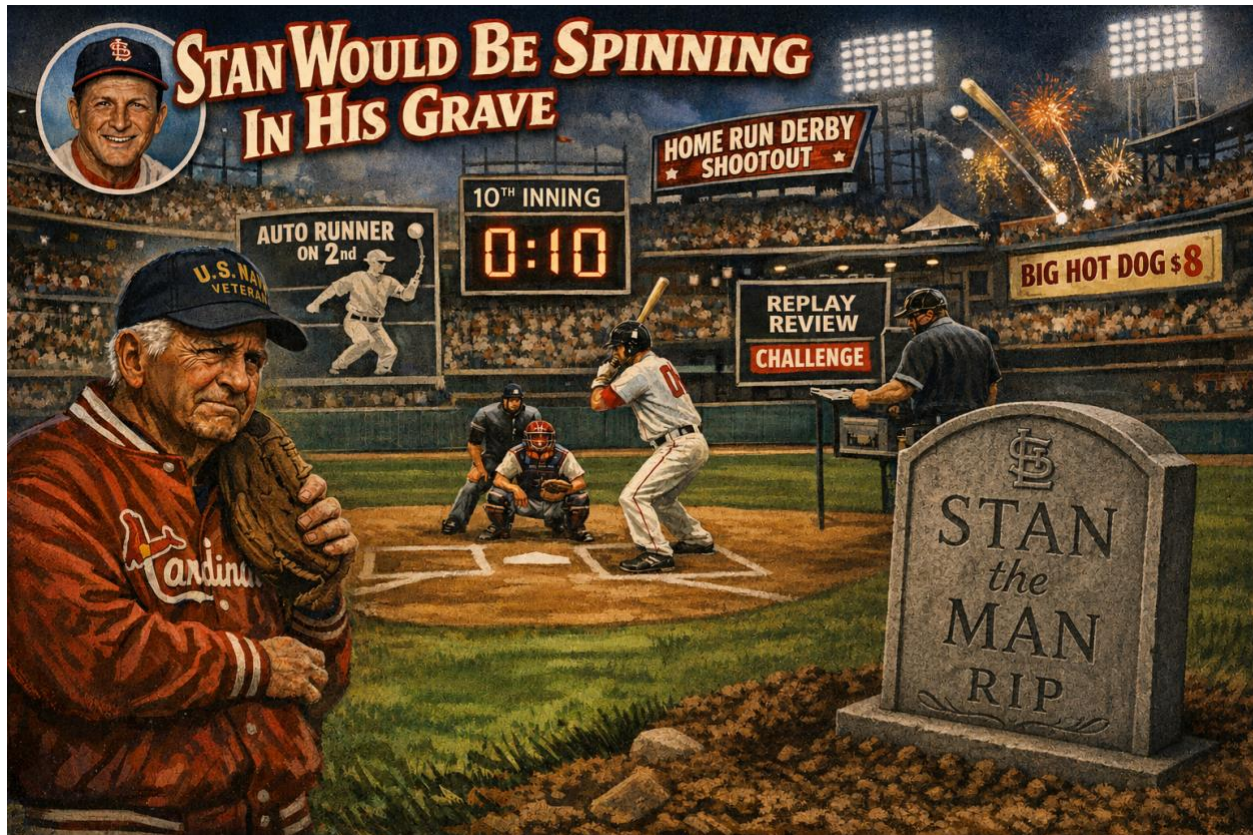




Stan Would Be Spinning in His Grave

By Curt Smothers, a Lifelong Cardinals Fan Who Still Misses the Double Switch

Note: Curt Smothers is a retired Navy veteran and lifelong Cardinals fan who still believes a man should earn his way to third base without a timer watching his every move.

I've been around baseball long enough to remember when pitchers batted, umpires were final, and the game didn't need a clock to tell you it was time to go home.

These days, I'm not so sure I recognize what's happening on the field. Baseball, America's pastime, has been modernized to the point where I sometimes wonder if Stan Musial, Ken Boyer, and Red Schoendienst wouldn't be rolling over in their graves if they saw what passes for the grand old game today.

Ladies' Day Was Free Admission

My love for baseball goes back to the 1950s, when my younger brother and I used to lurk outside Sportsman's Park at Grand and Dodier in North St. Louis, hopeful grins on our faces. We'd spot a kindly older woman and ask, "Would you be our mother today?" Nine times out of ten, she'd laugh and say yes.

We got into the game for free—and used the money we saved to buy snacks. Not an eight-dollar hot dog, mind you, but a 25-cent frank and a glass bottle of Coca-Cola for about the same. It wasn't just affordable—it was magical.

Free Agency Changed Team Loyalty

While free agency gave players long-overdue bargaining power, it also transformed the relationship between fans and their teams. Dynasties became harder to sustain, hometown heroes became temporary employees, and lifelong loyalty increasingly gave way to free-agent contracts and salary-cap calculations. I understand why it happened—but I still miss the days when you could reasonably expect a franchise icon to spend his career in one uniform.

Designated Hitters Squelched Strategy

Then came the universal designated hitter, imposed on the National League in 2022. It stripped away one of baseball's most fascinating strategic dimensions. The double switch? Gone. The anxious moment when the pitcher's spot came up with the bases loaded? Forgotten.

Now every lineup looks much the same—a parade of designated hitters, with no sacrifice bunt, squeeze play, or surprise blooper from a weary pitcher trying to help his own cause.

The Pitch Clock Put Baseball on a Timer

Then came the pitch clock in 2023.

Yes, it shortened games. I understand why many fans love it. But baseball used to unfold like a good novel—slow enough to savor, yet compelling enough to keep you turning the pages. The pauses weren't dead time; they were part of the drama as pitcher and batter tried to outthink one another.

Now the game sometimes feels like TikTok with cleats. Blink, and it's already the seventh-inning stretch.

Want to hold a runner on first? You've got only two disengagements before you're gambling with a balk. The rules now favor the running game more than at any time in decades.

And now baseball has even introduced strike-zone challenges. While the human umpire still makes the initial call, technology increasingly serves as the final arbiter. I can't help wondering how long it will be before machines call every pitch as embarrassed, disgruntled umpires quit the game for good.

The Extra-Innings "Ghost Runner"

And don't get me started on extra innings.

In today's regular season, extra innings don't even begin organically anymore. Each half-inning starts with a runner already standing on second base, as if he materialized there by divine intervention. No hit. No walk. No stolen base. Just plopped into scoring position to "speed things up."

They call it the automatic runner. Most fans still call it the "ghost runner." I call it a gimmick.

Extra innings used to be a test of endurance, strategy, and nerve—who could scratch out that hard-earned run the right way. Now it feels like a carnival shortcut, a tiebreaker you'd expect in a backyard Wiffle ball game.

Stan Musial wouldn't recognize it—and I suspect he wouldn't stand for it.

Will Baseball Resort to Hockey's Shootout?

I'll admit it: the Home Run Derby swing-off used to break ties in the All-Star Game is entertaining. For an exhibition game, it works.

But imagine if that gimmick ever crept into meaningful baseball. Would you really want a division title, a pennant, or even the World Series decided by who could hit the most home runs in sixty seconds?

Baseball has wisely kept that spectacle confined to the All-Star Game—for now. I hope it stays there.

Don't Engineer the Soul Out of the Game

Look, I understand that every generation reshapes the sports it loves. Many of today's changes have attracted younger fans and addressed legitimate concerns about game length.

But there was something sacred about the imperfections of the old game.

The umpire's blown call? It hurt, but it was human.

The slow duel between pitcher and batter? That was theater.

The pitcher who had to pick up a bat and earn his keep? That was grit.

Baseball was never supposed to be perfect. It was supposed to be beautifully imperfect—a game of instinct, judgment, patience, and ritual.

Today it sometimes feels more like a laboratory experiment, optimized by algorithms, television schedules, and marketing departments. Somewhere, perhaps over a plate of Polish sausage at *Stan & Biggie's in the Sky*, Stan the Man is shaking his head.

Let's be careful not to engineer the soul out of the game.