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Giamatti's passing still leaves a large void

by Steve Zalusky

In "The Green Fields of the Mind," A. Bartlett Giamatti wrote about baseball, "It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. 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."

Giamatti, baseball's seventh commissioner, was writing about the end of the 1977 season for his beloved Boston Red Sox, when hope died with a fly out off the bat of Jim Rice against Baltimore's Nelson Briles.

But we feel the bitter irony of those words today, knowing that Giamatti didn't live to see the end of his first season as commissioner. On Sept. 1, 1989, he died of a heart attack only five months into his term.

Only days before on Aug. 24, Giamatti cemented his legacy in baseball history when he announced that Pete Rose, the Charlie Hustle idolized by baseball fans everywhere, the man who had broken Ty Cobb's record for hits and led the Cincinnati Reds and Philadelphia Phillies to World Series titles, had been banned from baseball for life.

Giamatti's courageous defense of baseball's integrity at the risk of toppling a baseball icon is the subject of a new podcast, "Downfall," featuring author and lawyer Neil Thomas Proto.

Proto, who grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, where Giamatti served as president of Yale University, is the author of "Fearless: A. Bartlett Giamatti and the Battle for Fairness in America." by signing up you agree to our terms of service

In a phone interview, Proto said of Giamatti's investigation of Rose, "What he recognized was that it had to be methodical. It had to be open. It had to be thorough."

He said Giamatti made sure investigator John Dowd conducted an exhaustive inquiry, even to the point of sharing his entire "work product" with Rose's counsel.

As commissioner, Giamatti recognized the importance of a level playing field in sports, with everyone competing under identical conditions and rules, with "sheer ability" carrying the day. In "Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games," Giamatti wrote that if "cheating is not dealt with swiftly and severely, the game will have no integrity."

Giamatti wasn't naive, Proto said, He had no illusions about what he called the "snakes in the garden."

In the podcast, Proto talks about how Rose embraced the big lie that he didn't bet on baseball, and how others helped him perpetuate it.



Neil Thomas Proto

They included Rose's attorneys, who, Proto said, misled the courts about Rose's gambling, and Rose's biographer Roger Kahn and the publisher Macmillan.

Proto said Giamatti's predecessor, Peter Ueberroth, who initiated the investigation, wanted to keep the Rose probe under his wing even after Giamatti succeeded him.

Giamatti rejected that.



"It's highly likely that he wasn't going to be as serious and thoughtful and methodical as Giamatti and (Deputy Commissioner) Fay Vincent and ultimately John Dowd were," said Proto, especially, he said, given that Ueberroth had engaged in his own premeditated cheating, referring to his involvement with the owners in the 1980s in colluding to keep players' salaries down.

Indeed, in February 1989, after Ueberroth, still commissioner, met with Rose, Giamatti and Vincent, he told *The New York Times*, "There's nothing ominous and there won't be any follow-through."

Giamatti's love affair with baseball was deep. His maternal grandmother became an avid Boston Red Sox fan during the days of Smoky Joe Wood -- later, when Giamatti was president of Yale University, he would personally deliver Wood's honorary degree.

Giamatti also grew to love the Red Sox, admiring second baseman Bobby Doerr and listening to games on an attic radio.

His love of baseball blended with the values with which he was raised. Responsible citizenship. Fairness. No allowance for special privilege.

Ultimately, Giamatti believed that baseball was a public trust. Proto said, "He believed that baseball was and should continue to be 'America's pastime,' a game that was central to America's history and identity. He was going to do everything he could to preserve its integrity for that reason."

Proto said there is a deeper tragedy in the Rose situation. He said Giamatti offered Rose a path to redemption.

"Giamatti and Dowd actually talked about Rose going around the country and meeting with young people, with Little League players, with high school and college players, and talking about the evils of gambling."

Proto said Giamatti would have been just as strong on other issues involving premeditated cheating, such as the Astros World Series scandal, as he was with the Rose affair.

In the case of the Astros, "I think he would have taken away the trophy."

With Giamatti's passing, a potentially glorious summer for baseball under his stewardship ended too soon. Without a Giamatti at the helm today, it could face a grim fall.