

Some tips for those late shoppers

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So I wake up this morning and the assault begins before coffee, a clear violation of the Geneva Agreement if I'm not mistaken. First thing she wants to know -- did I get her anything for Christmas yet.

That's when it hits me. Christmas! Damn. I thought something was up. The traffic

was so bad down by the mall the other day I almost missed the early daily double. Say, is that grounds for a lawsuit?

Just kidding, honey.

The moral of this story is simple: Unless you feel like suffering the unholy consequences, matrimonial or otherwise, you better get your sorry butt down to Last-Second Shopping Hell immediately.

Don't panic, though. I am here to help. We can get through this.

Go to Victoria's Secret, pick out something that would look great on Salma Hayek, and tell the girl to wrap it up. There, you're done.

Unless you also have a serious sports fan on your list -- one who walks upright and doesn't drool -- in which case I might actually be of some assistance.

There are two books out now that could save you some time in Hell. One is the story of a forgotten basketball genius, Ernest Blood. The other, written by a Monmouth University professor, is a statistical search for baseball's best shortstops, written in plain English so you don't have to have a

Ph.D. in mathematics to understand the conclusions.

"Prof Blood and the Wonder Teams" is the story of an overlooked basketball pioneer whose Passaic High School teams once won 159 games in a row, a ridiculous number in any era. This thorough account of the legendary coach was written by Chic Hess, a former high school and college coach himself.

Hess takes us back to a time when they jumped center whenever someone made a basket, a time when backboards were attached to the wall in a gymnasium that was barely big enough for immediate family and selected friends.

In the early 1920s, Prof's teams were routinely scoring 100 points, while the average team was scoring in the 20s and 30s -- a truly Ruthian feat at a time when The Babe was hitting more home runs than most teams in baseball.

Once, in 1922, the Wonder Five beat a team from Connecticut 145-5. It would be 35 years before another high school team would score that many points.

The night Thousand Point Bobby Thompson scored his 1,000th point was another big occasion for Passaic. Hess went back to the microfilm, and his research captured the moment and the era perfectly: "A hush fell over the armory as the ball made its slow journey to the hoop. As the ball filled the cylinder, the crowd erupted. Hats and coats were thrown in the air. As women danced in the aisles, boys did handsprings along courtside."

In those days many teams traveled to games by pickup truck, the players riding in the back blanketed by hay, trying to stay warm. One can only imagine now what it must have been like for visitors to Passaic. Greeted by the sight of Zep, the black bear who served as team mascot, they would then be thrown to the wolves -- the Wonder Five. It had to be a daunting experience.

Hess tells the story from the vantage point of one who knows the ins and outs of coaching, complete with all the red tape and controversy. He says he started getting intrigued by Prof's story in 1985. It would soon grow from a hobby into an obsession. Now it has become a crusade.

"I practically lived in the library," Hess says of his three years he spent researching the book, which may be purchased by calling 1-800-247-6553.

"This was a guy who was short-changed by history."

Speaking of which, Dr. Michael Hoban brought several overlooked names to our attention in his first book, "Baseball's Complete Players." By his estimation -- and yes, there is a mathematical method to his madness -- Charlie Gehringer was the best second baseman of all time, Stan Musial was a better all-around left fielder than Ted Williams, and Gary Carter was the second best catcher in the history of the game, contrary to the opinion of voters who made him wait an eternity before he was inducted into the Hall of Fame.

In his latest book, "Fielder's Choice: Baseball's Best Shortstops," Hoban has created "a whole new way of assessing people's careers," those people being the best defensive and best all-around shortstops of all time.

This seems particularly topical now, with Alex Rodriguez and Nomar Garciaparra in the news every day, with Miguel Tejada having just relocated.

As far as Hoban is concerned, A-Rod is the best shortstop in the game today and may well be remembered as the best of all time before he's done.

"There's a chance he could pass Honus Wagner not only as the greatest hitting shortstop of all

time, but as the greatest all-around shortstop as well," says Hoban. Yet he ranks A-Rod only sixth among today's top defensive shortstops.

This is still a whole lot better than Garciaparra or Derek Jeter fared. Jeter, whose defensive numbers -- percentage plus range -- have been declining steadily since 1997, is actually ranked dead-last among the 13 shortstops with five years experience in the big leagues.

"Derek makes a good point when he says the reason for this is the number of strikeouts by the Yankee staff in those years," says Hoban. "But in 1997, his best year, and in 2002, his worst year, the number of strikeouts by the staff was virtually identical."

Make no mistake, though: As a fan of the game, Hoban loves Jeter. "He's such a quality person, he's the backbone of that team," says the professor, who grew up in the shadow of the Polo Grounds, a Giants fan naturally.

"But of the three shortstops who are considered possible Hall of Famers . . . only A-Rod can be considered at this time to be a good fielding shortstop. Both Garciaparra and Jeter can be considered to be defensively challenged."

If that's the kind of thing that might get a family member or friend stirred up, you can get Hoban's book on-line, at Amazon.com, or you can pick up a copy at the Monmouth University bookstore.

But you'd better not wait too long, only two more shopping days.

After that you can go back to having at least one cup of coffee before she launches her initial assault of the day.

Just kidding, honey.

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