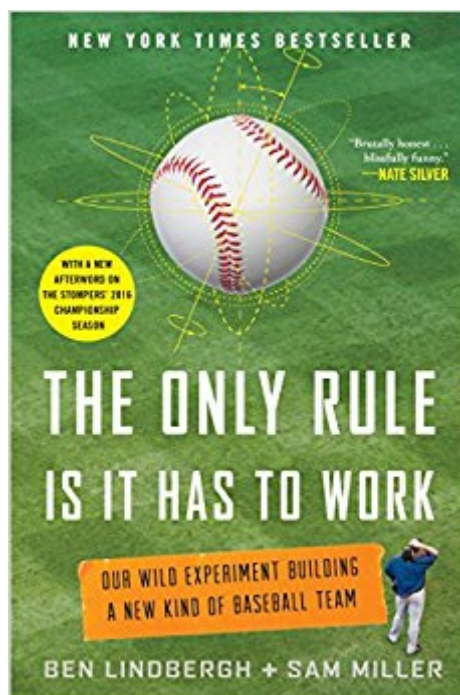




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# The Only Rule Is It Has To Work: Our Wild Experiment Building A New Kind Of Baseball Team [Includes A New Afterword]



## Synopsis

What would happen if two statistics-minded outsiders were allowed to run a professional baseball team? It's the ultimate in fantasy baseball: You get to pick the roster, set the lineup, and decide on strategies -- with real players, in a real ballpark, in a real playoff race. That's what baseball analysts Ben Lindbergh and Sam Miller got to do when an independent minor-league team in California, the Sonoma Stompers, offered them the chance to run its baseball operations according to the most advanced statistics. Their story in *The Only Rule is It Has to Work* is unlike any other baseball tale you've ever read. We tag along as Lindbergh and Miller apply their number-crunching insights to all aspects of assembling and running a team, following one cardinal rule for judging each innovation they try: it has to work. We meet colorful figures like general manager Theo Fightmaster and boundary-breakers like the first openly gay player in professional baseball. Even José Canseco makes a cameo appearance. Will their knowledge of numbers help Lindbergh and Miller bring the Stompers a championship, or will they fall on their faces? Will the team have a competitive advantage or is the sports folk wisdom true after all? Will the players attract the attention of big-league scouts, or are they on a fast track to oblivion? It's a wild ride, by turns provocative and absurd, as Lindbergh and Miller tell a story that will speak to numbers geeks and traditionalists alike. And they prove that you don't need a bat or a glove to make a genuine contribution to the game.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Best Sports Book of the Year by Sports Illustrated, The Boston Globe, and The Buffalo News, and a

Great Read of the Year by NPR

“Ben Lindbergh and Sam Miller have given us a brutally honest but blissfully funny look at where we really stand a decade into the analytics revolution. If you want the insights that statheads and baseball traditionalists still need to learn from one another, start by reading this book.”

—Nate Silver, bestselling author of *The Signal and the Noise* and the founder and editor in chief of FiveThirtyEight

“The Only Rule Is It Has to Work is a terrific read, as Ben Lindbergh and Sam Miller — two of baseball’s leading sabermetric writers — put their beliefs on the line by taking over an actual team of actual players and trying to implement their unorthodox theories. The story of their season with the Sonoma Stompers is a fascinating human drama about the give-and-take between the new thinking and the old school.”

—Ken Rosenthal, MLB on FOX reporter, FOXSports.com senior baseball writer, and MLB Network insider

“In a phenomenal book that is a fun, breezy, and moving read, Ben Lindbergh and Sam Miller invite us into their mad experiment. They show us the trials, travails, and challenges of running an independent league baseball team, and along the way they do something remarkable: they make us care deeply for the players who put their hearts into every point of on-base percentage.”

—Jonah Keri, bestselling author of *Up, Up, and Away* and *The Extra 2%*

“The Only Rule Is It Has to Work is the happy, improbable spawn of *Moneyball* and *Bull Durham* — a relentlessly smart and consistently funny journey into the dregs of the minors that proves one thing above all: No matter how many statistics you apply to baseball, you can never kill its heart.”

—Stefan Fatsis, author of *Word Freak*, *A Few Seconds of Panic*, and *Wild and Outside*

“The Only Rule might be the most important baseball book published this year — though to use the word ‘important’ detracts from the sheer fun of the situation. . . . You’ll never look at a baseball game, from professional down to fantasy, the same way again.”

—Allen Barra, *Chicago Tribune*

“A fun lark . . . a terrific book.”

—Will Leitch, *Sports Illustrated*

“A worthy modern heir to [George] Plimpton’s 1950s stunt.”

—Jack Dickey, *Sports Illustrated*

“The Only Rule Is It Has to Work [is] more than a book about using data and objectivity to build a better baseball team. It’s an intimately human story. . . . While readers will come for the stats, they’ll stay for the story.”

—Michael Kershner, *Eephus*

“Lindbergh and Miller are real storytellers, explaining their strengths and defects as they attempt to field a capable team, using the best stats money can buy. . . . For fantasy baseball junkies and baseball purists alike, this is a vivid, joyful exploration of recruiting and running a team by numbers and instinct.”

—Publishers Weekly

“The Only Rule tops most works of its genre because it explains the real-world successes and pitfalls that come with trying to

take theories and apply them to a team of real humans who might not always be as receptive to change as a simulation league team. If you ever wondered what it would be like to jump from running a fantasy team to being a GM, *The Only Rule* is your guidebook. —J. J. Cooper, *Baseball America* —“The Only Rule Is It Has to Work sounded like it would be a book that would document all the crazy things you could do on a baseball diamond. And while at times it did, it was more a story about loving baseball. As the authors note in the book’s acknowledgments, there is no wrong way to love the game, and this book drives that point home thoroughly and unflinchingly. —Paul Swydan, *The Hardball Times* —“Lindbergh and Miller revel in [esoterica], but they’re admirable communicators, too, and unafraid to explain exactly why and how a particular idea failed or succeeded. If the game has recently started to seem a little impenetrable to you, this might be the book that brings you back into the fold, a welcome reminder of all that’s eccentric, idiosyncratic and optimistic in baseball. —Dwyer Murphy, *LitHub*

Ben Lindbergh is a staff writer for *FiveThirtyEight* and, with Sam Miller, the cohost of *Effectively Wild*, the daily *Baseball Prospectus* podcast. He is a former staff writer for *Grantland* and a former editor in chief of *Baseball Prospectus*. He lives in New York City. Sam Miller is the editor in chief of *Baseball Prospectus*, the coeditor of *Baseball Prospectus*’s annual guidebook, and a contributing writer at *ESPN The Magazine*. He lives on the San Francisco peninsula with his wife and daughter.

In the book “*The Only Rule Is It Has to Work: Our Wild Experiment Building a New Kind of Baseball Team*”, Ben Lindbergh and Sam Miller recount a grand adventure to take command of an independent league baseball team, with the vision of trying every idea, sane or crazy, in an attempt to achieve a winning edge. Five infielders, four outfielders, defensive shifts, optimizing lineups - everything. It was really an impossible task. Professional sports at every level are filled with highly accomplished and competitive athletes, with real lives and real egos. Now imagine walking in one day and suddenly trying to convince them that they should be doing things differently. Who do you think you are? I was one of the analysts who helped Ben and Sam in this quest, and I wanted to write some thoughts down from my own perspective, not as one of the main characters, but as someone more behind the scenes. These are some very short initial thoughts only, but I’d like to follow up with some more ideas on where things went wrong from my perspective, and also how independent league teams can better identify roster talent from some non-traditional sources. My

focus was on attempting to identify talent overlooked in the MLB draft. This is extremely challenging; there are 30 teams, 40 standard rounds plus other picks. Furthermore, among those players left, many sign as amateur free agents post-draft. You're left with players from lower divisions, very small schools, 23-year-old seniors, bad bodies, soft tossers, poor defenders, etc. But, still, there may be players who aren't good MLB prospects, but who could still perform well as part of an independent league team. Looking at top framing college catchers was a bust; this is a premium defensive position and very little is overlooked. Among the undrafted senior hitters and pitchers there were several potential prospects, many of whom you'll read about in the book. The most important fact to keep in mind is that these are real people with real lives, real families and real hopes and dreams, and playing independent ball isn't nearly lucrative enough to pay the bills. Harsh reality will limit your pool even more, and those who choose to pursue it will face the additional stress of financial strain. That being said, was Ben and Sam's experiment a success? You'll have to read the book, but absolutely, some talent was found.

As an avid listener of Effectively Wild and consistent reader of Ben and Sam's work, I know that they are statheads. I assumed this book would lean heavily on sabermetrics, the pages chock-full of numbers and advanced baseball analysis. I was wrong. This book offered much, much more. This is less of "The Book," by Tom Tango, and more of "The Soul of Baseball," by Joe Posnanski; it is more story than stat. Ben and Sam may have been the ones who got to run this indy-league baseball team, but through their writing you feel like you're right alongside them. You cringe when they're getting scolded by the team's manager. You're sad when a player leaves for greener pastures. You pump your fist when the team comes through. It's funny, it's dramatic, it's gripping. By the end, you realize you've grown to love this ragtag group of characters just as the authors did. This isn't just a baseball story. It's a story about people, about relationships, about finding your way. My only regret is that that summer in Sonoma had to end.

I absolutely loved this book. It reads like a top-flight novel, is packed with interesting stories and details, and brings the game to life. Many of us are armchair coaches and general managers, always making recommendations and second-guessing our teams' decisions. We have the dream and we put it on a pedestal. Ben and Sam explain just how difficult it is. Sam's note and prepared speech especially hit home. But even more interesting than the baseball parts are the psychological undertones: how Ben and Sam's relationship changes during the season, the effect the season has on players, the toll it all takes on you. If you are a baseball fan or know a baseball fan, give them this

book. They will find multiple stories in it that they can relate to.

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