

## It's All about the Ball

March 3, 2009

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### I The Whip

The crowd was hushed, at the plate, Eddie Stanky, the scrappy Brooklyn Dodger second baseman, choked up further on his bat. On the mound, the lanky right hander, nodded at the catcher's sign, and began his windup. It was his delivery of the pitch which gave him his nick name. The ball remained in his glove as he began to pitch, rocking back on the rubber, he tucked his chin into his shoulder, as he turned slightly away from the batter. Then his body began to move forward, the ball came out of his glove, but out of the batter's view and down at his waist. Suddenly, his arm came into sight, the side arm delivery causing the ball to explode into view at the unusual angle, and moved latterly as well as down.

At ninety miles an hour, the ball travels the 60' 6" from the mound to the plate in about a half second. There are many variables, as my technical consultant has pointed out, which enter into this equation. The pitchers arm is well forward of the pitching rubber when he releases the ball. The pitchers mound is higher than the plate so the ball does not travel parallel to the ground, but follows a gentle hypotenuse. Batters stand at different points in the batter's box, although usually at the extreme rear to get just a tiny additional bit of time. Note that the back chalk line of the box disappears by the second inning. Regardless of other factors, the batter must begin his swing almost as soon as the ball is released. It is a tribute to the extraordinary skill of major leaguers that they hit the ball at all.

Ewell Blackwell's pitching motion was so unusual, that most batters, particularly right handers simply couldn't adjust.. At 6'6" and 185 pounds, Blackwell was fondly described as 'string bean', and 'rainspout'. But his more widely used nickname, The Whip captured the awesome terror he struck in batters hearts. This was a whip such as Lash LaRue, noted western comic book hero wielded to tame the bad guys.

The Time Star reporter described Blackwell's dominance that June Sunday in these words, "The attempts of the Dodger batters were as funny as the efforts of a drunk

trying to pick his teeth in a revolving door.” And this was no ordinary team. In addition to Stanky, the 1947 Dodger lineup included Carl Furillo, Duke Snider, Dixie Walker, Pee Wee Reese, Gil Hodges and a new guy, first baseman Jackie Robinson, who went on to be named Rookie of the year. The Dodgers would go on to claim the pennant that year. The Reds on the other hand were coming off a sixth place finish in '46, and hoped to get into the first division. The two power hitters on the Cincinnati team were the keystone combination of Eddie Miller and second baseman Grady Hatton. Later in the season came the first appearance of a former University of Indiana All American footballer, Ted Kluszewski.

The overflow crowd at that Sunday June 22 double header numbered 31,204. A good part of that was due to the fans coming from far and wide to cheer for the Dodgers' first baseman. The papers noted that fans of Robinson came from as far as 450 miles away to see him play. Visitors from Chattanooga, Atlanta, Nashville, Columbus, Indianapolis, Detroit and Birmingham arrived early, in Sunday finery to fill the Sun Deck and be a part of baseball history. There was another reason for the crowd. Four days earlier, the Whip had pitched a no hitter against the Boston Braves ! Cincinnati fans knew that lightning could strike twice. In 1938, their own Johnny Vander Meer had thrown consecutive no hitters. In fact Vander Meer was in the dugout that day, still a member of the Reds staff.

Ewell Blackwell was born in Fresno California. He came up in 1942 at the age of 19. And then as happened to many ball players, he went to war. He was a cook and a pitcher. He served in the European Theater. After the end of the war in Europe he was part of a brief, brilliant season of Army baseball teams. He played for the 71<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division's Red Circlers. The team made it to the European Theater of Operations championships in Nurnberg. My Dad was one of a crowd of more than 50,000 who watched the games. Blackwell and his team lost, but dad said he was unbelievable.

Blackwell was discharged in March of 1946, joined the Reds and went 9-13 that season with a remarkable 2.46 earned run average. However in 1947, he had the season of his career. He had one stretch where he won 16 straight games. He finished the season 22-8, with a 2.47 ERA. He pitched two scoreless innings in the All Star game. It was arguably one of the very best seasons a Reds pitcher has ever had.

Now facing powerful Dodger lineup before a full house in the first game of the Sunday double header, he was on the verge of immortality. For eight innings no batter had gotten a hit. He retired the first man up in the ninth and the crowd was holding its collective breath. Then to the plate came Stinky Stanky. As the treacherous side arm delivery poured plate ward, Stanky, badly fooled, committed himself and swung. The pitch broke his bat, and the ball skittered up the middle past the lanky Blackwell, between Miller and Hatton and into center field. The impossible, was indeed impossible. One out later, Jackie Robinson stroked a clean single. Blackwell got the final out leaving the two runners stranded and notching his second consecutive shutout.

Ewell Blackwell went on to have a fine career, mostly with the Reds, although he also played for the Yankees and the Kansas City Athletics. His career was cut short by injuries, and of course the three seasons he lost during the war. But in the summer of '47, particularly for two games in June, he was the best there was.

## II HAPPY

Most of us add various descriptors and titles over the years. Some of them come because of achievements or being selected in various manners to positions of authority and responsibility. They can come to define people. For instance, in this setting I can say, “The only person to serve as President of the United States and as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court is ....” And everybody can complete the sentence.

The second character in this story also had a unique identifying set of titles. Governor, U.S. Senator, and Commissioner of Major League Baseball, gives us only one person – Albert Benjamin ‘Happy’ Chandler.

When he was elected in 1935, at the age of 37, he was the youngest Governor in Kentucky history. A brash young lawyer, he reveled in his maverick populist image. He actually didn’t serve a full term, Two months before the end of his four years, the junior Senator from Kentucky, Marvel Mills Logan died. Chandler cut a deal with his Lt. Governor. Happy resigned and the new Governor, Keen Johnson appointed him to

Logan's seat, in October of 1939. Off went Happy to Washington. In 1942 he won, the seat, beating John Y Brown Sr. in the Democratic primary. This assured his election, since Republicans were without much standing in the south in those days.

It seems as though Chandler was never entirely happy were he was. In 1945, Judge Kennesaw Landis, Commissioner of Baseball died. Once again, someone's demise opened the door for Chandler. Landis had been chosen 25 years earlier to restore baseball's reputation. He demanded and was given full control by owners following the Black Sox scandal in the 1919 World Series with Cincinnati. After his death, owners sought new a commissioner and intended to reclaim control. Chandler was elected, but told baseball that he could not start until the war was over, and the nation safe. Then after he had accepted and the announcement was made, he insisted on retaining Landis' absolute authority. It turned out he would need it.

His first act was to move the Commissioner's Office from Chicago, where Landis had lived, to Cincinnati. He took an office suite on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor of the Carew Tower. He set up his desk so he could look across the Ohio River and feast his eyes on the Kentucky landscape.

The first crisis came when the Paquel brothers attempted to lure American baseball stars to play in their Mexican league. They offered gigantic salaries, in comparison to the pay Major League ball players were receiving. Stan Musial, the finest player in the National League was getting \$13,500 a season. Only Babe Ruth had been able to force the Yankees into a huge salary in the 30's. When a reporter pointed out to Ruth that his \$80,000 salary was more than the President of the United States, Ruth replied, "I had a better year than Hoover!"

Chandler managed to safely maneuver through this, in part by banning, for life, ballplayers who did sign up. He then faced the Leo Durocher problem. 'Leo the Lip' was constantly in the news for a number of embarrassing actions. Once he went into the stands after a young fan who had been heckling him. When he caught the lad, he beat him up. In 1938, while with the Dodgers, Durocher went out of his way to criticize Babe Ruth during his brief coaching stint with the National League club. He told a reporter, that '...Ruth didn't have the brains to give a proper sign.' When Ruth heard about this he confronted Durocher and it resulted in a clubhouse fight between the overweight 43 year

old Ruth and the 33 year old Durocher. Given the universal dislike for the Lip, allegations of consorting with gamblers and moral turpitude, involving actress Lorraine Day were sufficient to support Chandler's one year suspension of Durocher.

Just when it seemed that the 1947 season might be just about baseball, along came Branch Ricky and Jackie Robinson! Baseball had been totally segregated for decades. The Brooklyn Dodgers' owner Branch Ricky signed the former UCLA football and baseball star to a minor league contract. In January of 1947 at a secret meeting Ricky announced his intention to bring Robinson up to the big leagues. The vote was 15 against, with only Ricky voting in favor.

Not only was baseball segregated in those times, but there were only 16 teams. There were no West coast teams; in fact the trains carrying the teams didn't go beyond St. Louis – to the West, or the South. There were two teams there [the Browns have disappeared], two in Boston [so long Braves], two in Philadelphia [the late lamented Athletics] and three in New York [westward ho the Giants and Dodgers]. These were simpler days, there was no designated hitter, few night games, no divisions, no unbalanced schedule, no wild card teams, and no league playoffs and no inter-league play. The schedule was simple, mathematical perfection – 22 games against every team in the league, half at home half on the road resulted in a 154 game season. But I digress.

A short time after the secret meeting, Ricky and Chandler met. Ricky asked the commissioner to approve Robinson's contract. In Chandler's autobiography, Heroes, Plain Folks, and Skunks, he gave this account of the conversation. First, he reviewed his experience on the Senate Armed Forces committee and said, "Plenty of Negro boys were willing to go out and fight and die for this country. Is it right when they came back to tell them that they can't play the national pastime? You know Branch, I'm going to meet my maker some day and if he asks me why I didn't let this boy play and I say it's because he's black that might not be a satisfactory answer."

Happy Chandler's decision to overrule the owners and integrate baseball assured him a place in American history and resulted in the decision not to let him have a second term as Commissioner. Once again he left early; resigning after the contract extension was defeated, by a 9-7 vote in favor of renewing his contract! Baseball by-laws required a  $\frac{3}{4}$  majority.

But in the summer of 1947, Chandler was firmly in charge. One of his accomplishments was bringing Babe Ruth back to baseball and the fans.

### III The Babe

In the words of Pirate pitcher Guy Bush, “And I said coming out of the dugout, ‘Well that guy who hit the little bloop home run before will be up again in this inning, I’m going to throw three fast balls right by that guy and see what the crowd will do and get my laugh on him.

Well that’s what I started out to do. I got the first pitch in there for a strike and he just watched it go by just as pretty, like he was looking for a softball. And I didn’t say a word.

I got a signal for another fast ball, and I come through there with one, I mean with everything I had on it. I hit the plate, maybe an inch or two inches off the plate, about halfway between his knees and his waist. Just where he could that fat part of his bat on it.

He got ahold of that ball and hit it over the triple deck, clear out of the ball park in right center. I’m telling you, it was the longest cockeyed ball I ever saw in my life.

That poor fellow, he had gotten to where he could hardly hobble along. I ain’t mad no more then. So, when he rounds third base, I just look over there at him, and he kind of looked at me, I tipped my cap just to say, ‘I’ve seen everything now, Babe.’

He just looked at me and kind of saluted and smiled, and that’s the last home run he ever hit.”

That day, May 25 1935, Boston Brave outfielder, George Herman Ruth hit three home runs at Forbes Field, finishing with a career total of 714. After Pittsburgh, the Braves traveled to Cincinnati where they lost three more and Ruth stayed with the team through the Philadelphia series because they had sold a lot of tickets for the Memorial Day game. He grounded out in his only at bat. At the age of forty, lame, overweight and with a bad cold, he ended his career.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Smelser, Marshall, The Life that Ruth Built. 1975

Ruth's plan, long before he left New York was to stay in baseball as a manager. At the end of the 1934 season, it was clear that the Yankees and Ruth would soon part company. In an effort to achieve a graceful separation, he was offered the job as manager of the Yankee's Newark minor league team. He was insulted, and turned it down. That led to his trade to Boston. Under baseball's waiver rules, every American League team had to approve his departure, which they did. The National League experience was brief. At the end of May in 1935, Ruth left baseball. After a two year absence, he did serve as a coach for the Brooklyn Dodgers briefly in 1938. During this time, he actively sought the Newark job and was turned down.

He was bitter at baseball's abandonment. Although he was financially secure, he sorely missed the spotlight. While his principal activity was working on his golf game, he took part in occasional exhibitions usually drawing huge crowds. Every time he returned to Yankee Stadium for a game, he was the center of attention. One of those returns in 1939 was for the farewell by Lou Gehrig. Ruth stood nearby as Gehrig uttered what may be baseball's most famous quote, "Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.." Crippled by the fast advance of the disease that bears his name today, Gehrig died 23 months later. This was a foreshadowing of Ruth's final trip to Yankee Stadium. That occurred on June 13, 1948. The Yankees chose that day to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "house that Ruth built" by inviting him as the guest of honor. He was very weak, but he still went to the microphone following Mel Allen's introduction and spoke a few words. Just over two months later on August 16<sup>th</sup>, he died.

In late 1946 on the day that he was supposed to appear at a picnic for 3,000 orphans, Babe Ruth felt an intense pain over his left eye. Despite that, he went ahead and entertained the kids. Shortly thereafter, however, he checked into the hospital. It is one of the interesting aspects of Ruth's illness that apparently he was never told that the doctors had identified and removed a cancerous tumor from his neck. The public was reassured with hospital announcements concerning pneumonia and other conventional illnesses. In February, he was hospitalized again. He had lost more than one hundred and twenty five pounds, was extremely weak, and the prognosis was not good. During this time, the only baseball person to visit Ruth was the new Commissioner "Happy" Chandler. After two weeks in the hospital, Ruth returned to his home and began a period of recuperation. As a

last ditch effort, the doctors tried an experiment. Ruth received an injection of teropterin, a synthetic folic acid and shortly began what seemed to be a miraculous recovery. He regained much of his lost weight, his energy improved, and it was at this time, that two things began.

The first was his collaboration with Bob Considine, the noted sports columnist, on The Babe Ruth Story. In Ruth's words, this was, "my only authorized story." A movie based on the book starring William Bendix in the title role was rushed into production. There are numerous other biographical efforts, and even a few efforts at fiction that incorporate "the Babe." One of the more recent, which I recommend, is The Bambino Secret by J. Anderson Cross.

The second, begun in part at the instigation of "Happy" Chandler, was the designation of "Babe" as the official ambassador for American Legion baseball. Ford Motor Company, in a post-war effort at sports sponsorship as an advertising and goodwill gesture, put more than one million dollars into the development of American Legion baseball. In explaining his eagerness to carry out this endeavor, Ruth said, "I won't be happy until every boy in American has a bat and a glove." Ruth crisscrossed America covering more than fifty thousand miles in the summer of '47.

Accompanied by his wife and a nurse, he flew around the country. On Sunday, August 3, 1947, Ruth landed at the Greater Cincinnati Airport in Covington. This was the first year of operation for the replacement for Cincinnati's Municipal Airfield, Lunken Airport. The flood of '37 which rose more than a dozen feet up on the Control Tower signaled the end of its brief commercial career. Because of increased flight activity, short runways and the fact that all too often sunken Lunken was obscured in fog from the nearby Ohio River, the airlines moved across the river.

As was the schedule in other cities, there was a motorcade from the airport to the Netherland Plaza Hotel where Ruth was staying. It had originally been planned that he would be in Cincinnati two days earlier but it had been necessary to return to the New York hospital where he was being treated.

The occasion for Ruth's presence was an All-Star game which had been arranged between American Legion players from Cincinnati and Cleveland. The game was

sponsored by local Legion posts and was held at Crosley Field. More than ten thousand fans were in attendance.

This was Ruth's first visit to Cincinnati since 1938 as a coach with the Dodgers. And the time before that had been his final road trip as a player with the Braves. At this point, he had been out of baseball for almost a decade. But in his interview with a reporter, he seemed to condition his response to a question about returning to baseball. After shaking his head no, he said, "It will take a lot to get me to walk away from the boys."

In the final sentence in the Time Star story, it was mentioned that on Sunday night, Ruth signed fourteen dozen baseballs.

#### IV The Oyster House

1947 was a long summer for Reds. The season that had begun so promisingly drifted slowly into an effort to get into the first division, which at that time, was defined as the first four finishing teams. Coming off of their sixth place finish in 1946, the Reds struggle to hold on to fifth place seemed like a modest achievement. In fact, the previous year's sixth place finish began a string of unhappy performances by the Reds that extended all the way into the 60's when in 1961, they returned to the World Series for the first time in twenty-one years. And it would be another fourteen years in 1975 when the world championship flag again flew in Cincinnati. That stretch was relieved by the barrage of home runs that began in 1956 when Frank Robinson arrived to join Ted Kluszewski, Gus Bell, Wally Post and Jim Greengrass. So, for Reds fans these were dismal times. Only the dreadful Chicago Cubs and Pittsburgh Pirates and occasionally the Phillies kept the Reds out of the cellar.

The city was alive with amateur baseball, however. As the summer wore on, even Blackwell's fabulous season slipped behind coverage of the amateur teams. There were leagues filled exclusively with ex-servicemen. All of the major companies sponsored

teams such as the Trailmobile's [where my Dad worked and played], and they took on other Oakley industrial giants, such as the LeBlond and Milling Machine teams.

The biggest show was the play of the American Legion teams. With the sponsorship of Ford Motor Company and the support of newly returned veterans, the number of American Legion Posts grew and youth baseball flourished. One of the strongest teams was the now legendary Bentley Post.

Led by Coach Joe Hawk, in 1947, the Bentley Post team had won the city championship ten straight times, and half of those times had gone on to become state champions. Throughout the summer, the sports pages followed the exploits of these heroes. The roster included future Chicago Cub manager Jim Frey. The shortstop was the future major leaguer Don Zimmer. Bentley Post won the district and then the state. By mid-August, they were in Quincy, Illinois where they won the regional and moved on to Los Angeles to play in the American Legion World Series. They won the Championship, defeating a team from Little Rock, Arkansas. In fact, the American Legion program in Cincinnati was so strong that in a fifteen year stretch beginning in 1944, Cincinnati teams claimed the Championship trophy 6 times. Five of those teams represented the Bentley Post.

Meanwhile in downtown Cincinnati, Robert Bacigalupo returned from the service and continued in his father's tradition as the proprietor of Bacigalupo's Oyster House. This was not an easy time for restaurants. The nation has not recovered fully from war-time shortages, and the influx of returning servicemen drove up demand which led to price increases. Further, on August 19, 1947, the Times-Star reported that price increases on lunches were occurring due to the recent wage and hour agreement between food dispensers and the restaurant employee's union. For instance, the Blue Plate Lunch Special many places went up twenty-five percent from twenty cents to a quarter. Coffee rose from five to six cents a cup, and local beers from seventeen to twenty cents. The article noted that draft beer was still ten cents. The Wheel Café on Sixth Street, which many viewed as the political headquarters of the city, was not exempt. Wheel Vice-President Walton Bachrach noted that they had been forced to increase the price of a piece of pie from twelve to fifteen cents. However, he was quick to add that now they

would only cut six slices from a ten inch pie instead of seven. Presumably the Oyster House was not exempt from these increases.

Nonetheless, customers continued to enjoy the oysters, sandwiches, and soup. The daily blue plate specials were favorites of the Court House lunch crowd who walked the short two blocks to the Oyster House. Desserts were home made pies prepared by Bob's mother. There was no alcohol served. The oysters arrived daily by train and appeared each morning outside the restaurant in a wooden barrel packed with ice. They came from the Chesapeake Bay area and there is some question as to whether or not oysters were served in the months without an "r."

The Oyster House occupied a number of different locations during its existence. The last in the late 40's was on the northwest corner of Eighth and Main Streets. The building is now gone replaced by a parking lot. Similarly, today, 226 East Sixth Street is a parking lot. In 1947, this was the site of the Oyster Bay Restaurant run by Robert's cousin, Dorothy Bacigalupo. It's sad to think that a city that once could support two restaurants dedicated to the wonderful shellfish now has none.

Tom Brokaw's "Greatest Generation" didn't just win a war. It produced many unforgettable characters, people we now view as somewhat larger than life, who after the war came back and threw themselves into the community. Operating the Oyster House was Bob Bacigalupo's occupation, but at that time and for many years after the Oyster House was closed, he had another passion. That was young people and athletics. A golden gloves boxing champion before the war, he came back and coached youth baseball teams. He also continued his military involvement by becoming Commander of an American Legion Post. He was outgoing, gregarious, and generous with his time spent coaching youth teams in baseball, football and basketball.

When the Ford Automobile Company announced the Babe Ruth tour, Bob Bacigalupo went to work to make sure Cincinnati was one of the stops. And so, on Monday, August 4, the Cincinnati-Cleveland all star game was played. Since the Reds were out of town, the game took place at Crosley Field. There were more than 10,000 fans in attendance. Down on the field, Legion Post Commander Bacigalupo introduced his nine year old daughter, Rosemary to Babe Ruth.

When all the hoopla was over, Bob Bacigalupo ended up with 10 autographed baseballs. We can not account for the other 158 that Ruth signed the night before the game. Of the ones that Bob got, one went to a Boy Scout at St. Aloysius in Covington. One remains in the family, although his son, Lou Bacigalupo admits to playing catch with it. And later that summer, a 5 year old kid visited the Oyster House with his Father and Grandfather.

What I can remember is that Mr. Bacigalupo came over and offered me a baseball. It had three signatures on it. Ewell Blackwell, A.B. Chandler and Babe Ruth! I can not explain why this amazing bit of good fortune came my way. My best guess is that my grandfather who was also a great sports fan, and a frequenter of the downtown lunch establishments had become friends with the folks at the Oyster House.

We all keep things, things passed on as well as our own. I have five generations of stuff in my basement - from my Grandparents to my grandchildren. I've moved more than a dozen times, not counting college and the Navy. Almost all the things from my youth have disappeared.

And yet, as for that baseball – Lo and behold – here it is

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