

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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Ty Cobb

As I continue to research Ty Cobb the baseball player and the man's character, I come away forming a much different picture of this larger than life person who inexplicably became a target for those who chose to denigrate him.

How could so many writers, sports writers in particular, get so many stories wrong about this man? I don't know. But this much I can surmise: Sports writers worked under deadlines which meant they had to write stories which would appeal to their readership. In that era newspapers were king in the world of communication. The demand for current and updated material for publication no doubt exerted its own pressure on those making a living investigating reports on the antics of professional athletes.

One of the hits on Cobb was his aggressiveness, which led to fights with other players. It's true that he hated to lose. Then again, who doesn't? He had three fist fights, originally reported to have been with black players. This was later proved to be false. He did mix it up with other players on a number of different occasions. I can hardly blame him for mixing it up with an opposing player, or even a teammate. In my own time in sports I had my share of "knuckle-and-skull" encounters, beginning with Pee Wee League baseball running through a year of college football, two years of football in the Marine Corps, and years of fast and slow pitch softball in the service. Today I'm relegated to golf, but I'm just as competitive as ever! But throwing hands in an altercation with someone is, thankfully, long ago in my past.

Charles Leerhsen, the other of this article on Ty Cobb asks the question: "So how did such a distinguished author (Charles Alexander) make such obvious mistakes? When I asked Alexander about this, he simply replied, 'I went with the best information I had at the time.'" Thus the mischaracterization of Major League Baseball's first member of the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, Ohio was analytically tarred-and-feathered by a sensationalistic media that looked to spice up any rumor or supposed true story about one of the game's great players.

"Ty Cobb getting a walk is more exciting than Babe Ruth hitting a home run," a sportswriter once said. Leerhsen reports that Cobb held a batting average of better than .400 in three different seasons. He also holds the record in stealing home plate – 54! He once stole 2nd, 3rd, and home on three consecutive pitches. He would constantly shuffle around in the batter's box, attempting to distract the pitcher. On base he would do the same thing to disrupt the infielders. It must have worked because they could never stop him.

Another hit on Cobb was the accusation that he sharpened his spikes so he could cut opposing players while sliding into base. Players he played with and against were later interviewed, and to a man they denied that Ty Cobb ever filed

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his spikes. Leerhsen writes, "And some sportswriters—understanding that sports is less about scores than about storylines, and that without antagonists stories fall flat—were willing to fan the flame and depict the aggressive, unpredictable Cobb as a dirty player. Many of the quotes I found from opposing players defending Cobb's style were in response to charges that he was a spiker. To a man, they said he wasn't. And in 1910, Cobb wrote to the American League president asking that players be forced to *dull* their spikes so that he might be free of the dirty-player charge."

In the late 1950s Cobb went on the wildly popular TV show, "I've Got A Secret." Baseball had changed so much since Cobb retired in 1928 that no one guessed his secret even after he told them he still held the record for the highest batting average in baseball. To top it off, none of the panelists even recognized him. He had fallen into the sports world's version of "The Twilight Zone."

As he aged he was troubled that his legacy was being framed by unscrupulous sports writers. Wanting to set the record straight, he was to have his story told for publication by Doubleday & Company who hired a discredited writer who spent a couple of days with Cobb, only to stonewall the great player as to what he was writing, refusing to share with Cobb the manuscript he was putting together. Al Stump was known for simply making stories up for the purposes of the sensational effect it garnered. Cobb threatened to sue Stump and Doubleday, but unfortunately he died before any legal action could be taken. A few months later the book was published, *My Life in Baseball: The True Story*, mischaracterizing a flawed human being, dragging his name and reputation through the proverbial mud.

Stump wrote that everyone hated Ty Cobb, and that only three people attended his funeral. Leerhsen further writes, "It didn't matter that Cobb's family had put out the word that his funeral was a private service, or that four of his closest friends in baseball did attend, or that thousands of people packed the church and lined the way to the cemetery. Despite all this, people thrilled to the story of the monstrous Cobb."

"What I didn't understand before, Leerhsen says, "was the power of repetition to bend the truth. In Ty Cobb's case, the repetition has not only destroyed a man's reputation, it has obliterated a real story that is more interesting than the myth."

A friend wrote following last week's initial article on Ty Cobb informing me that having grown up in Georgia, everyone already knew the real Ty Cobb. That was good to hear.

So, for me, I want the truth about someone. Not fabrications and sensationalism. And good for Ty Cobb for being a man who is the genuine article: a baseball pioneer and icon who is dressed in the frail trappings of humanity.