

# BABE RUTH



## PLAYING THE GAME

**MY EARLY YEARS IN BASEBALL**

EDITED BY WILLIAM R. COBB | NEW INTRODUCTION BY PAUL DICKSON

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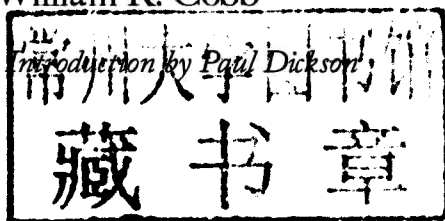
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MY EARLY YEARS IN BASEBALL

## BABE RUTH

EDITED BY  
William R. Cobb

*With an Introduction by Paul Dickson*



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### *Bibliographical Note*

*Playing the Game: My Early Years in Baseball*, first published by Dover Publications, Inc., in 2011, is a republication of a series of articles that appeared in the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1920; the original spelling and punctuation errors have been retained for the sake of authenticity. The work includes a Foreword by William R. Cobb and an Introduction by Paul Dickson, specially prepared for the Dover edition.

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## Introduction

This early Babe Ruth autobiography originally appeared as a newspaper serialization during the 1920 baseball season, when the home-run king was a mere twenty-five years of age. It takes the reader through the first season of Ruth's fifteen-year career with the New York Yankees and is an important key to understanding the great enigmatic slugger and major twentieth-century cultural icon.

In *Playing the Game: My Early Years in Baseball*, Babe Ruth had just been traded from the Red Sox, where he was—first and foremost—a pitcher; whereas, as a Yankee pitcher in pinstripes, he had made only five widely scattered appearances on the mound in more than 2,000 games, compiling a perfect 5–0 record. However, in the year before he came to New York, he blossomed as a slugger, which is why the Yankees wanted him. In 1919 he played in 130 games and had 432 times at bat, 139 hits, and 75 extra-base hits, and scored 103 runs—more than any other player in the league. Ruth also struck out more times than any other batter in the league—58 times—and made 230 outs, two errors, and 20 assists as an outfielder, for a fielding average of .992.

Ruth's first season as a Yankee proved to be a singular debut: he hit 54 home runs and batted .376; his .847 slugging average for the season was a Major League record until 2001. It was a time when he weighed a relatively svelte 210 pounds, and his Ruthian appetite seemed to be under some modicum of control.

The folks who syndicated this series said it was written by Ruth claiming he was “just as great a performer on the

typewriter as he is with the willow that is carving him an income that rivals a king." Nonsense. It was almost certainly written or heavily edited by a ghost writer. Nonetheless, it is clear that the thoughts, recollections and opinions are totally those of the Sultan of Swat, a fact that it is apparent from the first line of the book: "There's no use of my beating about the bush. I spent twelve years in a reform school." Unlike those who later spoke of him as spending his early years in a trade school, Babe had no use for euphemism. He says he was sent to a reform school at the age of seven when he was "a pretty hard case" who refused to go to public school preferring instead to play the truant and most days devoted his time to an "independent study of baseball." He gives a full account of those years which include his first home run at seven and his regular "lickings" as punishment for smoking and chewing tobacco. Despite the tough exterior he shows himself to be a vulnerable young man who is often homesick and lonely. Out of the blue in 1914, he is signed at the age of 19 by the old minor league Baltimore Orioles who turned around and five months later sold him to the Red Sox. He comes into his own as pitcher in the 1916 World Series when he pitched 16 scoreless innings.

This book satisfies on many levels beginning with the cadence of the book which is written in the disarming baseball jargon of the day. Describing his August 25, 1920 homer, for instance he says: "I put the old ball on ice for my forty-fourth this afternoon. I creaked one of Kerr's shoots into my favorite spot, the right field stands and drove a man in ahead of me."

On another level, there is much of the mechanics of being Babe Ruth here ranging from the description of his preferred techniques at the plate and in the field to moments of truth, such as when he abandons the "scientific" game at bat and starts swinging for the fences. There are also occasional confessionals such as his discussion of the moment in 1917 when he punched umpire "Brick" Owens after refusing to leave the field when Owens ordered him to do so. He regrets the moment and admits that he feared this loss of self-control would lead to his banishment from the game. Instead he is fined \$100—a slap on the wrist.

An aspect of the book which is pure Ruth are his strong personal opinions. For example, he mounts a detailed attack on the "one thing in baseball that always gets my goat and that is the intentional pass." In his view, walking a batter on purpose is an ethical issue. "It isn't fair to the batter. It isn't fair to his club. Its raw deal for the fans and it isn't baseball. By 'baseball,' I mean good square American sportsmanship because baseball represents America in sport. If we get down to unfair advantages in our national game we are putting out a mighty bad advertisement."

This long-lost treasure is an absolute joy to read if for no other reason than the self-deprecating view he has of himself and his seeming inability to sugarcoat his life to this point in his career. So, sit back and listen to the young Babe tell his story before it got shrouded in myth.

Paul Dickson

## Foreword

**B**y the end of 1919, 23-year-old Babe Ruth's achievements in Boston had elevated him to a national celebrity status beyond that of any player in baseball history. Fans followed his exploits in the newspapers on a daily basis, anxiously reading every article about Ruth's performance in his latest game, and anticipating the next homer that Ruth would hit. The Babe exceeded the twentieth-century home-run record of 25 by the beginning of September 1919, and only a week later he broke the 1899 record of 26. The interest and excitement were only heightened by the late-season discovery of an even older 1884 record of 27 home runs, which Ruth immediately promised to break. He tied that mark within two weeks, and by the season's end, he had clouted an all-time record total of 29 round-trippers.

With the January 3, 1920, announcement that the New York Yankees had paid the astounding sum of \$125,000 to Boston for Babe Ruth, the public excitement about Ruth reached new heights. Ruth was coy at first with Yankees manager Miller Huggins, who was sent to California with a contract to sign Ruth. But Ruth quickly accepted the Yankee offer, and he signed his contract the day following their first meeting. In late February, he arrived in New York just in time to join the team on a train to spring training in Jacksonville, Florida.

For the 1920 season, the home-run show had begun in earnest. By June 20, with 61 games left in the season, Babe Ruth broke his own record by hitting his 30th home run. By the end of July, he had hit 37. The season ended with Ruth having hit an astonishing 54 home runs—almost twice his record of the

previous year. Ruth and the Yankees had broken attendance records in six American League stadiums. He had hit home runs in all eight parks. The attendance record in New York was set to a higher mark in practically every game throughout the remainder of the season. A new era in baseball had begun.

In this frenzy and excitement, the press hounded Ruth for "exclusive" stories with which to tantalize their readers. The United News Service convinced Ruth to write—or more accurately—to participate in writing a series of articles to give fans their first real look at his early life. The agreement also included articles to be written describing each home run Ruth hit for the remainder of the season. The price was \$1,000, plus \$5 for every home run, provided Ruth would wire the Service a description of the clout. As the season's end approached, the writing assignment included an article giving the Babe's analysis of each of the Yankee games as they fought for the American League pennant, and of the 1920 World Series games between Brooklyn and Cleveland. This series of articles was printed in newspapers across the country, and was widely popular among baseball fans. The series began in August, and ultimately included twelve autobiographical articles covering Ruth's childhood, his time in Boston and his first year as a Yankee. There were fifteen articles describing the home runs Babe hit during the remainder of the season and analyzing the games leading up to and including the 1920 World Series.

These articles have not been widely available in recent years, although they were well known to modern Ruth biographers. Many other autobiographical articles of the time by famous players are suspected to have been ghost written. With the 1920 Ruth series, there is no question. It is well documented that the articles were written by a young United News Service writer named Westbrook Pegler. Pegler was at the beginning of a long and ultimately controversial writing career that started with sports and ended with politics.

There is a question about how much input Babe Ruth actually had into this series, and in that sense, whether the series is truly autobiographical or not. One of Ruth's modern biographers, Leigh Montville, asserts that Pegler never met with Ruth



to provide his input to the articles. According to Montville's biography, Pegler made several attempts meet with Ruth, and failing in his efforts, the reporter went home in frustration and pounded out the entire series of articles in one weekend. Another biographer, Kal Wagenheim, describes some details of Pegler's efforts to corner Ruth for a meeting, including the one successful Sunday afternoon meeting, which provided the bulk of Ruth's input to the series.

In either case, these 1920 articles do represent the first contemporary account of the early Ruth years. They have heretofore been available only to researchers and history buffs, and not to the modern Babe Ruth fan. While they do shed some light on Ruth's life history, they also present some conflicts with well-known Ruthian stories. How Ruth came to be called "Babe" is one, and which of the Xaverian Brothers at St. Mary's School was most influential to Ruth is another. That the articles do little to clarify these and other inconsistencies is unfortunate. But, they do provide an enjoyable read and some new insights into the story of how Babe Ruth began "Playing the Game."

William R. Cobb, Editor

## Editor's Notes

The text of this edition was retyped from prints of aged microfilm copies of the original articles that appeared in the Atlanta Constitution. While there were instances where poor legibility led to interpretations being required, these were very few, and the resultant accuracy of the text is felt to be quite high. Modernization of the original text was not attempted. Only obviously needed corrections were made. The original capitalization, punctuation, abbreviations and archaic grammar were retained throughout. The use of hyphenated and compound words, sometimes inconsistent within the original text, was also retained. Footnotes have been added where needed to explain or clarify phrases, terms or references no longer in current use.

The 1920 Introduction is a slightly edited combination of two lead-in articles that preceded the Ruth series. Chapter titles for the autobiographical series articles were added to reflect the chapter content. For the articles in Part 2 covering Ruth's home runs, and the game analyses, the original news article titles have been retained.

## Acknowledgment

**T**he Editor wishes to thank Roy Brownell for reviewing this manuscript, and for providing many useful comments, suggestions and corrections.

## The 1920 Introduction

“**B**abe” Ruth is going to be a reporter for the baseball fans of America, and the main thing he’s going to report is the story of the home run king’s life. When he gets through, the readers of the newspaper are going to know everything about the greatest clouter in the history of the game, from the cradle to the latest home run. Whenever “Babe” hits out a homer he writes a chapter in this great feature story, and at this time the book is about complete.

The United News is providing this series and will run it in twelve weekly installments—on each Monday. This syndicate also signed Ruth several months ago for a feature story every time he hammered out a home run.

Babe is just as great a performer on his typewriter as he is with the willow that is carving him an income that rivals a king. He has a unique style, simple, but descriptive beyond words.

Aside from his uncanny ability at slapping home runs to the streets that border the various American league diamonds, “Babe” is recognized as one of the brainiest players in the baseball world. He is one dopest that goes astray on few of his predictions. The readers will continue to keep track of the race in the American league through the idol of the fans of the younger circuit, as Ruth will keep up his weekly articles on the hunt for the bunting.

With the story of Ruth’s life in weekly installments, his feature story on every home run he knocks, telling just how the ball was “kissed,” and his dope on the American league race, the readers of the sports pages will have every opportunity to know “Babe” Ruth from every one of his interesting angles.

The four-base king is a writer of mean ability, using a simple but very descriptive style of putting his ideas in print. Ruth has already stated he expects to bag fifty home runs before the close of the 1920 season, and as he already has forty-one, we are of the belief that Ruth will get the number he's driving at.

Ruth is the greatest drawing card the national pastime ever saw, the only human being who can force a Wall Street broker to stop looking at the ticker long enough to watch the Babe slap home runs over the stands at the Polo grounds. The largest price ever paid for a base ball player was given the Boston Red Sox for Ruth's services, and he's already paid for his purchase price by bringing tens of thousand of fans every day through the turnstiles of the American league.

His own stories about his life are certain to prove interesting, and these may well be the best sporting feature of the year. Ruth's story will come in twelve installments, and be published weekly for the three months.

PLAYING  
**THE GAME**

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# Chapter 1

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## *A Pretty Hard Case*

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There's no use of my beating about the bush. I spent twelve years in a reform school. A friend of mine came to me the other day out in Chicago and said "Babe, a lot of people seem to have an idea that St. Mary Industrial School in Baltimore is a reform school. Don't you think it would be a good idea for you to clear up that point?"

There was only one answer that I could make him. It is a reform school. St. Mary's Industrial School for Boys is the sort of institution where unruly young radicals are taken in hand by men of big character and taught to be men. It is run by an order of brothers who can find and develop the good in a disobedient youngster. When I was first sent to St. Mary's I did not give the idea many votes. But as I look back upon the years I spent there, I realize now that the best thing my parents ever did for me was to put me in the way of the good training I got there.

At the age of 7, I must have seemed a pretty hard case. For a year I had been enrolled as a schoolboy. And most of that year I had devoted to an independent study of applied baseball. The ordinary punishment for playing hookey, applied to the customary zone, had no effect on me.

My father was a stern man. He loved his family so well that it undoubtedly cost him many a sleepless night to decide on sending me away, young as I was, to St. Mary's

In thinking of St. Mary's, people unjustly lost sight of the fact that the boys were there to be trained, not to be punished. They



forgot that many of the boys were homeless, friendless little orphans being befriended, taught trades and kept out of mischief. Many of the lads had never done a wrong thing. Others had played hookey.

My father knew that I needed the constant good example of the brothers, some discipline and close supervision. He would not flinch. And after many conferences under the reading lamp after supper my mother consented for my own sake, although her heart was aching.

Mother did not live to see me break the world's home run record in 1919. I only wish that she might have been spared to see that her decision was the right one. If only she were here now so that I might repay her in happiness. She died in 1913 while I had still a year ahead of me in school. It was the first great sadness I had experienced as young man. I was summoned home from school too late to be with her.

My first day in school was the hardest. Physically, I was so big for seven that I might have held my own with some of the lads older than myself. However, I had a knack for getting along with my fellow "men," and seldom met trouble more than half way. On the second day in school I made the Colts, the smallest ball team in the institution, as catcher, and it was only a couple of days later that I stepped up to the plate with the bases full, measured a nice groove ball and socked it over center fielder's head for the first home run of my career. My smack won the ball game and I stood high with the team. So you see I was on a ball team when I was seven years old and made my first home run at that age.

Since that day I have put over a good many home run wallops, but no drive I have ever made meant half as much to me as my first home run at St. Mary's. I can remember that drive as though it happened only yesterday. There was a tall skinny lad pitching—I've forgotten his name because there were several hundred of us playing ball on the school teams—and I hit a boy's "fast one" and lined it out way over the center fielder's head. I didn't have any idea how far the ball was going, but all the kids looking on set up a yell and I dug my toes in and raced around. I was so afraid that I'd be caught out at the plate that I began sliding for it when I was about ten feet away.