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Babe Ruth

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Last Monday, February 6th, was the 100th Birthday of George Herman Ruth: the Babe, the Bambino, the Sultan of Swat, the Baron of Bam, the King of Slam, the greatest sports hero in American history, and one of the greatest baseball players in the history of the game.

The records held by Ruth are legion, and they were achieved as a hitter, a pitcher, and a base stealer. He was one of the best outfielders of his time, an excellent base runner, and had a sophisticated knowledge of the game. His excellence as a player earned him great acclaim, but his stature as an American hero goes well beyond the playing field.

He had nearly all the qualities one could ask for in a hero, and clearly exemplified some of the elemental historical forces of this time. In an age of increasing power and energy Ruth embodied elemental power. His swing was a sight to behold, and people who watched him were almost as excited by watching him strikeout as they were watching him hit a home run.

Ruth's power changed the nature of baseball from a game of singles and stolen bases to one of three run homers. The home run became a centerpiece of the game, and a parade of power hitters followed in his footsteps. Not only could Ruth hit home runs, he hit them farther and more frequently than anyone else, and he could apparently will them for special occasions: The first home run in Yankee Stadium, the first home run in an all-star game, a home run for Clare in the first game after their marriage, the legendary called shot in the World Series of 1932, and the numerous home runs hit for sick and dying children in hospitals across America.

Ruth's home runs not only won ball games, they cured children of serious illness and fatal disease. There are many stories contributing to this legend but my personal favorite comes from spring training in St. Petersburg where after hitting a home run Ruth ran past an automobile parked down the right field line. As he passed the car Ruth spotted a small boy, and shouted out the customary "Hi ya kid." The boy had been crippled from birth, unable to walk or stand on his own. When Ruth called out the young boy rose to his feet and called back, "Hi ya Babe."

Then there was Babe Ruth living proof of the Horatio Alger Stories of poor boy made good, the rags to riches phenomenon in

American life. In the 1920s Ruth demonstrated the unlimited opportunity for success in America even for the poorest and most disadvantaged of young boys. Ruth came out of St. Mary's Industrial School for boys, but this disadvantaged beginning was no obstacle for the great man who moved to the top of American society.

There was even the added legend that Ruth was an orphan which enhanced the rags to riches dimension of his life story. This image of Ruth as orphan, which Ruth's sister tried to squelch in the 1920s, never really died and was repeated in the early 1970s when Ruth's record was being pursued by Hank Aaron. It added to his power and appeal as an American folk hero.

Ruth had charisma and color to a degree that no one else in his time matched. He was a larger than life figure in the new age of public relations, mass communications, and entertainment. In the Golden Age of Sport he was the most famous of sporting figures. His color was displayed in his style of life. Attracted to fast cars and fast women, he was apparently never able to satisfy his appetites for either. The stories of his eating and drinking, his wild nightlife, and his ability to perform at extraordinary levels on the field despite his personal habits, added to the super human dimensions of the legend.

There are any number of colorful quotations which have added to the Ruthian image, including his comment to President Coolidge one warm summer day, "Hot as hell, ain't it, Prez?" or his famous line that his salary was higher than that of President Hoover because he had a better year than Hoover. But one of my favorite lines was about Ruth rather than by him. Joe Dugan and Waite Hoyt were pallbearers at Ruth's funeral, and Dugan complaining of the heat said to Hoyt that he would give his right arm for a cold beer. Hoyt looked at Dugan across the casket and said, "So would the Babe."

And finally Ruth reaffirmed the power of the individual in an age when individualism seemed to be in decline, unsuited to the new urban industrial mass society. He defied authority and still had enormous success. He defied the laws of nature and human anatomy without penalty. He was frequently cast as the repentant sinner, reforming his ways and heading to new heights. And finally he loved children and in many ways seemed the perpetual child himself. The eternal Babe, an American original.