Seventeen-year-old Mickey Tussler is recruited to play for a minor league affiliate of the Boston Braves. Arthur Murphy swears Mickey has the greatest arm he has ever seen, that anybody has ever seen. And it might be true. But Mickey's autism is prohibitive. It keeps him sealed off from a world he scarcely understands. Lost both in the memory of his former life with an abusive father and the challenges of a new world filled with heckling teammates, opponents and fans, there's no way Mickey can succeed. But his inimitable talent -- one of the most gifted arms in the history of baseball -- gives him a chance. Can he survive a real life dream? Or are the harsh realities of life too much for him? This is the powerful underdog story of how a young man with an extraordinary gift comes of age in a harsh and competitive world.
The Legend of Mickey Tussler, written by Frank Nappi, is in part a baseball book. But, it also is a novel about the cruelty and kindness people are capable of demonstrating, and the challenges of dealing with autism, before the term was even known.

Milwaukee baseball fans will find it particularly entertaining since Mickey is a rookie with the Brewers of the American Association in the 1940s.

Seventeen-year-old Mickey is discovered throwing apples, which he feeds his pet pig, Oscar, on the family farm. Arthur Murphy, a scout and manager for the Brewers, sees the potential in Mickey's arm, even though the boy has never played competitive baseball.

Mickey has problems articulating his feelings, often withdraws from reality when faced with stress, and has been insulated from much of what then was modern life. That's not necessarily a winning formula for a young man going into a high profile, competitive field like pro baseball.

The boy has been nurtured through life by his mother, Molly, but both have been victims of an abusive father and husband, Clarence.

Despite this baggage, Murphy, who hasn't exactly has a lot of success with the Brewers, takes the boy under his wing and gives him a chance.

Mickey indeed becomes a phenom and a fan favorite. But, he continues to face many challenges, from jealous teammates, to unscrupulous, scheming opponents, and his difficulties in dealing with a hardnosed, competitive environment.

The boy experiences both the cruelty of those just mentioned, and the kindness of Murph, Molly and some of his teammates.

To give you any more information about the plot would reduce the drama and your enjoyment of a good read.

Suffice it to say, that the baseball sections of the book are well done. Nappi, who is from Long Island and has taught writing for 20 years, clearly knows the game and captures the action and environment of baseball in the 1940s.

The players names are all fictitious, with the exception of Warren Spahn, who shows up in one chapter. Spahn, already a star for the Boston Braves, the parent club of the Brewers, comes to Milwaukee to meet the rising star. The exchange between Spahn and Mickey is entertaining.
Nappi did his research and even spelled Borchert Field correctly, not something that is always done by authors from elsewhere.

About the only criticism Milwaukee readers might have is that Nappi portrays the town as much smaller than it was in the 1940s. For example, Murphy is supposed to live only a few miles from the ballpark, on what is known as Diamond Drive, but his neighborhood is described as one you might have found in a much smaller town of the era, or in a town like Westby, where this writer lives, in this era.

Milwaukee was actually a well-developed city in the 1940s. In fact, it ranked higher on the country's population list of cities than it currently does. The Borchert neighborhood was a developed urban area, and Milwaukee was only a few years from getting the Boston Braves as its Major League team.

But, you can see where Nappi's portrayal of the environment does fit better into the story line. The book is well written enough that you can ignore that one flaw and still enjoy it for the human journey taken by Mickey, and the vivid, well-crafted baseball passages.

The Legend of Mickey Tussler is published by St. Martins Press and is available through most bookstores and via www.amazon.com.

This review first ran on www.midwestdiamondreport.com.

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