

William W. Connors on

DYNASTY LEAGUE BASEBALL

KEY DESIGNER: MICHAEL CIESLINSKI
DESIGN DEPOT (1995)

FEW SPORTS CAN BE captured in tabletop format without the loss of many of the things that make the game special. Baseball, on the other hand, is ideally suited to such adaptations. Games that have tried to replicate the Great American Pastime range from the quick-playing *Inning-A-Minute Baseball* I designed in concert with friend and fellow fan Timothy Brown to the venerable *Strat-O-Matic Baseball*, which has been around so long it may predate the actual sport. For my money, though, it's never been done better than in *Dynasty League Baseball*.

Starting in October of 1989, I had the good fortune to work for TSR, Inc. During most of my time there, many members of the design staff spent our lunch hours playing ongoing leagues of *Dynasty League Baseball* (it was called *Pursue the Pennant* back then). It wasn't unusual to walk into the lunchroom and find three games going on at once, with a few people standing around kibitzing — sometimes even doing the wave! The fact that so many professional game designers and truly avid baseball fans opted for *DLB* as our game of choice should, I think, speak volumes. Even more telling is the fact that we didn't feel the need to rewrite half the rules. To paraphrase Dr. McCoy: "I know (game designers), they love to change things."

Before the game starts, each manager puts together a team of 25 players — usually about 10 or 11 pitchers and 14 or 15 position players. That's the same number you'll find on a typical Major League roster. Starting line-ups are created and pitching match-ups determined. If the game is part of an ongoing series, which is certainly the best way to play, managers need to take into account pitcher fatigue, players who might be nursing a minor injury, and other such subtleties. That done, it's time to . . . play ball!

At its heart, *DLB* (like real baseball) is a deceptively simple game. Only when you look deeper do you understand the strategy and complexity at its heart.

A game of *DLB* is resolved one at-bat at a time, with only the make-or-break payoff pitch being addressed. Each player on your team has a card with a table on

it, representing how he actually performed during the season. These are all real players, from real Major League teams, and the information on the cards is painstakingly accurate. Although these cards have a wealth of detailed information on them, they are easy to read and managers quickly master their use.

The outcome of the at-bat is determined when the pitching team's manager rolls three 10-sided dice. These are read like percentile dice, generating a number between 000 and 999. Numbers between 000 and 499 are listed on the batter's card and those between 500 and 999 are on the pitcher's card. (This creates, essentially, one combined table between the two cards.) Generally, rolls on the batter's card favor the batter and rolls on the pitcher's card favor the pitcher. For example, suppose you're playing a classic game from the 1982 season and Paul Molitor is at the plate. The dice are rolled and come up 182. If he's facing a right-handed pitcher, that's a long fly out to center field. On the other hand, if there's a lefty on the mound, Molitor has just hit a shot out of the park.

In some cases, this roll ends the matter right there. If there's no one on base and the result of the roll is a strikeout, pop fly, or routine grounder, that's that. In many situations, however, you'll need to consult a book of other tables to determine additional details. A routine grounder might not be so routine if the offensive manager has called a hit-and-run play. Will the runner be caught off base and thrown out, can he see what's happening in time to hold up, or is he fast enough to make it safely to the next base? The charts to resolve all these things can be a little intimidating at first, but their use is logical and quickly mastered.

Okay, so what's the big deal? That's a cute mechanic, but does it really make *Dynasty League* so much better than all the other baseball games on the market? Nope. But here's what does.

Factored into *DLB*'s tables and charts are all the unusual and often controversial plays that make every at-bat potentially game- or even season-shattering. The ever-present chance of an error can transform a simple dribbler down the line into extra bases or a blown call by the umpire can thwart a manager's best strategy. A hitter who's a terror in the clutch can turn the tide of the game with one swing of the bat, while a pitcher who's tough in a jam can come through to shut down a potentially disastrous rally. And there's every manager's biggest nightmare — the injury table. Having the heart of your batting order or the ace of your staff go down for the season on opening day can bring tears to your eye.

There's also a little entry on one of the cards reading *Bizarre*. When you roll

that, everyone sits up and takes notice. This is where *Dynasty League Baseball* really hits it out of the park. All sorts of unusual, one-in-a-million things — drawn from real events of the MLB season — show up here. Line drives or blazing fast-balls can hit birds in flight, ceiling tiles can break away from domes and bring games to a premature halt, and bench-clearing brawls can result in one or more players ending up with suspensions. Corked bats, pine tar in the pitcher's palm, and traffic accidents on the way to the ballpark are all possibilities here.

Design Depot releases a new set of cards and charts every year, detailing the previous Major League season. If your team moved to a new stadium, it will be in the charts. If your favorite player had a career year, you'll see it reflected in his new card. *Dynasty League Baseball* is ideal for people who want to draft and manage their own team — trading players, adjusting batting orders, and setting up pitching rotations.

There's so much detail and careful thought in every aspect of *Dynasty League Baseball*, it can only be described as a labor of love. And, to my way of thinking, that's what sets great games apart from good games — the certain knowledge that the designer had as much fun creating it as you do playing it.

I had the chance to introduce the game to my friend Kevin, a designer from another company who was also a hardcore baseball fan. We were playing a game between his favorite Toronto Blue Jays and my home town Pittsburgh Pirates. (This was back when the Pirates were good, so you know it was a while ago!) The game was a good one, with a number of close plays and interesting twists — but we went into the ninth with his Jays ahead of my Bucs by two runs. I was down to my final out, with runners on first and third. I brought in a .200-hitting bat off the bench and was getting ready to congratulate Kevin on the win, when the dice were rolled. POW! The results were right in the middle of a very narrow sweet spot on my batter's card, so the ball just cleared the fence for a three-run walk-off homer. There was silence in the room.

I can't say I was overjoyed, even though things had clearly gone my way. If you want someone to like a new game, it's really best if they win.

But after a second, Kevin stood up and shook his head. “[Expletive deleted], I feel just as upset as I would have at the ballpark!”

How many games can evoke that kind of emotion?



WILLIAM W. CONNORS is a lifelong gamer who's been lucky enough to get paid for it since the mid-1980s. He's worked for a number of companies, either on staff or as a freelancer, including TSR, Wizards of the Coast, id Software, and Hasbro. He is best known as the guiding force behind the Ravenloft game line and currently heads up the entertainment division of Senario, LLC, a Chicago-area entertainment and consumer products company. Although still a baseball fan, it has been supplanted by Rugby Union as his favorite sport. He currently resides in southeastern Wisconsin with his wife Kathryn and two sons, Chris and Patrick.