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*The Eighth Wonder of the World: The Life of Houston's Iconic  
Astrodome* by Robert C. Trumpbour and Kenneth Womack (review)

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**Robert C. Trumbour and Kenneth Womack. *The Eighth Wonder of the World: The Life of Houston's Iconic Astrodome*. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2016. 223 pp. Cloth, \$27.95.**

*Frank G. Houdek*

The first thing to know about *The Eighth Wonder of the World: The Life of Houston's Iconic Astrodome* by Robert Trumbour and Kenneth Womack is that it received SABR's prestigious Seymour Medal, honoring it as the best book of baseball history or biography published during 2016. That alone suggests this is a book worth reading.

The second thing to know is that it not only tells the story of the construction of the Harris County Domed Stadium, the official name of the facility better known as the Houston Astrodome, it does so with enough suspense to keep readers engaged from beginning to end. Will Harris County voters approve \$20 million in taxpayer bonds, a must if Houston's moneyed interests are to back the project? Will city and county officials agree on a site for the stadium? Will the powerful Houston Fat Stock Show offer the support required to get construction underway? Will baseball's hierarchy even put a team in Houston? More questions arise once the project is approved. Will engineers solve the myriad problems encountered in building what no one has ever built before, "a gigantic indoor sports complex . . . [with] premium luxury suites, climate-controlled, air-conditioned comfort, and plush theater-style seating" (xxi)? And what about fielders blinded by the glare from the roof's skylights, and then the grass that dies when roof panels are painted over to dim that glare?

Seeking to "capture what unfolded as the Astrodome was planned and built, with specific focus on the larger-than-life personalities who were instrumental in bringing the project to fruition" (xxiii), Trumbour and Womack answer these questions in seven chapters that examine the forces that brought the Dome into existence and made it a facility that "[f]or better or worse . . . changed the way people viewed sports" (xxvi). The most compelling of those personalities is Roy Hofheinz, the subject of the book's first chapter. Judge Hofheinz—he earned the honorific by serving eight years as Harris County judge after his election in 1936 at age twenty-three—actually only joined the stadium project after his plans to build the nation's first domed shopping mall fell through. Others had conceptualized a multipurpose stadium for Houston, and area leaders such as banker William Kirkland, oilman Craig Cullinan, and sportswriter turned PR executive George Kirksey had worked through the Houston Sports Association to attract a major league team to the city. But as *Eighth Wonder* emphasizes, it was Hofheinz, with "incredible energy, talent,

and creativity,” who had the vision to “construct an impressive and unique venue, one that would . . . [impress] a much more global audience with a luxurious facility that showcased the city’s ‘can-do’ spirit” (188). It documents not only his much needed political acumen, but also the single-minded focus which he applied to all aspects of the project.

Although Hofheinz garnered most of the attention, *Eighth Wonder* makes clear that there were other players equally crucial to the endeavor. Chapter two introduces one of particular importance, the Houston Fat Stock Show (now the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo). From modest beginnings in 1932, it is now a twenty-day-long entertainment “extravaganza”—with A-list entertainers (e.g., Elvis, Dylan, Garth Brooks, and Taylor Swift), world-class rodeo, and a huge livestock and horse show—that attracts an annual attendance (2.5 million) exceeding half of MLB’s thirty teams. Trumpbour and Womack show just how important the “backing of various [Fat Stock] power brokers” was for the Dome, arguing that “without their involvement, the case for construction would be weakened . . . and public support to fund the project might have failed” (40). Similarly, chapter three argues that luring a major-league team to Houston was essential to “muster [the] public support necessary to build a unique multipurpose facility” (60), and then explains how several individuals, but particularly Kirksey, Kirkland, and Cullinan, managed to pull it off (with an assist from threat of the Continental League becoming a third major league).

Chapters 4 and 5 cover the Dome’s construction and immediate aftermath. The former focuses on the work of Kenneth Zimmerman, responsible for engineering the roof and its supporting structural edifices, and his colleague, Narendra Gosain, who oversaw the Dome’s extensive renovation in the late 1980s, in part an unsuccessful attempt to keep Houston Oilers owner Bud Adams from moving his team. Many of the book’s excellent illustrations help explain the complicated construction process, especially the temporary towers that held the roof up before it was completed. While readers may be unfamiliar with the engineering feats required to build a nine-acre stadium with a roof span of 642 feet that circulates two-million cubic feet of air per minute, they will know something about the Astroturf created to replace the natural grass that was killed when the skylights were blacked out to reduce the glare. But they will know much more after reading chapter 5.

In its concluding chapters, *Eighth Wonder* details the Astrodome’s gradual decline, replaced in the public eye by “retro” stadiums with idiosyncratic dimensions, better technology, and surpassing luxury, but also paints a compelling picture of its legacy. “The Astrodome exposed team owners and league officials to a new model for sports spectatorship . . .” (186). Trumpbour and Womack remind us that the giant scoreboards, on-screen entertainment, wide

food selection, retractable roofs, climate control luxury, and high-end amenities of 21st-century stadiums are all born from the “pioneering ideas” [of Roy Hofheinz that] “served to pave the way for . . . a level of conspicuous consumption no one could have envisioned a mere generation ago” (187). Thus, even though replaced in 2000 as the home of the Astros by what is now Minute Maid Park, and with the wrecking ball looming, “Domers” have fought hard to preserve the once iconic stadium. They earned it a spot on the National Register of Historic Places in 2014, although this by itself will not guarantee protection from demolition. Still, as Trumbour and Womack write, “[w]hether as an artifact in the pages of the history books or as a repurposed civic project, the Astrodome will always occupy a special place in the evolution of Houston as a truly international city” (190). *The Eighth Wonder* does much to ensure that goal’s achievement.



**William C. Kashatus. *Macho Row: The 1993 Phillies and Baseball's Unwritten Code*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. 343 pp. Cloth, \$27.95.**

*Mitchell Nathanson*

At the start of the 1993 season, few fans gave the Philadelphia Phillies much consideration. They’d finished last in 1992 and things didn’t look all that much better going forward. Surprisingly, though, the Phils were hot out of the gate and, even more unexpectedly, remained so throughout the entire season, capturing an unlikely Eastern Division title and then an even more unlikely National League pennant by dispatching the heavily favored Atlanta Braves. Collectively, the ’93 Phils were misfits in baseball’s modern age, throwbacks to an earlier era when, legend has it, players played for the love of the game rather than the dollars on their paychecks. And the leaders of this pack of misfits were a cadre of players—Darren Daulton, John Kruk, Lenny Dykstra, Pete Incaviglia, Mitch Williams and Dave Hollins—who lockered together in an area of the clubhouse known as “The Ghetto” or, as anointed by the local media, Macho Row. It is this assemblage that forms the backbone of William Kashatus’s diary of the Phillies’ improbable 1993 pennant run and ultimate collapse in the World Series. Phillies fans packing for a trip down memory lane would do well to take this book along with them on their journey, although