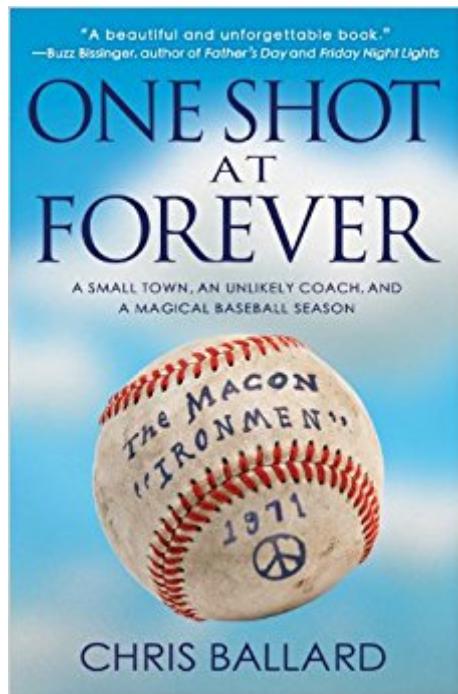


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One Shot At Forever: A Small Town, An Unlikely Coach, And A Magical Baseball Season



Synopsis

In 1971, a small-town high school baseball team from rural Illinois playing with hand-me-down uniforms and peace signs on their hats defied convention and the odds. Led by an English teacher with no coaching experience, the Macon Ironmen emerged from a field of 370 teams to become the smallest school in modern Illinois history to make the state final, a distinction that still stands. There, sporting long hair, and warming up to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the Ironmen would play a dramatic game against a Chicago powerhouse that would change their lives forever. In a gripping, cinematic narrative, *Sports Illustrated* writer Chris Ballard tells the story of the team and its coach, Lynn Sweet, a hippie, dreamer and intellectual who arrived in Macon in 1966, bringing progressive ideas to a town stuck in the Eisenhower era. Beloved by students but not administration, Sweet reluctantly took over a rag-tag team, intent on teaching the boys as much about life as baseball. Inspired by Sweet's unconventional methods and led by fiery star Steve Shartz and spindly curveball artist John Heneberry, the undersized, undermanned Macon Ironmen embarked on an improbable postseason run that infuriated rival coaches and buoyed an entire town. Beginning with Sweet's arrival, Ballard takes readers on a journey back to the Ironmen's historic season and then on to the present day, returning to the 1971 Ironmen to explore the effect the game had on their lives' trajectories--and the men they've become because of it. Engaging and poignant, *One Shot at Forever* is a testament to the power of high school sports to shape the lives of those who play them, and it reminds us that there are few bonds more sacred than that among a coach, a team, and a town.

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Customer Reviews

Everybody loves an underdog story. Chris Ballard's One Shot at Forever provides all of the nail-biting excitement characteristic of the David and Goliath tales of the sports world. I am sure that many will make comparisons to Hoosiers -- with its local color (Hickory - Macon, IL), star athlete (Jimmy Chitwood - Steve Shartz), and controversial coach (Norman Dale - Lynn Sweet) -- and justifiably so. But One Shot at Forever is so much more. This book transcends the sports genre. It is a character-driven page turner that will appeal to sports fans and non-sports fans alike. It offers a layered and nuanced portrait of Coach Lynn Sweet, the unforgettable protagonist whose unconventional approaches will captivate most readers just as the Robin Williams character did in Dead Poet's Society. And it pays careful attention to temporal characteristics and weaves them into the story in subtle fashion, much like Matthew Weiner does in Mad Men. Readers will feel transported to the early 1970s whether they lived through the era or not and will have a hard time not feeling nostalgic, as if they were part of Macon Ironmen themselves. Ballard is a gifted writer who draws on his superior reporting and keen attention to detail to paint an intricate picture of a group of boys--bound together by America's game--coming of age against a small town, Vietnam era backdrop. I couldn't put it down.

Best book I've read this year. As Ballard is a writer at SI I was hardly surprised that this is a fantastic baseball story. But I was delighted to discover that the book delivers so much more. The main character, a teacher and coach named Lynn Sweet, is as remarkable a character as I can recall. He's a sensitive, courageous, free thinker, who finds himself plunked down in a time and place where conformity is the rule. As a high school teacher, I found myself inspired by Sweet's story. And the book is also the portrait of a small town seeking an identity through the exploits of its baseball team. Ballard's exquisite reporting not only preserves that identity for the town of Macon, but he also allows the rest of us to savor the folkways of a (recently) bygone era.

I've read much of Ballard's work in Sports Illustrated over the past decade, and I got an early look at his latest book, One Shot at Forever. One Shot is a book-length example of his emergence as one of the top long-form narrative writers going today. (For proof, Google his stories about Jill Costello or Mike Powell, or his National Magazine Award finalist piece about Dewayne Dedmon.) At the highest level, the story runs much like Hoosiers, with a small-town Illinois baseball team going on an unlikely run against larger schools. But the real power of the book comes from the interplay of a small town stuck in the 1950s, an outsider coach straight out of the hippie-ville 1960s, a bunch of kids coming of age in the early 1970s, and the memories still seared in their minds as adults today. Those

memories are the real payoff of what's already an engaging story. The narrative is engaging on its own, but the way the games of their youth still stick in the psyche of many of the players, who now are in their 50s and 60s, goes right to what we cherish about high school sports -- whether we played them, coached them, or just cheered on our hometown heroes.

Chris Ballard has created a book that is so much more than a sports story. It's a story about the town where I coached and taught for 33 years and the people who played, worked, and lived there. I began my teaching career in 1972, the year after the Ironmen had gone to state and I've met many of the players and heard all of the stories about their dramatic run to the finals. Ballard has recreated a wonderful time for this community that changed the lives of these young men and showcases the great leadership talents of their coach L.C. Sweet. For over 30 years he touched the lives of countless students in the classroom as well as the athletic field in a positive way. What an achievement, and what a book!

First of all, One shot at Forever is a wonderful story. It is a story of courage, leadership, loyalty and a magical chemistry of a team and coach and their unbelievable climb to success and fame. It is a baseball story and in some ways it reminded me of Money Ball. I loved Money Ball and how Michael Lewis was true to Billy Beane's character and the story of how he single handedly changed professional Baseball. Chris Ballard, in One Shot at Forever, is as true to this wonderful story and characters as Lewis; And his characters are all so lovable. I also think that One Shot, for so many reasons, is an important read for all of us. It is a great, great American story in a tough time in American history. Thank you Chris for doing such a thorough job in the research and at the same time turning this into an exciting and inspirational story to read. If parents and coaches could only read One Shot at Forever and follow Lynn Sweet's main values: Have fun, don't take it too seriously and facilitate the chemistry and whatever else it takes to give your kids an unconditional confidence that is so strong that it takes them far beyond what any person in their right mind could have predicted. Sweet claims throughout the book and his life that he did not know how to coach and that he did not do anything but the kids did it all. It reminded me of another wise man by the name of Socrates who claimed he did not know anything.... I read One Shot in one night. I cried more than once. Bravo, bravo, bravo!

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