

Roots in Ripon

Roots in Ripon

18 April 2016

Chuck Roots

www.chuckroots.com

A Baseball Surprise

It has been said that if you repeat a lie long enough it becomes truth in the minds of the masses. This story corroborates this old adage.

As a kid growing up in the 1950s my every waking moment was an exercise in figuring out a way to play baseball with my friends. If we didn't have enough guys to field two teams we'd usually play "Flies Up!" The complete name is "Three Flies Up", and has variations on what constitutes the game. All I knew back then is I could never get enough of it. I loved playing baseball!

Because of a similarity in names, I was often asked by adults if I was related to the Chicago Cubs pitcher, Charlie Root. He played from 1926-1941, and still holds the club record for games, innings and career wins with 201. Some people called me Charlie when I was a kid. My sister started calling me Chas sometime in the mid-to-late 1950s. Today my wife calls me Charles, but I'm known as Chuck to most everyone else. But my last name ends in "s", clearly separating me from Charlie Root.

The baseball player I want to tell you about actually was ending his career about the time Charlie Root was starting his. A contemporary sports writer decided to do an updated version of the story of Ty Cobb since it had been several decades since anyone had written about this well-storied and maligned player.

Journalist, author, lecturer, and adjunct professor, Charles Leerhsen, has been an editor for *Sports Illustrated*, *People*, and *US Weekly*. In a lecture on April 7 at Hillsdale College he really opened a can of worms -- at least for me. His book published in 2015, entitled, *Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty*, won the 2015 Casey Award for best baseball book of the year.

The title for his talk given at Hillsdale was, "Who Was Ty Cobb? The History We Know That's Wrong." In the 1995 movie, *Cobb*, starring Tommy Lee Jones, the supposed dark side of Ty Cobb is portrayed, titillating our more prurient interests in man's fallen nature. It certainly is easier to believe the worst about someone, especially if we don't know them or if we don't care to know the truth. After all, it makes for juicier stories if we ignore the truth. Such was the case in the life of Ty Cobb.

As author Leerhsen explains, he became curious about this "bad-boy" of baseball. Were all these stories about him really true? As a journalist more interested in the truth than sensationalism, Leerhsen began to dig into newspaper stories dating back to the early 1900s when Ty Cobb first appeared in a Detroit Tigers uniform in 1905. What he discovered was a much different story than we have been told. Leerhsen makes no effort to raise Cobb to sainthood (nor do I through this article) but Ty Cobb was no more flawed in his character than anyone else.

"Ty Cobb was one of the greatest baseball players of all time and king of the so-called Deadball Era. He played in the major leagues—mostly for the Detroit

Roots in Ripon

Tigers but a bit for the Philadelphia Athletics—from 1905 to 1928, and was the first player ever voted into the Hall of Fame. His lifetime batting average of .366 is amazing, and has never been equaled. But for all that, most Americans think of him first as an awful person—a racist and a low-down cheat who thought nothing of injuring his fellow players just to gain another base or score a run. Indeed, many think of him as a murderer. Ron Shelton, the director of the 1995 movie Cobb, starring Tommy Lee Jones in the title role, told me it was “well known” that Cobb had killed “as many as” three people.” (Imprimis, Who Was Ty Cobb: The History We Know That’s Wrong, March 16 – Volume 45, Number 3, Charles Leerhsen).

Cobb was also portrayed as an unsavory character in the blockbuster film, *Field of Dreams*, starring Kevin Costner and James Earl Jones. In one of the final scenes, Shoeless Joe Jackson says they don’t want Cobb to join them because no one liked Cobb.

A writer by the name of Al Stump wrote a biography of Cobb following the player’s death in 1961. He penned such nasty stories that they quickly grew in the buzz of baseball circles and beyond so that these stories were later, erroneously, incorporated into books and film leaving our current generation believing lies about an otherwise very good man who happened to be one outstanding baseball player.

“Baseball historian Timothy Gay wrote that Cobb would pistol-whip any black person he saw on the sidewalk,” was one of the many false narratives going around. Leerhsen discovered the opposite to be true.

“But what about Cobb’s 19th-century Southern roots?” Leerhsen asks. *“How could someone born in Georgia in 1886 not be a racist? What I found—and again, not because I am the Babe Ruth of researchers, but because I actually did some research—is that Ty Cobb was descended from a long line of abolitionists. His great-grandfather was a minister who preached against slavery and was run out of town for it. His grandfather refused to fight in the Confederate army because of the slavery issue. And his father was an educator and state senator who spoke up for his black constituents and is known to have once broken up a lynch mob.*

“Cobb himself was never asked about segregation until 1952, when the Texas League was integrating, and Sporting News asked him what he thought. ‘The Negro should be accepted wholeheartedly, and not grudgingly,’ he said. ‘The Negro has the right to play professional baseball and whose [sic] to say he has not?’ By that time he had attended many Negro league games, sometimes throwing out the first ball and often sitting in the dugout with the players. He is quoted as saying that Willie Mays was the only modern-day player he’d pay to see and that Roy Campanella was the ballplayer that reminded him most of himself.”

This sure makes you wonder about what is said about anyone.

I will address this troubling historical injustice toward Ty Cobb further in my next article.