

Sammy Sosa: A Biography Short Guide

Sammy Sosa: A Biography by Bill Gutman

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Overview

The focus of *Sammy Sosa: A Biography* is on the 1998 baseball season during which Sosa hit sixty-six home runs. Most aspects of his life prior to 1998 are only sketched and not presented in detail. Gutman points out the pitfalls of Sosa's career, but they and Sosa's early successes are all treated as preludes to Sosa's superb 1998 season. *Sammy Sosa* is written as a popular biography, not a definitive one, and young adult readers may be interested primarily in Sosa's actions during the season that made him a prominent public figure, as well as establishing him as one of baseball's greatest players.

About the Author

Bill Gutman is a veteran writer of sports books for children and young adults, as well as adults. His research for *Sammy Sosa: A Biography* included long interviews with Sosa himself, coaches he played with, and ballplayers such as Mark Grace. Gutman's long record of publications about sports and his reputation for treating his subjects fairly has resulted in his having access to athletes who might not otherwise talk to other sportswriters. On the other hand, his flood of sports biographies for young adults has resulted in a diffident attitude among book reviewers, with some titles such as *Sammy Sosa* being overlooked, in spite of their popularity. One of the significant issues that arises when studying Gutman's writings is whether his works suffer from his writing too many during a given year.

Born in New York, but raised in Stamford, Connecticut, Gutman originally intended to become a dentist. Yet, while attending Washington College in Maryland, he majored in English. Upon graduation, he became a sports reporter, working for the *Greenwich Time*. He tried working in advertising, but by then his sports books were proving successful, and since the 1970s he has followed sports figures, famous or unrecognized, and devoted himself to writing books about them.



Setting

Samuel Peralta Sosa was born November 12, 1968, in San Pedro de Macoris in the Dominican Republic. In 1975, Sammy's father Juan Montero Sosa died, and Sammy's mother Mireya Sosa took a job in the textile district, delivering food to the workers. Sosa and his siblings had to find work, ending his hopes for an education. Sosa's mother and her seven children lived in a one-room home until Sammy bought them a new home when he became a major-league baseball player.

In about 1983, at age fourteen, Sosa was persuaded by a brother to play baseball for the first time. He proved adept at the game while using an inside-out milk carton for a fielder's glove. In 1985, Sosa attended a baseball camp run in the Dominican Republic by the Toronto Blue Jays, but it was a scout for the Texas Rangers, Amado Dinzey, who saw him and asked a minor-league coach for the Rangers, Omar Minaya, to come look at a kid with a strong arm and home run power. Minaya invited Sosa to a tryout and was impressed by the raw talent in the young man; he offered Sosa a professional contract with a \$3,000 signing bonus, but Sosa asked for \$4,000. They settled on \$3,500, and Sosa bought himself his first bicycle, giving the rest of the money to his mother.

From 1986 through 1989, Sosa bounced around the Rangers' minor league system, showing much promise, but much inconsistency as well. A low batting average and numerous strikeouts hampered his advancement. He began his career in Florida, where Latinos helped him adjust to American customs and taught him to speak English. On June 19, 1989, Sosa moved to the big leagues, playing right field for the Texas Rangers, but he developed a reputation as uncooperative with his coaches, and he was returned to the minor leagues.

Later in 1989, Sosa and two other players were traded to the Chicago White Sox. In August, Sosa returned to the major leagues and performed well. The White Sox played Sosa for an entire season in 1990, but he struggled to hit consistently, striking out too often. In the field, he often threw to the wrong base. His coaches were frustrated with him because he seemed unwilling to learn what they had to teach him. He ornamented himself in jewelry, and seemed self-centered and uninterested in helping his team, so in July 1991, the White Sox sent Sosa to their AAA minor league club in Vancouver, and he seemed destined for a career as a backup player—as someone who plays mostly in the minor leagues and only occasionally joins a major league club to replace an injured player.

In 1992, the White Sox traded Sosa to the Chicago Cubs, where Sosa worked with hitting coach Billy Williams. Under the gentle teaching of Williams and other coaches, Sosa began to learn how to play baseball intelligently. His strong throwing arm became a big asset; his base running improved; and his big looping swing became compact and smooth. All this is quickly outlined by Gutman, whose focus is on the 1998 baseball season and how Sosa performed during that season. Sosa became a romantic public figure—a hero without conceit or envy. He greeted the enormous publicity that his home

runs engendered with a smile and happy banter with the hundreds of reporters who followed him around.



Social Sensitivity

Sammy Sosa is primarily an invitation to enjoy Sosa's 1998 season, yet the issue of poverty is unavoidable in any full account of Sosa's life. In this biography, he is representative of many boys in the Dominican Republic who struggle to help their families survive, and Sosa seems to see himself as representative of other boys in the Dominican Republic. He recalls admiring George Bell and other players from the Dominican Republic who were successes in the major leagues and who built big houses in their homeland. Upon becoming a major league player, he may have emphasized his wealth more than he should, exhibiting gold chains and expensive jewelry, although buying his family a big home seems a worthy deed.

Sosa eventually quit his ostentatious displays of wealth and put his money into ambulances for communities in his homeland. He says he sees himself as a hopeful example, that through hard work and good will, poverty can be overcome. His numerous contributions to the well being of impoverished youngsters may be his example of how the well-to-do should behave toward those who are poor.

Literary Qualities

According to Gutman, Sosa is a true sports hero, who "not only emerged as a genuine superstar of his sport, but also as a man to be universally admired for his humility, his sportsmanship, his competitiveness, his humor, and perhaps most importantly, his humanity." Even when Gutman discusses some negative aspects of Sosa's personality, they tend to be part of the fairy tale. Gutman implies that the impressions of Sosa as selfish and not a team player were misunderstandings, that he had been playing baseball for only a few years before the Rangers signed him and thus had not had time to learn the skills of baseball. Also, he at first had trouble learning to speak English, and he was an unsophisticated kid for whom the United States presented daunting complexity.

Reading between the lines, one may form the impression that Sosa, until he reached the Chicago Cubs, thought he could do everything easily and required no coaching—an adolescent attitude from someone who was an adolescent when he signed his first professional contract. Gutman handles these negative aspects of Sosa's career gracefully, working them into a narrative of a poor boy who through talent, hard work, and good fortune rises out of poverty and returns to help his people. Even Texas Rangers scout Omar Minaya appears in Sosa's life like a fairy godfather, giving Sosa a chance to escape his poverty. Throughout *Sammy Sosa*, Gutman accentuates the positive, presenting negatives either as misunderstandings or as examples of how much Sosa has matured and how far he has come from the days when he shined shoes.

With the emphasis on the positive in this biography, Sosa's apparently numerous conflicts with his coaches and teammates in the years before he joined the Chicago Cubs are mentioned but not detailed. That Sosa was deemed uncooperative is clear enough, but the particulars are absent. With whom was he in conflict? Was he sullen, did he bicker, did he ignore his coaches? What made him such a hard pill to swallow that two major league organizations gave up on him in spite of his great talent? Neither Gutman nor Sosa go into these details in *Sammy Sosa*, although Sosa insists that he was not difficult to coach. Gutman suggests that previous coaches yelled at Sosa every time he made a mistake, whereas Williams and other Cubs coaches would take Sosa aside and quietly explain to him what he should be doing.



Themes and Characters

The unifying theme of *Sammy Sosa: A Biography* comes from a remark Sosa made: "My life is kind of like a miracle." He adds, "Pressure is when you have to shine shoes and sell oranges just to make sure there's enough to eat at the next meal." Gutman builds on this comment, noting how Sosa's family struggled to make ends meet, with the earnings of the children sometimes making the difference between eating and not eating on any given day. "My dream was to get to the United States any way I could," Sosa says. Part of his miracle is that he was noticed by scouts and that one of them, Omar Minaya, was willing to take a chance that his raw talent could be shaped into the skills a professional ballplayer needs to have.

To emphasize what a wonderful bit of luck this was for a poor boy, Gutman notes that Sosa gave most of his signing bonus to his mother, but "His only indulgence was to buy a bicycle, the first one he had ever owned." Sosa would have to learn how to make a big leap from a life of poverty to one in which he would become wealthy and famous.

Part of Sosa's miracle involves his overcoming not only poverty but himself. Chicago White Sox general manager Ron Schueler, explaining why he traded Sosa to the Cubs, says, "If I had to identify one problem, it was that he had no discipline."

Sosa was considered selfish, obsessed with building his statistics at the cost of his team, and ignorant of the basics of baseball such as what base he should throw to when he fielded a ball.

The young man who joined the Cubs in 1992 was on the verge of losing his opportunity to be a major league player when Billy Williams, the Chicago Cubs hitting coach, began working with him. Although Gutman does not go into great detail about the relationship, he points out their differences.

Williams had been a suave, sophisticated ballplayer who overcame liabilities, such as slow foot speed, that Sosa did not share.

According to Gutman and Sosa, Williams took the time to explain matters to Sosa without reproaching him. Sosa says that he did not like being yelled at by other coaches and that he appreciated how the Cubs' coaches would not embarrass him in front of the rest of the team but would take him aside to explain that he had made a mistake.

Under the tutelage of Williams and other coaches, Sammy's attitude changed. He worked harder and became more of a team player. In 1998, Sosa explained the change in his play: "I'm trying to make contact; I'm more patient; I'm more relaxed. That's what I've been doing and you see the results...."

"I want to be known as a good person more than I do a good baseball player," he said.

Gutman insists that such sentiments reflect the true Sosa and are not just for publicity.



One of the themes running through *Sammy Sosa: A Biography* is "Good things were happening to a genuinely nice guy."

For Gutman, Sosa's goodness had a powerful affect on those around him and on major league baseball. He likens Sosa to Babe Ruth, whose astonishing feats drew fans back to baseball after the Black Sox scandal, in which several Chicago White Sox ballplayers conspired with gamblers to throw the 1919 World Series to the Cincinnati Reds. Ruth had an ebullient, larger-than-life personality that enhanced the records that he set.

Gutman sees Sosa as doing something similar to what Ruth did. A wage strike by ballplayers in 1994, almost all millionaires, marred the image of the players, making them seem greedy and selfish. According to Gutman, Sosa changed the public image of ballplayers with his good humor and graciousness: "He [Sosa] was still smiling, still gracious, still willing to talk to everybody," even after months of intense scrutiny of his every move by public media. Billy Williams explains about Sosa, "He's a person who is at peace with himself. And when you're at peace with yourself, you can handle a lot of stuff." Sosa's admiration for Mark McGwire (Cardinal player who broke Sosa's home run record of 66 by hitting 70) set the tone for their race to set a new home run record, and his sportsmanship attracted disenchanting fans back to the game. Gutman declares, "They [Sosa and McGwire] really liked each other, and the compliments that passed between them made the home run chase even more of a feel-good situation."

Another theme that runs through *Sammy Sosa* is Sosa's love for one's country. Sosa loves the Dominican Republic. He is proud of the baseball stars from there who had made names for themselves in the United States. Sosa realized that he too could inspire young athletes who would, in turn, help the people of the Dominican Republic as he did when he put his money into ambulances for communities in his homeland.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why did Sosa seem spoiled and unmanageable during his first years in professional baseball?
2. How was Sosa transformed from self-indulgence into the generous, thoughtful man who chased Roger Maris's home run record?
3. Why would Gutman favor Sosa's exploits on the baseball field over Sosa's private life? What do you think Sosa is like in his private life?
4. What purpose is served by devoting most of *Sammy Sosa: A Biography* to the 1998 baseball season?
5. Is Sosa an admirable man? What does Gutman say about Sosa's being or not being admirable? Should Gutman's point of view on this matter be trusted?
6. Why do you think Gutman wrote *Sammy Sosa: A Biography*?
7. Why would Gutman shift back and forth between past tense and present tense at the end of the biography?
8. What made Sosa's cheerfulness during the 1998 baseball season appealing to fellow players, sportswriters, and fans?

What lesson do you think can be drawn from Sosa's behavior?

9. What is unique about Sosa's quest for sixty home runs in a season?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. A host of popular biographies of Sammy Sosa were published after his titanic 1998 baseball season. Compare them to Gutman's *Sammy Sosa: A Biography*. Do they portray Sosa differently? If so, how do they differ in his portrayal?
2. During the 1998 baseball season, the Cardinal's Mark McGwire hit 70 home runs, surpassing Sosa's mark of 66, but Sosa won the Most Valuable Player award for the season. Why did he receive it instead of McGwire? How do these two players compare in personality and skill?
3. In 1927, an aging Babe Ruth, thinking his best years as an athlete were passing away, tried to set a special record, one that would leave a permanent mark on the history of baseball. He managed to hit 60 home runs and had an incredibly productive period during August and September. Research his 1927 season and compare it to Sammy Sosa's 1998 season.
4. Babe Ruth's childhood and early life have much in common with those of Sammy Sosa: *A Biography* Sosa. What similarities do the early lives of the men have? How did they respond to their early lives?
5. Gutman notes that some people believe Sosa was a selfish player when he entered the major leagues. Why did they think this? What do you think?
6. What is the "Sammy Claus World Tour"? What does it do?
7. What has Sosa accomplished in his baseball career that would merit induction into the Hall of Fame, or does he fall short of meriting induction?
8. How has Sammy Sosa affected the Dominican Republic? Give examples.

For Further Reference

Olendorf, Donna. "Gutman, Bill." In *Something about the Author*. Volume 67. Detroit: Gale Research, 1992.



Related Titles

There was a flood of Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire books after the 1998 season, with some appearing only two or three weeks after the end of the season, and others appearing throughout 1999. Most of these books are minor, often little more than brief collections of photographs, but some have enough substance to be of longterm interest. Laura Driscoll's *Sammy Sosa: He's the Man* (1999) emphasizes Sosa's onfield achievements and, like Gutman's book, offers some color photographs. Matt Christopher's *At the Plate with ... Sammy Sosa* (1999) is part of a series of *At the Plate with ...* books about baseball players. As with other books in this series, it is somewhat slight and best suited to younger readers.

This is also true of P. J. Duncan's *Sosa!: Baseball's Home Run Hero* (1999; please see separate entry), which is also available in Spanish (*El Heroe del Jonron*). Duncan places Sosa's 1998 season in the context of Roger Maris's record and the history of baseball over the last few decades.

Merrell Noden's *Home Run Heroes: Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, and a Season for the Ages* (1998) appeared in November 1998, almost immediately after the 1998 baseball season ended. It is an account of the 1998 home run race with statistics and photographs. William F. McNeil's *Ruth, Maris, McGwire and Sosa: Baseball's Single Season Home Run Champions* (1999) is a thoughtful comparison of the achievements of the four players in baseball's history to hit sixty home runs in a single season, and he evaluates Sosa against a strong historical background. George Castle's *Sammy Sosa: Slammin' Sammy* (1999) emphasizes Sosa's positive characteristics and presents him as a role model.



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Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

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