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9-12-1991

## **Pennant Races - The Shot Heard Round the World- Dimaggio and Williams**

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### **Recommended Citation**

Crepeau, Richard C., "Pennant Races - The Shot Heard Round the World- Dimaggio and Williams" (1991). *On Sport and Society*. 299.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/299>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE  
September 12, 1991

As the baseball season of 1991 comes to a close with two pennant races still to be decided it might be appropriate to think back forty years and fifty years to reflect on two of the great finales in baseball history.

In 1951 the scene was the National League. In early August the Dodgers had a 13 1/2 game lead over their arch-rivals the Giants, but Giant winning streaks of 16 during August, and seven straight to end the season, resulted in a tie, and a three game playoff. They split the first two games, and game three in the Polo Grounds saw the Giants trailing 4-1 in the last of the ninth inning. Two singles and a double cut the lead to two runs. Don Newcomb was replaced on the mound by Ralph Branca, who came on to face Bobby Thomson. Thomson had won the first game with a two-run homer. The scene was set for what is perhaps baseball's most memorable home run, the shot heard 'round the world. Thomson hit a three-run homer, and the Giants won the pennant. The Dodgers went into mourning, and the Giants went on to face the Yankees. The game was carried on national radio and TV and remains etched in the national memory.

Ten years earlier the baseball season that was winding down in September was truly a season to treasure. It was played against the backdrop of the war in Europe, and the growing feeling that the United States would itself soon be at war. Already players had changed uniforms as the draft cut into major league rosters. It was a summer to remember for many reasons, but in baseball, in the summer of '41, two fetes were etched in stone.

The first was Joe DiMaggio's 56 game hitting streak, a record that stands to this day and is not likely to fall. The Yankee Clipper was in the minds of many the greatest player of his time, playing with grace and skill, the great hitter and the great fielder. The Streak, as it is now known, began on May 15 against the White Sox and went through July 16 when DiMaggio had a three hit game against the Indians. The next game the Indians ended the streak, in part due to superb fielding by Indians third-baseman Ken Keltner who twice robbed DiMaggio on drives done the line, and in part by a bad hop and great play by Lou Boudreau at short. Not only was this a 56 game streak, but DiMaggio hit .408 during that stretch. Then after one game without a hit DiMaggio put together another 16 game streak,

which meant he hit in 72 of 73 games, exceeding the fete of 70 out of 71 achieved by Bad Bill Dahlen back in 1894.

The 1941 season ended with another lasting achievement. Despite his streak DiMaggio finished only third in the AL batting race. Ted Williams, hit .406 that season, and no one has hit over .400 since. On the last day of the season the Red Sox were to play a double-header, and Williams was asked if he wanted to sit out the games and preserve his average which was right at .400. Williams declined. He couldn't imagine why anyone would do such a thing, and proceeded to go 6 for 8 to finish at .406.

The Splendid Splinter was a joy to watch. His nearly perfect swing was the result of hours of practice. Williams had a bat with him most of his waking hours, spending hours in front of mirrors working on his stroke. No one has ever known more about hitting than Ted Williams, and no one has ever hit any better. Not only did he hit .406 in the summer of '41 but he also won the All-Star Game that summer with a three-run home run in the ninth inning with two men out.

The greatness of Williams has been captured by John Updike in an essay written after Williams homered in his last time at bat as a major leaguer:

Like a feather caught in a vortex, Williams ran around the square of the bases at the center of our beseeching screaming. He ran as he always ran out home runs hurriedly, unsmiling, head down, as if our praise were a storm of rain to get out of. He didn't tip his cap. Though we thumped, wept, and chanted "We Want Ted" for minutes after he hid in the dugout, he did not come back. Our noise for some seconds passed beyond excitement into a kind of immense open anguish, a wailing, a cry to be saved. But immortality is nontransferable. The papers said that the other players, and even the umpires on the field, begged him to come out and acknowledge us in some way, but he refused. Gods do not answer letters.

It was a great summer for Williams, a great summer for DiMaggio, and a great summer for baseball.

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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