

100th Birthday of Babe Ruth

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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For a diversion last Friday night I headed off to Shea Stadium for the Mets' home opener with the Cardinals. It was a wild one with the Mets coming from behind to win 10-8. But it was even wilder among the fans. There were fights in the stands too numerous to count, including a evening ending brawl down the left field line that send two fans out on stretchers with bandaged heads. No fewer that seven different game stoppages came as fans ran on the field. Some went to center field, one came sliding home, one literally stole third base and ran off with it, but the most interesting was a protest by three young fans who came onto the infield throwing around fake money and going to second base where they lined up in salute with fists in the air. On their t-shirts was written GREED.

I was able to make the trip to Shea Stadium because I was in New York at Hofstra University for "Baseball and the Sultan of Swat: The Conference Commemorating the 100th Birthday of Babe Ruth." It could have been called "Everything you never wanted to know about Babe Ruth, and so didn't ask, but we'll tell you anyway."

Is there any other figure in American Sport who could attract nearly a thousand people for three days and nights to an event devoted to discussing and analyzing that person and their significance in American life? I doubt it. And that alone tell us something about the continuing presence of Babe Ruth in the nation's conscious memory.

The Babe was assessed by his contemporaries and successors, by sportswriters and broadcasters. There were two sessions on Babe Ruth and Film; a session on Babe Ruth in Literature; Members of the Hall of Fame Discuss the Babe; The Statistical Analysis of the Babe; Babe with the Red Sox; Thirty Poets read poems about the Babe; The Babe in Latin America; The Babe in Japan; The Babe in Canada; The Babe in the Barroom and the Bedroom. And these are but a few.

In addition there was an exhibit of Babe Ruth Memorabilia drawn from the Barry Halperin collection; a art exhibit devoted to baseball; another collection of art works on the Babe; and a photo collection on baseball and the presidents.

And what was to be learned here. In fact quite a bit. Did you know for example that in the famous photo taken at Babe's farewell at Yankee Stadium in which he appears to using a bat as a cane, the bat belonged to Bob Feller? Did you know that there

were plans to use Babe Ruth to address the Japanese at the end of the war from an off shore location to urge a Japanese surrender, before the dropping of the A-bomb? The plan was dropped, and so were the bombs.

Babe Ruth's last win as pitcher came in 1933 when he pitched the Yankees to an 8-6 win. Ruth had a personal mascot, a young boy who sometimes travelled with the team and was almost always in the Yankee Stadium dugout. His name was Ray Kelly and he talked about what it was like to be a good luck charm for the Bambino from the time he was three until he was a teenager.

You could also learn that Babe Ruth owned an underwear company which sold "Babe Ruth Underwear," and that he had a candy bar named after him, and it wasn't Baby Ruth.

The most popular quote was Ruth's line about his salary being higher than President Hoover's because as Ruth pointed out he had a better year than the president. This was quoted no fewer than ten times, while a close runner up was the quote from Ping Bodie who said he roomed with Ruth's suitcase. On the other hand no one quoted Hugh Fullerton's wonderful line that "Ruth was our national exaggeration."

One of the most original pieces was by Oona Short of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation who speculated on how Ruth would be covered by today's press in a session called: "I was Babe Ruth's Sex Slave and other headlines for the Nineties." One of the most interesting speculations came from Hall of Famer Ralph Kiner who wondered aloud if given his lifestyle and habits Ruth might have become a cocaine abuser in our current social climate.

The most curious session at the conference was the appearance of David Eisenhower, grandson of Ike and son-in-law of Milhaus Nixon. His topic had little to do with Ruth, titled Presidential Dream teams. It was a mildly interesting presentation of how he and the trickster picked their dream baseball teams. More interesting however was the revelation that David and wife Julie, whom he referred to only as "my editor," are writing a book on the year 1968.

You remember them, David and Julie, the Hendrix and Joplin of modern Republicanism, the quintessential Sixties couple, who will now reveal their role in the counterculture. Could this be a sign of the apocalypse? Say it isn't so, David! Say it isn't so!

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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