



**The**  
**CARDINALS**  
**WAY**



*How One Team Embraced Tradition and  
Moneyball at the Same Time*

**HOWARD MEGDAL**



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*To Rachel, the Branch Rickey of wives, and Mirabelle and Juliet, my favorite prospects  
with limitless ceilings*

## *Prologue*

For years everyone had been telling Mike Matheny how great the Cardinals were, and in April 2014, sitting in the visiting manager's office at Great American Ball Park in Cincinnati, Matheny finally had enough. It was Matheny at peak Midwestern modesty.

If somebody told you Mike Matheny was the newest star in Hollywood, you'd buy it. But really, he belongs to a different Hollywood era physically and in manner, with intense blue eyes and the countenance of the guy you'd bet your money on in a western blockbuster's climactic gunfight.

He looks like a manager. He sounds like a manager. And when Cardinals general manager John Mozeliak started looking for the person to continue the franchise's success after the 2011 World Series championship, Matheny's presence and ties to the organization made him the easy choice. His game-management skills are oft discussed and still developing. His relationships with people are why he has the job.

With reporters, Matheny answers the questions he wants to answer. And he doesn't dodge others: he flat out tells you he doesn't wish to respond.

But it would be a mistake to think his focus implies he has taciturn interactions with his players. Nearly every Cardinal has a story about a conversation with Matheny at a key time in his career, almost always initiated by the skipper. Still just forty-three as the 2014 season began, Matheny's ability to come in and succeed Tony La Russa, a legendary manager, isn't talked about often, largely because of how seamlessly it happened.

Matheny took over in 2012 and led the Cardinals to the NLCS. In 2013, his

Cardinals won the pennant before falling to the Boston Red Sox in the World Series. In 2014, they returned to the postseason, and lost in the NLCS once again. And as this book went to press in August 2015, the Cardinals were on a pace to win well over 100 games, with a Tom Verducci story about them in *Sports Illustrated* using both “beast” and “superteam” in the headline.

Coming on the heels of Tony La Russa’s 2011 World Series championship in his final season, the Cardinals have put together the kind of sustained success that is rare in baseball, drawing all kinds of attention and a simple question.

How are they doing it?

Accordingly, there’d been a great deal of talk about “the Cardinals Way.” It had come to represent many different things in the public eye and media discussions: a code of conduct, a particular outlook on baseball, a moral compass. It had been co-opted, used as shorthand, and Matheny was sick of all the praise.

“I don’t even want to use the *Cardinals Way* term anymore,” Matheny said. “But that whole idea is really something to be inside this clubhouse and inside more importantly the minor league clubhouse. About what it’s supposed to look like and not really for commercialization or for promotion.

“I think it got out of hand to the point where it’s ugly to people outside of this organization. No good comes from it. And I think it’s put people on the offensive. And they have all the reason in the world [to want to beat the Cardinals].... You know, it’s like we’re out there running, carrying this big banner, and that’s not necessarily—not at all—who we are.”<sup>1</sup>

You can understand where Matheny’s coming from. After all, who needs teams more motivated to play you? Other fans around baseball took similar exception to the consistent refrain about Cardinals fans being the “best fans in baseball,” as if the way the Cardinals (and many, many other teams) choose to thank their fans for support had turned into a boast by those very fans.

A Twitter account even sprung up, @BestFansStLouis, highlighting awful things Cardinals fans would say on Twitter. What this proved, I couldn’t tell you. Finding disgusting sentiments on the cesspool that is Twitter doesn’t take long. And “best fans in baseball” is a fundamentally different concept from “perfect fanbase, purged of anything petty or nasty.” In my experience, Cardinals fans do boo less and are more gracious when an opposing player makes a great play. They show up more, and more consistently. Their local television ratings in 2014 were the highest of any MLB team.

But this isn't a group of fans trying to maintain modesty—this is a key member of the Cardinals, trying to avoid entirely deserved praise. Let's take a step back and think about that. The Cardinals largely avoid publicizing the Cardinals Way as an idea, large or small. The name itself comes from a manual, written originally by George Kissell, a coach whom the Cardinals employed from 1940 until his death in 2008. Kissell was signed by Branch Rickey, meaning that the team's minor league player-development staff is either directly trained by a man Rickey hired or works from a manual created by that man. This is how directly the Cardinals connect to the creation of the farm system itself.

That isn't new, though. The attention to the Cardinals Way in recent years stems from the Cardinals' winning. The Cardinals made the postseason and advanced at least one round each season between 2011 and 2014. Notably, this was the first time the Cardinals had made the postseason four consecutive years.

And the Cardinals were not just winning but doing so while seeming to have a bottomless pit of talent to draw from, should anyone currently on their major league team falter. Also, the major league team was largely homegrown: seventeen of the twenty-five players on the 2014 postseason roster came through the Cardinals farm system.

Had the New York Yankees managed to build the kind of organizational strength the Cardinals have, can you imagine them trying to step back from the praise and, yes, the envy engendered by what the St. Louis Cardinals have created? Please—they'd have told Mariano Rivera to step aside, and named Rivera Avenue "The Yankee Way" instead.

But when I first started looking deep into what the St. Louis Cardinals were, how they'd created what has to be considered the model organization for Major League Baseball in the twenty-first century, I heard the same pleas from nearly everybody I spoke to—that the Cardinals weren't trying to prove they were smarter than everybody else, weren't trying to draw attention to themselves. I spent hundreds of hours with scores of people from the organization, and I can tell you, this was no pose of false modesty.

In working on this book, spending days, weeks, and months with everyone in this organization from owner Bill DeWitt Jr. to current and former Cardinals John Mozeliak, Dan Kantrovitz, Jeff Luhnow, Sig Mejdal, Gary LaRocque, and many others, I've learned those claims come from a deep sense that, while they take pride in

what they've built, and what the Cardinals mean to the whole of baseball, they don't believe in relying purely on what has already worked as the road map to what will work now and in the future. Sure, there are traditions and practices—particularly through the rediscovery of statistical analysis, first pioneered by Branch Rickey, and reintroduced to the Cardinals by DeWitt's hiring of Luhnow, along with the on-field, dynamic work of Kissell—but they are the starting point for how the Cardinals determine what to do moving forward. And the upheaval caused by the hacking scandal—an effort by a member or members of the Cardinals' front office to break into the Houston Astros' computer database, where Jeff Luhnow is now the general manager, leading to an FBI investigation and the termination of Scouting Director Chris Correa by the Cardinals already—has only expedited the team's need to search for how to maintain that continuity, even as the team's succession plan gets challenged on multiple fronts.

But the challenge, from within and without, is not new. That need for innovation not only drove the fundamental realignment of how the Cardinals operated over the past decade and powers everything Mozeliak and company are doing even now, but also simultaneously reflected and traced back to the work Branch Rickey himself did—Bill DeWitt Sr., father of the current owner, at his side—to take the Cardinals out of the poorhouse and into a position of royalty in the National League, a place they've held for a disproportionate amount of the one hundred years since.

How the Cardinals find themselves in this enviable position within the league, drawing so much attention for a phrase that does little more than describe how and why the Cardinals act, is not some secret formula or words scribbled by George Kissell many decades ago.

The Cardinals of today are very much a product of Kissell's work for many decades. They are also the Cardinals of today because of decisions DeWitt made, back in 2003, to completely change the business model of the team, from an old-school approach to a balancing between traditional methods and analytics. They are reformed in a vision put forward by Jeff Luhnow, who made the leap from business-turnaround expert to senior baseball executive in weeks, in the teeth of an often hostile working environment (more than we even knew at the time, it turns out) and skeptical press. And it is up to all of them, led by DeWitt and Mozeliak, to continue innovating, with the need to find consensus within a battle-scarred organization renewed by what DeWitt has described as “a rogueish act.” In essence, this is the reverse of the original

action that led to DeWitt hiring Luhnow in the first place back in 2003. As this book goes to press, the Cardinals, without any desire to change philosophies, are deciding just what the hacking scandal means to their future. No one will question a decision to change course, and future decisions by Major League Baseball or a court of law may force greater changes upon them.

But for the Cardinals of the last decade, the changed course was voluntary, enormous. And in the midst—from 2000 to 2006—of six play-off appearances, a pair of National League pennants, and the 2006 World Series championship, it appeared to many to be close to madness.

The Cardinals who ultimately emerged from this process begun by Luhnow and DeWitt were a collection of extremely bright people of utterly divergent backgrounds and personalities. You couldn't sit in a room with the understated brilliance of Dan Kantrovitz and masterful scout Charlie Gonzalez, as passionate as he is encyclopedic, and conclude that the Cardinals employ one specific personality type.

The results have been extraordinary, and the methods seemingly obvious, as with all great decisions in retrospect. Analytics helped the Cardinals take a leap forward as a baseball team. And that the Cardinals, in particular, incorporated statistical analysis helped analytics become the industry standard.

Incorporating analytics, through the hiring of Luhnow starting in September 2003, allowed the team to revamp the way they acquired players, particularly through the draft. Luhnow took a microscope to everything the Cardinals did, and from the draft to the study of their pitchers' mechanics, plenty of prototypical analytical practices became part of the Cardinals Way.

Interestingly, however, almost nothing changed about either the Kissell-inspired on-field practices or with the perhaps more significant ways Kissell preached for coaches and managers to emotionally connect with players.

As DeWitt put it, though, in our first interview in August 2013, "There were great people who were here when we got here. And so the Cardinals had that tradition of development that we were able to build on. But if you don't have the talent, all the development in the world won't get you good players."

DeWitt didn't purchase the Cardinals until 1996. But the foundation he described dates back a hundred years. Incredibly, the intellectual and personal through-line from the very start of major league teams entering the player-development business to the present-day Cardinals is clear, more practical than symbolic, and essentially

guaranteed the flip side of DeWitt's point.

Once the Cardinals figured out how to input more talent into their system, a hundred-year tradition, complete with established practices dating back to Branch Rickey and Bill DeWitt, Sr., and refined by George Kissell, supercharged the results. An incredible tradition merged with a group of great baseball minds to maximize what baseball's new collective-bargaining agreements eventually forced other teams to try to emulate.

The St. Louis Cardinals, ahead of the curve on the very existence of the farm system that transformed twentieth-century baseball, have once again ridden a combination of foresight and attention to detail at every level to represent a particular moment in baseball history here in the twenty-first century.

False starts occurred along the way—a skeptical group within the organization itself, the ill-fated 2004 draft, among others. Realistically, what is astonishing about the St. Louis Cardinals over the past decade isn't their sometimes-contentious path to their current state. Finding baseball executives to argue strategy, or scouts to disagree over a particular player, might be the easiest task on earth. And it appears that the rancor that led to the hacking of Luhnow's new team's database came from personal, not philosophical differences—Chris Correa, for instance, was a Luhnow hire with full analytical buy-in.

The marvel is how completely the Cardinals of today are both the manifestation of a vision Branch Rickey had a hundred years ago, and how much of the team's current business model both fits what Rickey envisioned and is practiced by direct acolytes of Rickey himself.

There is no Cardinals Way without George Kissell, signed by Branch Rickey. There is no Cardinals Way without Red Schoendienst, signed by Branch Rickey.

There's no analytic revamp of the Cardinals without Bill DeWitt Jr., raised in and around baseball by Bill DeWitt Sr., whom Rickey hired at age thirteen and worked with for decades. There's no analytics revamp of the Cardinals without Luhnow, hired by DeWitt less than a month after they first met. And bringing in Luhnow, and the analytics team he assembled, wasn't some rejection of Cardinals tradition—the very concept of an analytics department dates back to Rickey, who hired Travis Hoke,<sup>2</sup> baseball's first team-employed statistician, in 1914 to chart every game “with base and out efficiency” in mind.

The hiring of Luhnow was characterized by some in the organization and many

outsiders as a new direction for the Cardinals, a break with tradition. Really, it was nothing more than a restoration of a key component of Branch Rickey's tradition, dating back a hundred years. And the key to the Cardinals sustaining that success in the years to come will depend on maintaining that level of innovation, even as that talent finds homes all around the league.

It also represented something vital for the industry itself, in the post-*Moneyball* world. The extent to which that book created sides, a supposed war of ideas, is frequently cited by both those with primarily analytics background and the scouts. So for the Cardinals to incorporate both worldviews into a highly successful franchise—perhaps the most successful of the twenty-first century to date—signaled to everybody that not only would integrating the two approaches be possible, it would be the wisest possible course.

Accordingly, the St. Louis Cardinals, circa the 2010s, will mean something significant to baseball fans now and forever, just as the Oriole Way did under Paul Richards and Earl Weaver, or the Big Red Machine conjures up the best Cincinnati Reds teams of the 1970s, or the \$100,000 Infield is Philadelphia A's baseball approximately a hundred years ago.

Here's how it happened—from Rickey and DeWitt to DeWitt and Mozeliak. Here's how it happened, from George Kissell's insight and training to Jeff Luhnow's, Sig Mejdal's and Michael Girsch's revolution to Dan Kantrovitz and Gary LaRocque's implementation. And here's how it works in practice, as seen through the eyes of players and coaches, scouts and analytics experts, operating the Cardinals Way at all levels of the farm system right now.

Mike Matheny may object, but he's only forty-five, and he's only been present for a small part of the history of the determining factors in the success of the St. Louis Cardinals. Even Branch Rickey himself was once fired as manager of the Cardinals, and if anything, it ultimately enhanced his building of the organization. The Cardinals Way is almost a hundred years old, both the deep connection with young players and reliance on new data, and it doesn't appear to be going anywhere.

So there's pride, but no belief from the Cardinals that this is somehow the best or only way to do things. The implicit idea that would come with such an attitude, that twenty-nine other teams ought to follow the Cardinals' example, wouldn't even make sense, though many will try, and the Astros, in particular, will be a fascinating test case of many of the ideas that once drove the Cardinals' success, with so many of those

who drove the Cardinals' innovative engine now in Houston with, as Luhnow put it to me in August 2015, "a clean sheet of paper." Meanwhile, this Cardinals Way is a product of a hundred years of serendipity, a number of innovative baseball men creating a tradition that predates any efforts to duplicate it, and a group in place now who have the ability to both maximize and build on what the St. Louis Cardinals began a century ago.

# 1

## THE CARDINAL IDEA

*Want to know what will happen tomorrow? Read yesterday's paper.*

—MIKE SHANNON

I love *Baseball Prospectus*. But I couldn't help noticing this paragraph by Russell Carleton, in his March 4, 2014, column on the Cardinals:

“Before we create too much of a mythology surrounding *The Cardinal Way*, let's be realistic for a minute. The Cardinals did not invent player development. They do not have a monopoly on smart guys who are good at molding young bats and young arms. They did not invent the idea of making sure that there was a coherent philosophy running through the player development system. Lots of teams make it a point to ensure that from the Sally League to the National League, the expectations that pitchers have are as uniform as they can be. It sets up a nice uniformity and eases the transitions that players might face as they move up in the minors. For all we know, they may not be the first team to write an internal book—or a series of memos which, if someone had bothered to collect them into a three-ring binder, would look like a book.”<sup>1</sup>

Let me stop you right there, Russell. The Cardinals did, in fact, invent player development. They did invent the idea of making sure a coherent philosophy ran through the player-development system.

And they were the first team to write an internal book, too—but we'll get to George Kissell soon enough.

First, we need to talk about Branch Rickey, inventor of the farm system. Rickey was many things: an Ohio schoolboy. A catcher good enough to play in the major

leagues, before an arm injury ended his career. An academic and a teacher, repeatedly offered jobs outside the confines of the game that ultimately employed him for six decades. The bringer of integration to Major League Baseball, and of Jackie Robinson to millions of people who will never forget seeing him play.

But Rickey spent twenty-five years of his life, from 1917 to 1942, with the St. Louis Cardinals. And the foundation for how the Cardinals, and ultimately, every major league team acquired and developed talent came from Rickey himself.

It is easy to assert, with benefit of hindsight, that the farm system was an eventuality, a claim that still allows Rickey to claim credit for getting there first. But both opinion at the time of Rickey's great innovation, and even the example of other leagues to this day, argue against this limited view.

The idea of a farm club predates Rickey. John T. Brush, owner of the Cincinnati Red Stockings,<sup>2</sup> also owned the Indianapolis Hoosiers of the Western League and shifted players between the teams. But pushback from other minor league teams limited this practice until the second decade of the twentieth century.

Around this time, Rickey was coaching baseball at the University of Michigan. And he was hired by Robert Lee Hedges, owner of the St. Louis ... Browns.

It's startling to consider just how much fate could have shifted in St. Louis baseball if any number of things had happened slightly differently, or earlier, or later. This book could easily have been about the most successful franchise in baseball history—the Browns. Hedges believed in Rickey's idea of a farm system and hired Rickey originally in 1913, for \$7,500, to create that farm system.<sup>3</sup> Hedges also hired Charlie Barrett, who went on to become one of Rickey's most successful scouts with the Cardinals.

During his time with the Browns, Rickey, in need of an administrative assistant, hired a thirteen-year-old peanut vendor at Sportsman's Park to be his new assistant: Bill DeWitt Sr.

The Browns, not the Cardinals, owned Sportsman's Park. The Browns drew bigger crowds than the Cardinals. The Cardinals were the money losers in town. Even after the Cardinals were sold by the Robison family, the debt the new ownership took on (the deal with the Robison family essentially mortgaged the Cardinals, with payments constantly due) meant constantly trying to meet debt obligations while maintaining, if not building, the team.

The Cardinals even opened up shares of the team to fans, hoping for a cash

infusion. It was referred to publicly as “The Cardinal Idea.” Incredible as it may seem, given the fan support the Cardinals enjoy today, response was tepid at best. No St. Louis child born since 1902 has reached age twenty-five without seeing a World Series championship parade in his town. But in 1917, the year Rickey started with the Cardinals, the oldest children that astonishing stat covers were only fifteen years old.

Hedges became a casualty of the settlement with the Federal League, a third major league built to challenge that NL and AL circuits. As part of the settlement, Hedges sold the Browns to Phil Ball, owner of the St. Louis Federal League team, a man temperamentally unsuited, and not particularly inclined, to work with Rickey. As for Rickey’s farm system? “I don’t want anything to do with it!” Ball reportedly said.<sup>4</sup>

So when an opportunity opened up with the Cardinals, under their new ownership group, to join their front office as president, Rickey made the move. DeWitt and Barrett soon followed, along with other scouts, who helped populate those first Cardinal farm system teams. That wouldn’t have happened for the Cardinals had Rickey remained with the Browns.

Those early years were hardly representative of what the Cardinals would become. Rickey would bring expensive rugs that belonged to his wife’s family into team offices in Sportsman’s Park for the day to make the team look more respectable during meetings with the owners of potential minor league affiliates.<sup>5</sup>

But two circumstances changed for the Cardinals at the tail end of the 1910s. Sam Breadon, who’d had a small stake in the team, decided to get more involved, eventually buying enough to become president of the team, fully funding the expansion of Rickey’s farm system for the Cardinals, while simultaneously retiring the last of the debt due to the Robison family. In exchange, Rickey willingly gave up his title of president to Breadon.

And the second thing: Breadon, now in charge, decided to give Branch Rickey an entirely free hand to run baseball operations.<sup>6</sup>

Now the farm system would become the true “Cardinal Idea.”

The system, born in part of necessity, would quickly expand as was necessary. Bill DeWitt, Sr., ultimately, became the first “farm director” in Major League Baseball history.

“He was very close to Branch Rickey,” Bill DeWitt Jr. recalled, in my September 2014 interview with him, about his father. “He used to travel with him. When they had all these farm teams, they would go visit them and sort out what was going on—check

on the players. There were so few people in the front office, like eight to ten people. They really didn't have a farm director, but he was the de facto farm director."

Rickey, and the Cardinals scouts, such as Charlie Barrett, had been scouring the high minors for players for the last few years of the 1910s. But their eye for talent had become so respected, other owners, armed with the knowledge that Rickey wanted these players and nothing else, would swoop in and outbid the relatively penniless Cardinals for them. Rickey, fed up with this happening, wired Barrett in Texas, "Pack up and come home—we'll develop our own players."

Thus, the Cardinals acquired a controlling interest in a Class C team in Fort Smith, Arkansas. The youngest, rawest players with promise Rickey could find would be sent there, preparing them to play with the Cardinals. However, no player could be expected to jump from Class C to the majors. Accordingly, when Charlie Barrett brought word of a possible ownership stake to be had in the Houston franchise of the Texas League, the steps that would become commonplace for all began to fall into place for the Cardinals.

There to implement it all was Rickey's farm director, DeWitt Sr. Or as DeWitt Sr. himself put it in a 1980 interview: "I think I knew more about Branch Rickey in the twenty years I was associated with him. I used to sleep at his house at night. I lunched there. I ate dinner at his house. And so I knew him better than anybody during that twenty-year period."<sup>7</sup>

Does the Rickey/DeWitt farm system, in retrospect, seem obvious, the only proper way to develop talent? Perhaps. But no one can claim it was inevitable. No less a man than John McGraw dismissed the idea of a farm system, and the New York Giants didn't begin to build one until after he died in 1934.<sup>8</sup> That echoed the feelings of many throughout the major leagues. The Yankees didn't speak to Commissioner Landis about doing so until 1928 and didn't buy their first farm team until 1931, in Newark, New Jersey.

Nor were many minor league teams happy about this new idea, either. As John B. Sheridan wrote in his February 5, 1920, column in *The Sporting News*, "Managers of minor league baseball want players. Grievously. Must have them. Are turning heaven and earth to get them. Players are hard to find. When a minor league manager does light upon a likely lad he offers him a contract. The lordly lad pushes the minor league contract aside with a wide wave of his hand and says:

"I am very sorry, but Charley Barrett has offered me a contract with the St. Louis

Nationals, which you are probably aware is a major league club, even if it is in a lowly position....’

“Barrett’s specialty is signing untried, fledgling, amateur, semi-professional, any sort of platers to the St. Louis National League club contracts at figures which will permit of the players being sent to the minor leagues for development. Barrett goes about the country picking up boys at from \$125 to \$200 a month.”

The Cardinals won the World Series, finally, in 1926. That first crop of astonishing young stars, developed through the nascent farm system, included Jim Bottomley, George Toporcer, Lester Bell, Chick Hafey, Taylor Douthit, Ray Blades, Wattie Holm, Heine Mueller, Tommy Thevenow, Flint Rehm, and Eddie Dyer.

For those keeping score at home, that’s a pair of Hall of Famers in Bottomley and Hafey, a 20-game winner for those world champions in Rehm, two-thirds of the championship outfield in Douthit and Blades, and a number of other key contributors who powered the Cardinals for much of the decade.

And once the time came for the Cardinals to build that farm system, finding enough other minor league teams to go along with it still might have proved impossible if not for Rickey’s vast network of contacts and personal relationships, and the ability of people such as Charlie Barrett to scout and Bill DeWitt Sr. to carry out that vision.

As he did so, DeWitt Sr., at the strong urging of Rickey, finished his education.

“I have a picture of my father and his brother with Branch Rickey,” DeWitt Jr. told me. “It says, ‘To William, a great friend.’ The fact that he said ‘to William.’ I read someplace that he called everybody by their formal name. I mean—I wonder if, when he was eighteen, he called him William—he must’ve!

“But Charlie Barrett called him Orville, which was his middle name. So he was the young guy around the office, relied on to contribute, do a lot of stuff.”

Then DeWitt Sr. went to college. Rickey sent him.

“My college work I did all at night, and I worked for the Cardinals in the daytime,” DeWitt Sr. said.<sup>9</sup>

Then Rickey sent him to law school. DeWitt passed the bar. Eventually, he became treasurer for the Cardinals, working under Rickey.

Remarkably, the farm system Rickey, DeWitt, and Barrett put together is largely the one the Cardinals use even now. A man Rickey himself hired, George Kissell, spent many of the subsequent decades formulating its consistent approach to training

players.

But the people who engineered it, and the animating principles behind player procurement that went with them, had another job to do before the Cardinals' restoration we see today. They had to go build out the rest of baseball. Bill DeWitt Sr., to the Browns (who won the AL pennant in 1944), the Yankees, the Tigers, then Cincinnati Reds, with the foundation that became the Big Red Machine. Larry MacPhail, then Rickey, to the Brooklyn Dodgers, who won NL pennants in 1941, 1947, 1949, 1952, 1953, 1955 and 1956.

All the while, a young man from upstate New York put together the animating principles, not to mention the hard work and personal relationships, that came to define the Cardinals minor league experience for scores of Hall of Famers, All-Stars, and those who never even made the big leagues.

## 2

### THE LANGUAGE OF GEORGE KISSELL

*He's legendary in this organization. And I would say about thirty to fifty percent of other organizations know George Kissell. And the reason they know him is because of how many managers and coaches he's sent to the big leagues.*

—MIKE SHANNON

*You meet George Kissell, and right away, in a day or two, you knew who he was.*

—RED SCHOENDIENST

If you didn't know better, you'd think George Kissell was an entirely fictional creation, a stand-in for the values most treasured by the game of baseball. His record is too impossibly broad, his reach ridiculous to behold and incalculable in scope. He lived eighty-eight years and not only stayed on with the Cardinals for sixty-eight years—from his signing in 1940 to his death in 2008—but combined the length of his tenure with the kind of tangible results, and correlating respect, that few achieve in this game.

For Kissell, it was a constant. You hear it in Hall of Fame speeches from some of the greats who played this game, and you hear it in letters written to Kissell by long-forgotten minor leaguers who crossed Kissell's path, briefly, decades ago.

The reason this matters to the Cardinals—the Cardinals of Lou Brock and Bob Gibson, of Willie McGee and Terry Pendleton, of Jim Edmonds and Scott Rolen, right through to the Cardinals of Michael Wacha and Matt Carpenter—is that so many of those people are still teaching the game the way George Kissell taught it to them in the organization. A man steeped in Rickey's lessons—signed by Rickey himself—directly