

Boys of Past Summers Slug It Out on CD-ROM

Which is the greatest baseball team of all time? The *Globe and Mail* is trying to answer this tantalizing question using a computerized baseball game. Each week, two fabled teams from the past slug it out in a best-of-seven series, with the results featured in the *Globe's* Saturday sports section.

The single-elimination tournament began with 16 teams. After the completion of the first round, eight remain: the 1927 New York Yankees, the 1930 Philadelphia Athletics, the 1954 Cleveland Indians, the 1961 New York Yankees, the 1970 Baltimore Orioles, the 1975 Cincinnati Reds, the 1986 New York Mets, and the 1998 New York Yankees.

This whimsical piece of entertainment is the creation of *Globe* writer Brad Wheeler, who, oddly enough, works in the newspaper's arts department. In a telephone interview, Wheeler, an admitted computer-baseball buff, says he sold the *Globe's* sports editors on the idea for the tournament after the New York Yankees' impressive campaign last year. The Yankees set an American League record by winning 114 regular-season games, then downed the Cleveland Indians in the playoffs and steamrolled the San Diego Padres in four straight games in the World Series. "There was a lot of speculation about how the 1998 Yankees would have stacked up against some of the great teams of the past," Wheeler says. "I decided to try to settle the argument."

To claim that this tournament will settle the argument is nonsense, of course, because until scientists invent a way to clone replicas of Babe Ruth, Dizzy Dean, and Mickey Mantle, this kind of question can never really be settled. In truth, it's doubtful that any of the old-time teams could compete with their modern-day counterparts, simply because they were all-white. Until Jackie Robinson broke the colour barrier in

1947, many of baseball's best talents were barred from the majors.

Wheeler is using Strat-O-Matic CD-ROM Baseball, one of the more popular simulation games. In these computer games, individual players are supposed to perform the way they actually did in a particular season. The game's designers go to great lengths to achieve statistical accuracy. Outfielders have arm ratings, base runners have speed ratings, and a batter's success is influenced by the style of pitcher he is facing. To prevent overuse, the pitchers even have fatigue ratings.

If Whitey Ford tended to run out of gas after seven innings in real life, he will lose his effectiveness in the seventh inning of the computer game, too.

Yet having played computer baseball, I know that statistical probabilities don't always pan out. In a short series, the random element can produce unforeseen developments and, just as in real life, unexpected heroes.

The results can also be affected by managerial decisions. Wheeler is managing all the teams, so much depends on his impartiality and judgment. If he leaves a tiring pitcher on the mound too long in a key situation, a game and a series could rest in the balance.

Which teams you select for a tournament and how you match them up are other factors. Wheeler says he picked teams that had high winning percentages, that had Hall of Fame talent in their lineup, and that were dominant for more than one year. In all cases but one—the 1954 Indians—he chose clubs that won the World Series.

Cleveland notched 111 victories in 1954, the second-highest total in AL history, but lost the World Series in four straight to the New York Giants, who are *not* in the tournament. "I had a call from one reader who was upset that I didn't include the '54 Giants," admits Wheeler. "But I don't think most people would argue that the Giants had a



better team. They just had a great week."

Personally, I think a more glaring omission is the absence of any of the mighty Yankees squads from the 1930s. From 1936 to 1939, the Bronx Bombers won four straight World Series, losing only three games in those four Fall Classics while outscoring their NL foes 113 to 52. The 1936 edition may have been the most imposing of all. Led by Lou Gehrig, Bill Dickey, and Joe DiMaggio, the club had a record five players with more than 100 RBI.

To conform to contemporary sensibilities, the mix of teams in the tournament has a modern flavour. Of the 16 original entrants, only four predated 1954, but two of those—the 1927 Yankees and the 1930 Athletics—both have a strong claim to being *numero uno*.

Dubbed Murderers' Row because of the lethal lumber of Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Bob Meusel, and Tony Lazzeri, the 1927 Yankees won the AL pennant by a whopping 19 games and set a big-league record for team slugging average. The 1930 Athletics, with a lineup that included Hall of Famers Jimmie

Foxx, Al Simmons, and Mickey Cochrane, boasted nearly as devastating a crew of hitters. The As also had one of baseball's greatest pitchers, Lefty Grove, who posted a 28-5 won-lost record and a 2.54 ERA.

Because of the chronological arrangement of his pairings, Wheeler has these two juggernauts meeting in a quarterfinal tilt on February 27, which strikes me as premature. I suspect that the winner of this series will go on to capture the tournament, and my gut feeling is that the As will prevail.

Wheeler has no idea who will claim the grand prize, because he is playing each series the same week that the results appear in the paper. The final that would generate the most interest would be a duel between the 1927 Yankees and the 1998 Yankees, the two teams that so many in the media were comparing last fall. At the moment, however, that intriguing showdown is far from a sure bet. Yankee haters can take hope. There are five other teams still in the hunt that could prevent the crowning of yet another pinstriped champion. ■