



July 2002

Endless Summer: Baseball writer Larry Rocca chronicles America's game

Earnie Clark

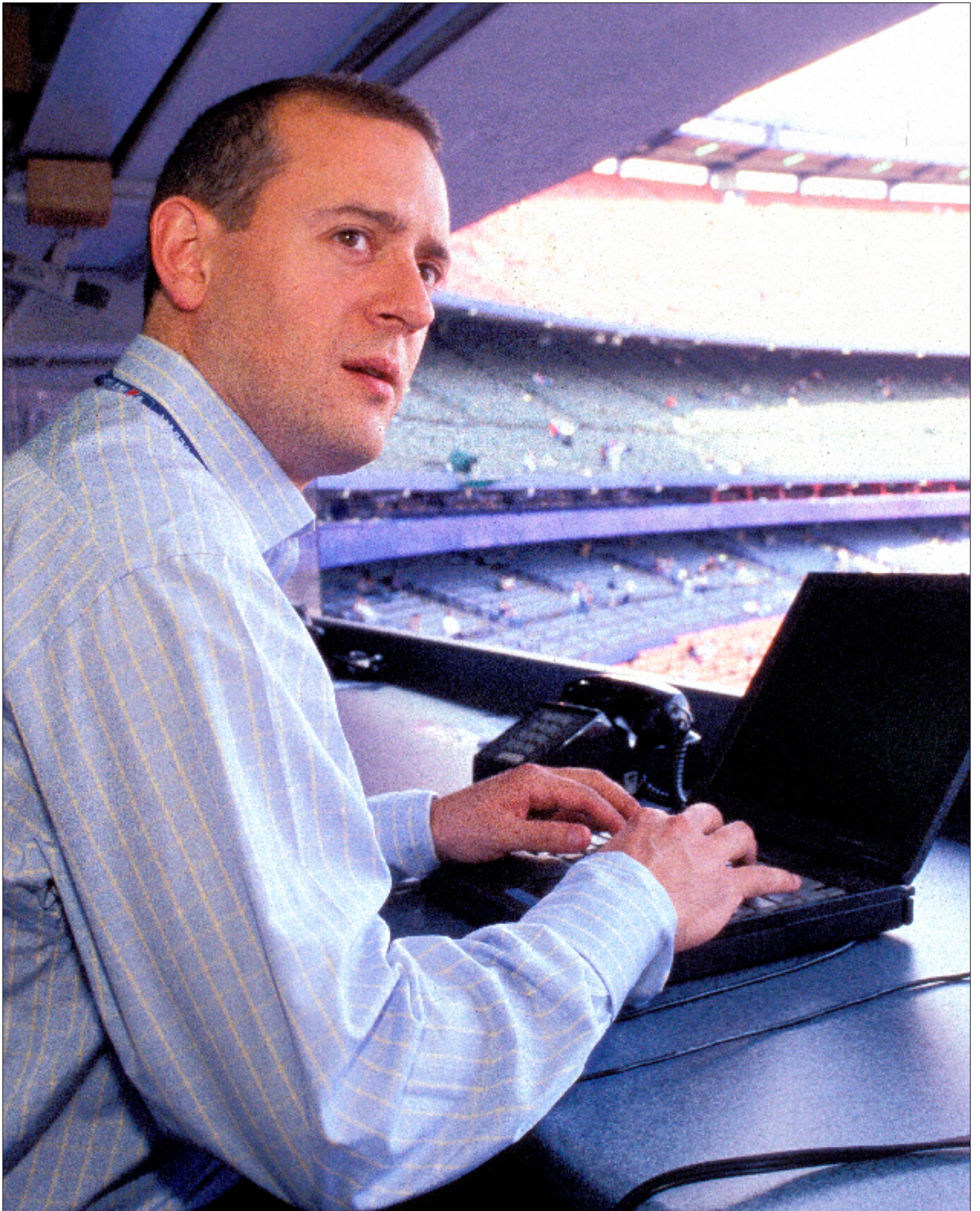
Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>

Recommended Citation

Clark, Earnie (2002) "Endless Summer: Baseball writer Larry Rocca chronicles America's game," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 91 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol91/iss3/7>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.



Endless Summer

By Ernie Clark

Baseball writer Larry Rocca chronicles America's game

Larry Rocca '90 was cut twice from the Colby baseball team but still made it to the big leagues.

Rocca spends his days and nights in major league ballparks, in the company of the Boys of Summer. They carry bats and gloves; Rocca settles for a notebook and laptop but still performs every week for an audience in the hundreds of thousands.

As Major League Baseball columnist for the 407,000-circulation Newark (N.J.) *Star-Ledger*, 35-year-old Rocca keeps his eyes trained on New York teams and on any other baseball topic that piques his interest. In a recent column he explored the Red Sox and their karma versus the Yankees (it was good) and the need for action to prevent an epidemic of steroid-induced health problems among ballplayers.

The columnist job is a big change from the five years Rocca spent as a beat reporter covering the Yankees and Mets—a job that could be more competitive than the play on the field. Rocca watched from the press box and the locker room as the Yankees won three straight World Series from 1998 to 2000. The Yankees beat writer for *Newsday*, Rocca had an insider's view of the Bronx Bombers and imperious team owner George Steinbrenner. Rocca didn't like what he saw. "I hated covering them," he said. "You'd see things, the way they treated other people. It just wasn't fun."

Rocca returned to *The Star-Ledger* in March 2001 for his second stint as the Mets beat writer. "The Mets were the best group of guys to work with," he said. "[Mike] Piazza is by far the player I have the best relationship with. Most stars don't give out their private numbers, but I have his cell and home and parents' number and everything."

Most player-reporter relationships don't develop that level of accessibility. "Most of the good players are extremely focused and self-absorbed," Rocca said. "Many of the best players are suspicious. The clubhouse has a very macho atmosphere but players are also very childish and sensitive to criticism. They are crazily sensitive."

"Players are also very cliquish. The baseball clubhouse is a culture unto itself and players immediately detect outsiders. As a reporter, it takes time to learn to walk the walk and talk the talk in the clubhouse and there is a definite initiation period for reporters. It sounds crazy, but the baseball clubhouse would make a great place for an anthropological study."

Rocca covered the Mets in 1997 and early 1998 for *The Star-Ledger* before moving to *Newsday* and the Yankees. He got his beat-writing indoctrination covering the California Angels and the Los Angeles Dodgers for the *Orange County Register* in the mid-1990s.

Wherever he's worked, he's had plenty of company, particularly in New York. Eight daily newspapers cover the Yankees; seven cover the Mets. There are radio and TV reporters, reporters for Internet sites—and all of them want the scoop.

"It's a very weird dynamic," Rocca said. "When a baseball player goes to work he's with people who are on the same team. But when you're a [baseball] writer, most of the people you're working with are the people you're competing against. You're constantly traveling with

your competition. I can't really think of anything like it except being a pro golfer, but even they have their caddies with them."

And when Rocca talks about traveling, he knows of what he speaks.

One hundred thousand air miles a year have made him an expert on everything from hotel cuisine to packing for road trips that may last as long as two weeks. "Most guys stay in Marriotts; I'm a Starwood guy," he said. "I've earned over a million frequent flier miles in my career; I have platinum everything for frequent flier and hotel miles."

While reporters sometimes travel together, they almost never share accommodations with the teams they cover, a marked change from earlier generations of baseball. Traveling with a team wouldn't work for another reason. "We're just starting to write as the players leave for the airport," Rocca said.

The challenges he faces daily: writing to deadlines measured in minutes rather than in days, gaining access to the teams and players he covers, fighting the fatigue inherent in rushing from airport to hotel and hotel to airport. The bottom line, however, is being right and being first. "When you're a beat writer, if you don't get the story and somebody else does, you've lost," he said. "It's like you're constantly being graded on a reverse curve. You don't get a perfect score unless the other guys get a worse score."

But Rocca has had his scoops: the impending firing of Mets General Manager Joe McIlvaine in 1996; the intricacy trade of David Justice from the Yankees to the Mets for Robin Ventura; and the Mets' acquisition of Roberto Alomar from the Cleveland Indians, a deal consummated at last winter's meetings in Boston.

When he's not at the ballpark, Rocca works the phone from his apartment on Manhattan's upper east side. Since there is almost always a home game in the city (the Yankees are usually home when the Mets are away and vice versa) he often takes the subway to the ballpark. "But I did go to Boston for two games, I was in San Diego to catch up with Barry Bonds last week, and I went to Oakland to write a story before Jason Giambi's return there. I probably go to four games a week, which is not really any less than as a beat guy."

Rocca says he wouldn't miss being at the ballpark for anything in the world. He was on hand when the Mets (with their New York skyline team logo) played Atlanta last Sept. 21. The evening began with a tribute to the World Trade Center victims and later featured a 21-gun salute, Diana Ross singing "God Bless America" and Liza Minnelli performing "New York, New York." And when Piazza struck perhaps the most recuperative blow of that night, a game-winning home run, it seemed symbolic of the city's determination to bounce back.

"There are times you wonder why baseball creates so much anxiety and stress in you as a writer, because in the grand scale of things it can seem so frivolous," Rocca said. "But then I think about that game and how the people of New York needed it, how it provided them an escape. It gave people something else to think about, and when Piazza hit the home run to win it was just electrifying."

To see Larry Rocca's column, "On Baseball," go to www.nj.com/columns/ledger/rocca/

Larry Rocca in the press box at Shea Stadium for the "Subway Series" during the interleague play in June.