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*Baseball Maverick: How Sandy Alderson Revolutionized  
Baseball and Revived the Mets* by Steve Kettmann (review)

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The final chapter serves as a nice epilogue, bringing closure to the major stories Katz followed through 1981, including Valenzuela's career after his dual Cy Young-Rookie of the Year season, Pete Rose and his quest for Ty Cobb's MLB hit record and then sad fall from grace, Reggie Jackson who spent 1981 battling a horrific slump and the mercurial Steinbrenner, and Bowie Kuhn and the Player's Association. It was a satisfying ending for a reader who remembers the season but didn't quite remember every detail, and it will be a perfect wrap up for the reader who is first encountering this historic season.

Katz does an excellent job of wading through the often confusing labor negotiations and related legal proceedings, peppering his coverage with on the field action (when negotiations and baseball were going on simultaneously—until June 12). Fortunately for fans, there was lots of great stuff going on in 1981. A 32-inning minor-league game, the debut of a young Cal Ripken Jr., exciting pennant races, the controversy over the decision to split the season, and the always entertaining George Steinbrenner.

The book is not perfect. A couple of tables in an appendix would have been nice so that final standings could have been seen at a glance and league leaders and award winners could have been looked up more easily. And the book is not a scholarly tome. There are no footnotes and the references are predominantly New York newspapers, the *Sporting News* and *Sports Illustrated*. As a result, there is little here that will be of use to the serious scholar. What it lacks in depth and analysis however, it makes up for in readability. It is a fun read that covers all the bases. It is entertaining and works very well for what it is—an enjoyable ride down memory lane.



**Steve Kettmann. *Baseball Maverick: How Sandy Alderson Revolutionized Baseball and Revived the Mets*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015. 331 pp. Cloth, \$26.**

*Steven P. Gietschier*

It takes a bit of East Coast *chutzpah* to suggest in the very title of a book that the man who has presided as general manager over the New York Mets for the past four seasons, during which they have amassed 77, 74, 74, and 79 wins, has revolutionized the game and revived a mediocre franchise. Dyed-in-the-wool Mets fans may believe, as spring training opens in 2015 and this review is being written, that the upcoming season will be their year, but how many others

think this will be the case? Oh, ye of little faith! Spend a few hours reading veteran journalist Steve Kettmann's excellent baseball biography of Sandy Alderson, the general manager in question, and perhaps you will not be surprised if the Mets reach the post-season for the first time since Adam Wainwright dropped that enervating curveball over the plate against a helpless Carlos Beltran in the 2006 National League Championship Series.

A lawyer by training, Alderson was a baseball novice when he became general counsel for the Oakland A's. Roy Eisenhardt, working in the same law firm, coaxed Alderson to Oakland just after Eisenhardt's father-in-law, Walter Haas, bought the A's in 1980. Two years later, Alderson, an ex-Marine with an inquisitive mind, was Oakland's general manager. By the end of the decade, the A's had won four division titles, three pennants, and the 1989 World Series. After the Haas family sold the team, Alderson transitioned out. He did two stints in the Commissioner's Office, sandwiched around four years and two division titles with the San Diego Padres. In his first stint in New York, he worked to improve the game's umpiring. In his second, he ironed out some difficulties in the Dominican Republic. Then, at the urging of Bud Selig, the Mets called in the fall of 2010.

Kettmann's title may appear to be a brash, in-your-face marketing ploy, but his book is thoroughly researched, with Alderson's support, and carefully written. It is well worth the attention of serious fans and scholars. As the subtitle suggests, the book has two themes. The first is a necessary and overdue corrective to the notion that Billy Beane was the first major league executive to introduce sabermetrics—or what is now called advanced analytics—to the front office. Committed to learning the game and working smart, it was Alderson who ruminated on the merits of Earl Weaver's preferred offensive strategy, get two men on base and hit a three-run homer. It was he who read Bill James. It was he who listened to Eric Walker's commentaries on the local NPR station and brought him in to do some number-crunching. And it was he who rebuilt the A's farm system that produced three consecutive American League rookies-of-the-year, Jose Canseco, Mark McGwire, and Walt Weiss, and a steady record of success. In the spring following the 1989 Series, Beane's marginal career as a player was over, and he became a scout for Alderson and later his assistant and his student. The rest is history, at least according to *Moneyball*.

What Alderson has done with the Mets is Kettmann's second and larger theme. Following the heartache of 2006, the New Yorkers had endured two September collapses and two indifferent seasons. General Manager Omar Minaya had proven not to be the savior Mets fans craved, and the Wilpon ownership team turned to Alderson. He accepted the challenge, unaware of

the extent to which the Bernard Madoff financial scandal, implicating the Wilpons, would tie his hands. Still, re-assembling a cadre of experts who had worked with him before, Alderson put in place a four-year plan designed to put his team in the post-season in 2014. But more than that, the GM dedicated his efforts to rebuilding the Mets' farm system and to changing the negative and dispirited clubhouse culture that had hung over the team like a miasma for years.

Progress has been slow, to put it mildly. It took a while for Alderson to shed payroll, just as it took the Wilpons a while to move beyond the Madoff madness. Developing competent everyday players has proven to be more difficult than developing pitchers, and Matt Harvey, who set the league afire during the second half of the 2012 season and the first half of 2013, tore his ulnar collateral ligament that August and underwent Tommy John surgery. Meanwhile, key additions to the roster, whether acquired by trade or free agency, have continued to come up short. The latest in this depressing string is outfielder Curtis Granderson, signed to a four-year, \$60 million contract that runs through 2017. His on-base percentage last season was a dismal .326.

Kettmann is an experienced journalist who has reported from more than forty countries, and he covered the A's as the beat writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. This is his ninth book, and it is more than competently done and a pleasure to read. Alderson is a figure who, more often than not, has endeavored to avoid the spotlight, even in New York, but Kettmann has drawn a rather full and incisive portrait of his professional life. Still, readers might wish for a bit more and a slightly more critical pose. There is nothing here, for example, about the decision to hire Terry Collins as the Mets' manager right after Alderson inked his contract or about the incessant debates since about Collins' effectiveness. One might rightly wonder if Alderson's analytics can evaluate a manager objectively. Similarly, the book might have been more colorful if, at some point, Alderson or Kettmann had ruminated about the intense angst Mets fans have long endured, a feeling as palpable at Citi Field as the aroma of the Double ShackBurgers for sale from the stand near Section 139.

