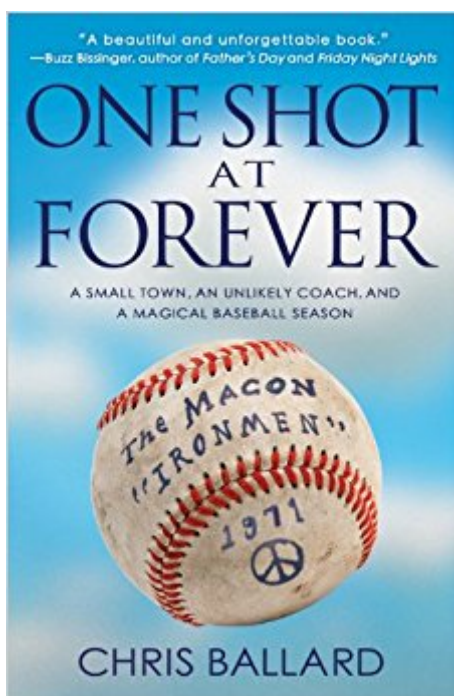


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# One Shot At Forever: A Small Town, An Unlikely Coach, And A Magical Baseball Season



## 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

"One Shot at Forever is tender, fun, bittersweet, with a great narrative that just motors. It also features the funkiest coach not just in the history of baseball but the history of sport--an unforgettable character in a beautiful and unforgettable book."--Buzz Bissinger, author of *Father's Day* and *Friday Night Lights*"One Shot at Forever is powerful, inspirational and--in an era where sports are too often marred by scandal--as pure and true as a warm spring breeze. This isn't merely a book about baseball. It's a book about heart."--Jeff Pearlman, New York Times bestselling author of *The Bad Guys Won*"...Reminds us why sports matter and why sports writing has such great power to inspire...One hell of a good story, and Ballard has written one hell of a good book." --Jonathan Eig, *Chicago Tribune*"[A] nonfiction gem about an underdog team that made good. This is the kind of baseball book that has long arms: YA readers, avid baseball fans, sports readers, and narrative nonfiction readers who like to be firmly set in a particular time and place should all find it joyful."--*Library Journal*"There's a reason Chris Ballard has emerged as one of America's top sports writers. One Shot at Forever is powerful, inspirational and--in an era where sports are too often marred by scandal--as pure and true as a warm spring breeze. This isn't merely a book about baseball. It's a book about heart."--Jeff Pearlman, New York Times bestselling author of *Boys Will Be Boys* and *The Bad Guys Won*

Chris Ballard is the author of four books and a senior writer at *Sports Illustrated*, where he specializes in narrative features. He's also written for the *New York Times Magazine*, among other publications, and his work has been anthologized in *The Best American Magazine Writing* and *The Best American Sports Writing* series. For the last two years, he's taught a class at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. Ballard joined *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* in September 2000. He has covered the NBA and MLB, written two dozen cover stories, penned the back page "Point After" column and reported on everything from pigeon racing to Jake Plummer's post-football life to the Vancouver riots. He was one of five 2012 finalists for a National Magazine Award in profile writing and was the 2011 winner of The Joanie Award for a story about Cal Berkeley coxswain Jill Costello, who died of lung cancer after her senior year. Five of his stories have been optioned for feature films, including "One Shot." Before joining *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*, Ballard was an intern at the *Courier-Post* in Camden, NJ and attended Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. A native Californian, Ballard graduated from Pomona College, where he played basketball and was a mediocre high jumper. He lives in Berkeley with his wife, his two daughters, and two dogs. He thinks every restaurant should serve at least one quality IPA.

Despite all of the baseball books I have read I never heard of this one until one of my former Little Leaguers of over fifty years ago alerted me to it. Lynn Sweet came to Macon, Illinois, to become an English teacher and ended up becoming the school's baseball coach as well. In conservative Macon Sweet's unorthodox teaching methods and coaching style and what some perceived as hippie-style became troublesome to the administration and school board. As so often happens a bond developed between the coach and his players and they had an unforgettable 1971 season at the high school state finals. The last part of the book is, to me at least, the most moving where former students come up to him and say what an influence his classroom teaching had on their life. In 2010 team members and their coach had a reunion in which they traded past experiences of the 1971 season and what their life has become now. Two members have since passed away and others have experienced good or bad things happen to them. Regarding the importance placed on winning in any sport coach Sweet stated to a reporter, "Games were invented to accommodate leisure time. Now they've become a semi-religion. God, they make you a hero and all you're doing is playing baseball." I thank my former player for alerting me to this book. Anyone who has taught and coached baseball would do well to read this book. It includes eight pages of photographs.

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.

Even though I am somewhat ambivalent to baseball, I could not put this book down. I really loved it. Here are my top 3 reasons: 1. I can relate to being the small town underdog. In 1970-71, the Illinois state baseball championship was one big playoff. There were no class divisions (1A, 2A, etc). So, big schools from the Chicago area played against the small schools from rural Illinois. The book chronicles the unlikely winning season of the Macon Ironmen and their magical run in the state championship playoffs. Macon is a tiny town with a tiny school. Although they had some success in the season immediately prior to the time covered in the book, they were coming off several losing seasons. No one considered the Ironmen a serious threat. I attended a small high school, and

although it was not as small as Macon, we were seen as the country kids from the small school. Like the kids from Macon, it gave us a wee bit of a chip on our shoulders, but also a deep bond. We felt a sense of commitment to each other. It was something I missed later when I went to college. I felt a serious sense of nostalgia reading *One Shot at Forever*.<sup>2</sup> The colorful (and real) characters. The Macon Ironmen and their coach were not your typical high school baseball team. Their coach was an unlikely hero. He had just started teaching English at Macon High School. Macon was a conservative town. Lynn Sweet, English teacher and soon to be baseball coach, was anything but conservative. He held liberal ideals, frequented the local bars, had long hair and a Fu Manchu mustache, and lived a nomadic existence. He eschewed the English curriculum for his own unorthodox teaching methods. In short, the towns people considered him a hippie. Not all of them approved. But he won over their kids. They loved him. Their English grades improved and they became more engaged in class. These methods carried over into baseball. For example, practices were optional. Some of the team members grew their hair out, wore peace signs on their hats, and they began listening to the sound track from *Jesus Christ Superstar* on a boom box during warm up at games. This is the kind of teacher I would have loved as a kid. The players and their parents are also interesting, complex people. There are the unlikely heroes, the star athletes, the small and scrappy players. But they are not just stereotypes. We learn about their lives, what drives them, their relationships, and how they lived and grew during those two remarkable seasons.<sup>3</sup> The excellent sports writing. Let's face it, with a nonfiction book such as this, the outcome is known. Even the cover of the book says "the magical season." So I went into the book knowing the Ironmen experienced a remarkable winning season. But there were still twists that I didn't see coming (yay!) and the storytelling of the games had me on the edge of my seat. I couldn't stop reading. In fact, I stayed on the elliptical machine an extra 15 minutes to finish a certain section. I definitely recommend this book, even if you are not a baseball fan. I even recommend it even if you don't like sports. It's about a lot more than sports or baseball. It's about a group of people who come together, form a bond, inspire each other, and triumph against overwhelming odds. How can you not love that?

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.

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