateur draft that produced Dwight Gooden and Shawon Dunston—Ward remembers having a similar reaction to Martinez upon his arrival.

“God almighty,” Ward said. “That’s what I thought, but it took me about two months to realize I’d gone from the penthouse to the *presidential* penthouse. The Braves are a class organization, but the Blue Jays ... the way they treated you when you got there was something else. I mean, you’d see Gillick in the clubhouse here or there, but Beeston, Mr. Widdrington and Mr. Hardy? They were there all the time. The owners. They’d always ask you if everything was good, how was the family, could they do something for you. Constantly.”

And that didn’t change once the Blue Jays became successful. A pitcher for the Detroit Tigers named Jack Morris first took note of what was going on in Toronto during the 1984 season, when the Tigers saw that the Blue Jays had answered their 35–5 start with a 30–14 run of their own. “I got the sense then that these guys were dang close,” Morris said. “From that point on, I just kind of felt that they were a team you always had to keep an eye on. You knew where they were.” Morris would, of course, end up doing more than merely keep an eye on the Blue Jays. In 1992, he joined them as a free agent.

THE TURNING POINT

Martinez believes the naming of Bobby Cox as manager in 1982 was the on-field turning point for the franchise. By then the Jays had a well-developed farm system of athletes with speed and pitching. They had also developed some swagger, to the point where Martinez remembers Willie Wilson of the Kansas City Royals standing at the plate screaming at Blue Jays pitchers, then yelling at nobody in particular to “tell those motherfuckers to stop throwing at me.” Martinez and Willie Upshaw had a system for tipping off the location of the opposing catcher’s glove, with Martinez saying “C’mon, Willie,” if the glove was positioned inside, or “Hey, Upshaw, c’mon,” when the glove was outside. Alfredo Griffin took to stealing the catcher’s signs when he was at second base and relaying them with such flourish that his teammates had to tell him to tone it down. It was a team of players thinking about what they

could do to win, and Cox was the perfect guy for that group at that time—a guy whose first meeting with Martinez, at the end of spring training in his first year, consisted of these words: “I don’t know you guys very well but you had a good spring. Ernie [Whitt] had a good spring. You’re going to platoon and go out and have a good year.” They were in the process of developing that inner belief common to good teams in any sport.

“I thought when we started this whole thing in 1976 that we would have a free pass for three or four years, that it was years five, six and seven where you’d start to feel public pressure,” Gillick said. “At that point, people would be looking for improvement. So we had to get the foundation right in those first couple of years. It was different than the things I had to do in my other jobs later on—whether it was Baltimore, Seattle or Philadelphia. In those cities, it was all about filling in holes here and there as opposed to developing right from the bottom.” Gillick, of course, would go on to win a third World Series with the 2008 Phillies.

FICKLE GODS

In 1985, the Blue Jays finally made it to the post-season, finishing 99–62 before blowing a 3–1 lead to the eventual champion Kansas City Royals in the best-of-seven ALCS (American League Championship Series). In the first of what would seem to be many snubbings by the baseball gods, it was the first time in 16 years that the league championship series was best-of-seven instead of best-of-five. A year earlier, a 3–1 lead would have been enough to move on.

“By ’83 we could out-hustle everybody and out-play everybody, and Bobby used everybody,” said Martinez. “We had a great mix. Lloyd Moseby, George Bell, Alfredo [Griffin], Jesse Barfield ... a great mix. And they all grew up together and came to the big leagues together. Hell, in 1984 we thought we’d played better than the Tigers after that great start that they had.”

Cox would leave the Blue Jays after the 1985 season and return to Atlanta to become general manager of the Braves, the team that had fired him in 1981. Cox had kept his home in Atlanta, and it wasn’t hard to hear echoes of Cox in the explanation John Farrell gave for leaving Toronto for Boston with another year remaining on his contract. Boston was Farrell’s dream job; Cox, who was on his second marriage, wanted to return home. Baseball has tampering charges that prevent teams from pursuing employees of other clubs, but the Blue Jays had a much-ballyhooed “handshake” policy that allows coaches and front office executives to make lateral moves, the understanding being “if you don’t want to be here, we don’t want you here.” That was all fine when the Blue Jays were winning and the grass wasn’t greener any place else, but when Beeston returned as president and chief executive officer under the ownership of Rogers Communications, it seemed quaint, a sign of weakness. And when rumours first surfaced after the 2011

season that John Farrell was being courted *sotto voce* by the Boston Red Sox, Beeston said publicly that it was no longer the case.

Jimmy Williams was the choice to replace Cox, and it was a sensible move because he was familiar to the organization, and as Cox's third-base coach was the on-field executor of the manager's will, an omnipresent lieutenant. But as good as the Blue Jays were, the core of the team was still in transition, and Williams' demeanour had a tendency to make every baseball decision seem a black-and-white choice, fraught with tension and hinting at agendas that likely didn't exist. The Blue Jays took a step back in 1986 when the roots of a legendary feud between Williams and George Bell were laid, a feud that burned enough that Williams could still cut off a conversation about it 20 years later. Then Toronto suffered through a galling collapse in 1987: up three-and-a-half games with seven left to play, Williams' Jays dropped all of their remaining matches to finish in second place with a 96–66 record that left them two games out.

"That was a major meltdown," said Ward. "I mean, to not even squeak out one win? That happens and you know the stars aren't aligned."

Williams' time with the team ended with a 12–24 start in the 1989 season, and the Blue Jays stayed in-house again, naming hitting coach Cito Gaston as manager. The hiring was made on an interim basis, and it was clear almost immediately that Gaston was far from Gillick's first choice for the permanent posting. That would have been Lou Piniella, a broadcaster with the New York Yankees who had previously spent three years as a manager for George Steinbrenner. Piniella would go on to win three Manager of the Year awards and rank 14th on the all-time wins list when he left the game, but at the time, Steinbrenner was asking for three players in a trade. "Not even a trade for a manager, a trade for a fucking broadcaster," Paul Beeston said, laughing. The Yankees clearly valued Piniella more as a broadcaster than the Blue Jays valued Farrell as a manager; the Jays settled for one mediocre Boston infielder named Mike Aviles.

Gaston remained as the Blue Jays' manager through their halcyon years, staying with the organization as a senior advisor and coming out of retirement to take over the team in the dying days of general manager J. P. Ricciardi's tenure. As was the case with most minority players of his time, Gaston viewed much of the criticism he faced with the Blue Jays—and he faced a ton of it—through the prism of past racial battles won and lost. That was wholly understandable, and anyone who heard the stories told by Gaston and his contemporaries, or by people like Tommy Harper and Felipe Alou and Frank Robinson, might agree.

Gaston's style gave his critics much to chew over. He was criticized for sometimes being insensitive to young players and putting too much faith in older players, although it's easy to find as many counter-examples of that as it is to find examples. Beyond that, Gaston was a firm believer in not fixing what wasn't broken; his lineup was usually static because it didn't need much tinkering during the World Series years. And when he gave players a day off,