

Ruth's First

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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A hundred years ago, Babe Ruth strode to the plate and cracked his first major league home run on May 5, 1915. Twenty years later he would hit No. 714, a milestone that would stand for generations. 712, 713, and 714 came in Pittsburgh a few weeks before his retirement, and 714 was the first ball ever hit over the roof of Forbes Field in right, and it came to rest in a small park across the street. It was the longest home run, some would say, of his career.

Over the course of two decades, George Herman "Babe" Ruth Jr. transformed America's national pastime from a game of speed into a game of power, from the national pastime to a national institution. The long-ball hitters came to overshadow the base stealers, the bunters, and the hit-and-run artists, while the fans fell in love with the long ball.

They also fell in love with Ruth, who delivered home runs at a rate never before seen in baseball.

Some have called Ruth a symbol of his time. He reaffirmed the Horatio Alger success story; he displayed the strength and power of a Paul Bunyan; and he was a rugged individual in the new urban corporate world that demanded conformity. He defied authority and still achieved massive fame and success. His name became an adjective in the American language, and we still speak of "Ruthian clouts" and "Ruthian achievements." Sportswriter Bill McGeehan in 1925 dubbed Ruth "our national exaggeration."

How did he reach this pinnacle, and what does he mean to us today?

That first home run came at the Polo Grounds in New York, where the Boston Red Sox were playing the New York Yankees. Ruth sent the first pitch he saw in the third inning into the upper stands in right field with 8,000 fans in attendance. Ruth, the Sox pitcher that day, took the loss in extra innings.

A year earlier, at age 19, Ruth had made his debut pitching for the Red Sox, but he only logged 10 at bats that season. He remained in Boston through 1919 and continued to pitch, although each year he played an increasing number of games in the outfield. In 1918 Ruth led the league in home runs with 11. He added a league-leading 29, a new major league single-season

record, the following year when he also led the league in runs scored and runs batted in.

Although a very good pitcher, Ruth was an even better hitter and the Red Sox grew dependent on both his arm and his bat. In 1916 he led the American League with the best earned run average, and in the 1918 World Series he pitched 29 1/3 consecutive scoreless innings, a record that stood until 1961 when it was broken by Whitey Ford of the Yankees.

The Babe's future was not in pitching, but in hitting. When the Yankees purchased him from the Red Sox for \$125,000, they were paying for hitting, not pitching.

In 1920 Ruth shattered the home run record with 54 (only one other entire team had more), and bested himself the next season with 59. In 1927 he set a new mark with 60 home runs. He was the first player to reach 30, 40, 50 and 60 home runs in a season, and between 1926 and 1931 he averaged over 50 home runs a season.

The numbers are staggering, and not just in home runs. Ruth led the league in RBIs five times, runs scored eight times, walks 11 times, and on-base percentage 10 times, and he won the batting crown once. As an outfielder he had a strong arm, and base runners didn't usually challenge him.

In addition to the sharp increase in home runs, Ruth's career influenced a sharp increase in runs scored per game and batting averages all across Major League Baseball. Although there are many reasons given for this change, the most likely explanation is that hitters were swinging for the fences and therefore when they made contact they were hitting the ball not only farther, but also harder than ever. Conversely, there was a steady decrease in stolen bases. In 1916 there were 2.21 stolen bases per game across the major leagues and by 1930 there were only .87 per game.

It is not just the home run for which Ruth is remembered. He was performing his great feats at a time when celebrity was established as a centerpiece of mass culture. Ruth's fame spread well beyond the diamond, and beyond the borders of the United States. His personal life became a matter of interest to the general public, not just baseball fans.

The Babe's off-field antics were widely reported and added considerable volume to the roar of the Roaring Twenties. He

became known for his overeating, his high-speed automotive habits, and his general extravagances. Less well known, but equally large, was his appetite for women and alcohol. He was not only the Sultan of Swat, but also the Sultan of Sex. His nighttime hours were often filled with multiple liaisons and multiple cigars, and no shortage of booze in the age of prohibition.

The reputation for a wild lifestyle was tempered by stories of his special bond with children. He was often described as a child or childlike, and although he was not an orphan he was generally reported to be an orphan. His sister called a press conference in the mid-1920s to set the record straight. It had little impact. His image was tempered too by the times he publicly acted out the role of the reformed sinner, rededicating himself to baseball and to the children for whom he was a hero.

Did he hit home runs for sick children? Undoubtedly. Indeed it was part of his extraordinary skill that he seemed to be able to hit home runs at will: The "called shot" in the 1932 World Series, the first home run in Yankee Stadium, the first home run in the first All-Star Game, and many others were all testimony to his super human powers.

Ruth's success brought him a high salary from the Yankees and endless endorsement opportunities in the new world of America's consumer culture. He was the first baseball player to have an agent/manager, Christy Walsh, who along with the second Mrs. Ruth, Claire, organized Ruth's off-field business opportunities and managed his wealth. Claire was also able to curb some of Ruth's off-field excesses, and that likely extended the Bambino's playing career.

In the end Ruth is a near mythic figure who remains a hero and a wonder across generations of baseball fans, and indeed in the general population. His language was crude and his social skills were awkward, often producing hilarious encounters. Ruth displayed an exaggerated version of individualism, defiance of authority, power, strength, excess, and record-breaking achievements. And he did so while achieving wealth and fame and maintaining his image as a beloved and ordinary American.

It is difficult to imagine that anyone could repeat this feat today, a century after the Babe hit his first home run.

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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