

An Interview with Brooks Mendell

Author of *Beaverball: A (Winning) Season with the MIT Baseball Team*¹

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology has a baseball team?

It's true. In fact, MIT's had baseball teams since the 1880s! Unfortunately, since becoming a varsity program in 1948, the program has lost 60% of its games. MIT's yearbook, *Technique*, even wrote, back in 1965, that "opposing pitchers seemed to find new talent as they faced MIT batters." I joined the team in 1989 and played for four years.

Why did you write this book? What's it about?

The original idea for this book was accidental. During the 1993 MIT baseball season, when I was a senior, I kept a detailed journal because I had two herniated discs in my lower back and wanted to keep track of my health. After games and practices, I would write for ten or twenty minutes in a spiral notebook while icing down my back. As the season progressed, my writing began to focus on game performances, individual players, and team stories. That year, our team won its first ever championship and the journal became a great source of material.

Years later, I followed up with players and coaches, and visited MIT to do research about MIT baseball at the Athletic Department and in the MIT Museum. Then, when I started speaking professionally and telling stories about the MIT team and what we learned from Coach O'Brien, others began telling me, "You need to finish that book!"

What's the origin of the word "Beaverball"?

"Beaverball" was an expression we used on the team for come-from-behind wins or unexpected, unbelievable plays. For example, the 1992 team ended its season with a 14-15 record by winning eight of its last 10 games. That streak was full of "Beaverball" moments, as was our 1993 season covered in the book.

Also, the beaver is MIT's traditional mascot because it's "nature's engineer" and, according to the story about how the beaver was selected, "does his best work in the dark."

You started writing this book in 1993. What took you so long?

I don't know. Let's just hope that good things are worth waiting for.

What position did you play?

¹ Published 2009 by Aventine Press; ISBN: 1-59330-586-9. To learn more, visit www.brooksmendell.com

Normally, I pitched and played first base. But in 1993, because of my back, I played left field. I couldn't bend over to field grounders or pitch, but I could run around and still swing the bat, so Coach put me in the outfield.

During the day, I often wore a back brace in class and stood up in the back of the room with a clipboard to take notes so I wouldn't have to sit down. My professors knew me as "the guy who stands in the back with a clipboard."

How long have you been a writer?

I wrote my first true story in fifth grade. We had a two or three page assignment and I turned in a 15-pager about Saturn and star travel. At MIT, I contributed to the student newspaper, entered writing contests, and wrote one-act plays – three of which were produced. In business school at UC Berkeley, I contributed articles and was a features editor for the school paper.

Since 2003 or 2004, I've published over fifty articles on topics related to forestry, finance, and communication skills. My first book, *Loving Trees is Not Enough*, was published in 2006. *Beaverball* is my second book. I love to write and try to get words down on paper every day.

Head Coach Fran O'Brien is a key figure in the book. Tell us about him.

This book and that season would not have happened without Coach. He was hugely influential and supportive of me at MIT. Over the years, when I'd catch up with guys from the team, we'd often tell stories about Coach and how lessons we learned from him guide us to this day.

Can you give an example?

Sure. Coach accepted physical mistakes, but couldn't tolerate mental mistakes. You play enough baseball, and someone is going to hit a groundball between your legs or you're going to throw the ball over the bushes. That's the way it goes, and you have to look forward and do your best to help the team on the next play. But miss a sign? Forget the count? Jog down the first baseline on a pop fly? No way. There's no excuse for that. Coach emphasized mental preparation, knowing your role, and remaining positive. This is how you put yourself in position to win and be successful. He was a great teacher and we had a lot of fun.

What do you do now?

Today, I run a forestry research and education business, Forisk Consulting, and I speak professionally about leadership and communication skills. So much of leadership and preparing teams to be successful revolves around having a positive approach and effectively communicating expectations. It's key to what we do today, just as it was for our team in 1993.