

THE SULTAN OF SWAT STEALS A WORLD SERIES SHOW 1923

----- *Heywood Broun* -----

George Herman “Babe” Ruth (1895–1948) played for the New York Yankees from 1920 to 1934, stunning audiences with his incredible skill and power. In 1927, he hit more home runs in one season than had any previous player, and more home runs than any other team in the American League. “The Babe” was one of the premier sports celebrities of his day. Newspaper articles such as this one from the *New York World* elevated Ruth to the status of mythic hero.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Recognizing Bias

Do you think the author of this article intended his report to be read for entertainment or as a historical account? Support your opinion with specific examples.

The Ruth is mighty and shall prevail. He did yesterday. Babe made two home runs, and the Yankees won from the Giants at the Polo Grounds by a score of four to two. This evens up the World Series, with one game for each contender.

It was the first game the Yankees won from the Giants since October 10, 1921, and it ended a string of eight successive victories for the latter, with one tie thrown in.

Victory came to the American League champions through a change in tactics. Miller Huggins could hardly fail to have observed Wednesday that terrible things were almost certain to happen to his men if they paused anyplace along the line from first to home.

In order to prevent blunders in base running he wisely decided to eliminate it. The batter who hits a ball into the stands cannot possibly be caught napping off any base.

The Yankees prevented Kelly, Frisch, and the rest from performing tricks in black magic by consistently hammering the ball out of the park or into sections of the stand where only amateurs were seated.

Though simplicity itself, the system worked like a charm. Three of the Yankees’ four runs were the product of homers, and this was enough for a winning total. Erin Ward was Ruth’s assistant. Irish Meusel of the Giants also made a home run, but yesterday’s show belonged to Ruth.

For the first time since coming to New York, Babe achieved his full brilliance in a World Series game. Before this he has varied between pretty good and

simply awful, but yesterday he was magnificent.

Just before the game John McGraw remarked:

“Why shouldn’t we pitch to Ruth? I’ve said before, and I’ll say it again, we pitch to better hitters than Ruth in the National League.”

Ere the sun had set on McGraw’s rash and presumptuous words, the Babe had flashed across the sky fiery portents which should have been sufficient to strike terror and conviction into the hearts of all infidels. But John McGraw clung to his heresy with a courage worthy of a better cause.

In the fourth inning Ruth drove the ball completely out of the premises. McQuillan was pitching at the time, and the count was two balls and one strike. The strike was a fast ball shoulder-high, at which Ruth had lunged with almost comic ferocity and ineptitude.

Snyder peeked at the bench to get a signal from McGraw. Catching for the Giants must be a terrific strain on the neck muscles, for apparently it is etiquette to take the signals from the bench manager furtively. The catcher is supposed to pretend he is merely glancing around to see if the girl in the red hat is anywhere in the grandstand, although all the time his eyes are intent on McGraw.

Of course the nature of the code is secret, but this time McGraw scratched his nose, to indicate: “Try another of those shoulder-high fast ones on the Big Bam and let’s see if we can’t make him break his back again.”

But Babe didn’t break his back, for he had something solid to check his terrific swing. The ball started climbing from the moment it left the plate. It was a pop fly with a brand-new gland and, though it flew high, it also flew far.

When last seen the ball was crossing the roof of the stand in deep right field at an altitude of 315 feet. We wonder whether new baseballs conversing together in the original package ever remark: “Join Ruth and see the world.”

In the fifth Ruth was up again, and by this time McQuillan had left the park utterly and Jack Bentley was pitching. The count crept up to two strikes and two balls. Snyder sneaked a look at the little logician deep in the dugout. McGraw blinked twice, pulled up his trousers, and thrust the forefinger of his right hand into his left eye. Snyder knew that he meant, “Try the Big Bozo on a slow curve around his knees and don’t forget to throw to first if you happen to drop the third strike.”

Snyder called for the delivery as directed, and Ruth half topped a line drive over the wall of the lower stand in right field. With that drive the Babe tied a record. Benny Kauff and Duffy Lewis are the only other players who ever made two home runs in a single World Series game.

But was McGraw convinced and did he rush out of the dugout and kneel before Ruth with a cry of “Maestro” as the Babe crossed the plate? He did not. He nibbled at not a single word he has ever uttered in disparagement of the prowess of the Yankee slugger. In the ninth Ruth came to bat with two out and a runner on second base. By every consideration of prudent tactics an intentional pass seemed indicated.

Snyder jerked his head around and observed that McGraw was blowing his nose. The Giant catcher was puzzled, for that was a signal he had never learned. By a process of pure reasoning he attempted to figure out just what it was that his chief was trying to convey to him.

“Maybe he means if we pitch to Ruth we’ll blow the game,” thought Snyder, but he looked toward the bench again just to make sure.

Now McGraw intended no signal at all when he blew his nose. That was not tactics, but only a head cold. On the second glance, Snyder observed that the little Napoleon gritted his teeth. Then he proceeded to spell out with the first three fingers of his right hand: “The Old Guard dies, but never surrenders.” That was a signal Snyder recognized, although it had never passed between him and his manager.

McGraw was saying: “Pitch to the big bum if he hammers every ball in the park into the North River.”

And so, at Snyder’s request, Bentley did pitch to Ruth, and the Babe drove the ball deep into right center; so deep that Casey Stengel could feel the hot breath of the bleacherites on his back as the ball came down and he caught it. If that drive had been just a shade to the right it would have been a third home run for Ruth. As it was, the Babe had a great day, with two home runs, a terrific long fly, and two bases on balls.

Neither pass was intentional. For that McGraw should receive due credit. His fame deserves to be recorded along with the men who said, “Lay on, MacDuff,” “Sink me the ship, Master Gunner, split her in twain,” and “I’ll fight it out on this line if it takes all summer.” For John McGraw also went down eyes front and his thumb on his nose.

Babe Ruth was too much for the baffled Giants. The American League Yankees won the 1923 World Series from the National League champions by a final score of four games to two.

During the 1932 World Series between the New York Yankees and the Chicago Cubs the Babe performed his greatest feat. The Windy City team, with Root pitching, was giving Ruth an unmerciful riding. He had already hit one home run when he came to bat in the latter part of the game. The entire Cub bench came to the front of the dugout to hurl choice epithets at him. When Ruth missed the first pitch, the Chicago fans roared, whereupon he held up one finger so that everyone could see it. When he swung again and missed, the crowd rocked with laughter and the Cub players hurled more insults. The Babe held up two fingers. Then there were two pitches, pitches wide of the mark.

At this point came the magnificent gesture. With his forefinger extended, the Babe pointed to the flagpole in center field to show the pitcher, the Cubs, and the crowd where he was going to wallop the next ball for a home run. He blasted the next ball straight and true out of the park at exactly the point he had predicted. It was an amazing feat, and it is already being denied by baseball historians.

The Babe's legs gave out at forty, and he retired. He never got the chance to manage a big-league ball club; it was said that nobody could be sure that Ruth could manage himself. When, in the summer of 1948, the Big Fellow died, after a prolonged and cruel illness, some 80,000 fans filed past his bier as he lay in state at Yankee Stadium, "the House that Ruth Built." "It is part of our national history," the *New York Post's* Jimmy Cannon commented, "that all boys dream of being Babe Ruth before they are anyone else."

Source: "The Sultan of Swat Steals a World Series Show" by Heywood Broun, from *New York World*, October 12, 1923. Reprinted in *A Treasury of Great Reporting*, edited by Louis L. Snyder (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949), pp. 414-416.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that the author intended his report to be read as entertainment and not as a historical account. Students may cite any number of examples of the author's colorful language. A few examples include "the Babe had flashed against the sky fiery portents which should have been sufficient to strike terror and conviction into the hearts of all infidels" and "it was a pop fly with a brand-new gland." Students may also describe the author's always playful and sometimes sarcastic tone. Examples include when he describes the signals exchanged between the Giants manager and catcher, and when he chastises the Giants manager for "nibbling at not a single word" of his previous criticisms of Babe Ruth.