

A SPHERE

AND PRESENT

DANGER

by Steve Mirsky

Stand in against a baseball being thrown at anything approaching the velocities achieved by major league pitchers, and you experience an epiphany: the ball makes noise. The air, combed by the seams and whipping over the white, produces the buzz of some massive, malevolent insect. Yes, the ball actually sounds like Randy Johnson looks.

The hum is a perceptible reminder that baseball, that most pastoral of pastimes, often puts its players in harm's way. Less appreciated is baseball's potential danger to the public. Sure, there are those ringing line drives into the stands that occasionally conk the innocent. And entire bats sometimes fly from the hitter's hands to wreak havoc on the residents of the box seats behind first or third. But there are more insidious risks.

One baseball threat loomed above all others, at least in the eyes of emergency clinicians in New York City: Yankee Bat Day. The impression among such physicians was that the annual unleashing of 25,000 kids with spanking new clubs onto the streets of the Bronx precipitated a flurry of bat blunt-trauma incidents. This assumption was tested in a study published in 1994 in the *Annals of Emergency Medicine* entitled "Impact of Yankee Stadium Bat Day on Blunt Trauma in Northern New York City."

The report's authors, three emergency medicine physicians, followed bat-related visits to 10 emergency rooms for the 10 days before and 10 days after a Yankee Bat Day. Enterprising New Yorkers must have had a stockpile of bats at the ready—in the 10 days prior to the giveaway, 38 people visited the ERs with bat injuries. Contrary to the suspicion among "emergency clinicians about the cause-and-effect relationship between Bat Day and bat trauma," the authors note, the number of patients who presented in the 10 days after the event was an almost identical 36. There was, however, "a positive correlation between daily temperature and the inci-

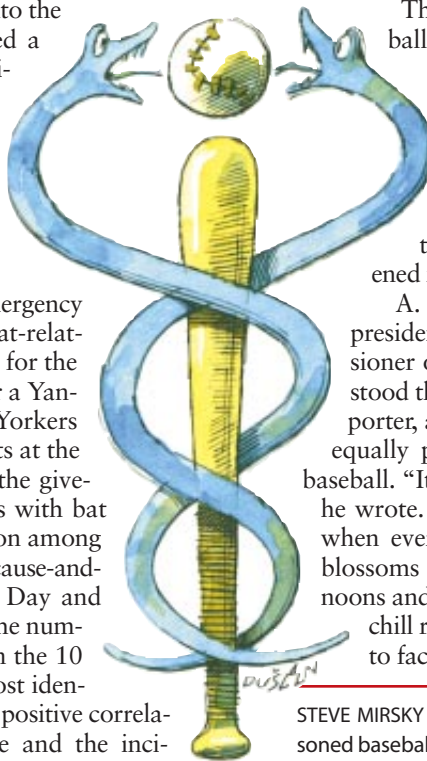
dence of bat injury." Apparently, if you can't stand the heat, whack someone.

The belief in post-Bat Day madness extends beyond the bucolic Bronx, at least as far as South Carolina. An attorney offered to sponsor Bat Day for the Class A South Atlantic League's Charleston RiverDogs, as long as the bats included his logo, in reverse, on the business end. "The offer was in jest," assures RiverDogs vice president and general manager Mark Schuster, "but the idea was that the bat would leave a mark that the victim could read and instantly know who to call to sue."

Of course, the danger of Bat Days pales in comparison to the risk of complications from an actual surgical procedure briefly offered by the RiverDogs in 1997: a possibly lucky male fan would have walked away, slowly, as the winner on Vasectomy Night. Schuster says that the public outcry convinced the team to nip that idea in the bud, despite the vas defrens it would have made in one man's life.

The biggest health threat to the baseball fan, though, is the one familiar to any who have loved not wisely but too well. The famous Framingham, Mass., studies of cardiovascular disease have never bothered to correlate morbidity with devotion to the nearby Boston Red Sox, who have long sickened more hearts than any high-fat diet.

A. Bartlett Giamatti, the one-time president of Yale University and commissioner of Major League Baseball, understood the special suffering of the Sox supporter, as well as the more pedestrian but equally poignant pain felt by all fans of baseball. "It is designed to break your heart," he wrote. "The game begins in the spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops, and leaves you to face the fall alone."



STEVE MIRSKY pitches in as *Scientific American's* seasoned baseball-batty editor.