Babe Ruth and His Record "Home Run" at Tampa

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It was during Spring Training in his final year wearing the Boston Red Sox uniform that Babe Ruth hit a home run that may have been the longest one any player ever hit. Born on February 6, 1895 George Herman Ruth, the son of a Baltimore saloon owner and bartender was sent to St. Mary's Industrial School For Boys by his parents when they found they could not control him. Within a short time George was taken in hand by six-foot three, 250 pound Brother Matthias of the Xaverian Order who introduced him to discipline, a limited amount of education, shirt collar stitching and helped him become a pitcher in the leagues organized by the school. Both catching and hitting came naturally to the left handed Ruth but pitching required much more sheer strength. Ruth became the outstanding all around baseball player in the school.1

When George Herman was twenty years old and still at St. Mary’s he was signed by a good Catholic and owner of the Baltimore Orioles Jack Dunn to a contract in organized baseball that paid $600 for the season.2 In his first year in the minor leagues Ruth won fourteen victories and six defeats as a pitcher and consequently was sold with two other players to the Boston Red Sox for $20,000. In that year at Baltimore sports followers began to call George Herman Jack Dunn’s baby or Babe.

The huge bulk, heavy features and self-centered inner image propelled Babe into the center of conversation held by students at St. Mary’s and members of the Baltimore Orioles. They called him Tarzan until Babe realized that Tarzan was King of the Apes. When he was invited to eat in a fine home he set aside asparagus salad untasted. When the hostess asked him why he had not eaten the salad, he replied that the vegetable caused his urine to smell. When teammates noted that he changed underwear only every two weeks, he refused to wear the undergarment in the future and no one suspected that only bare skin was beneath the expensive Suits.3

During Spring Training at Hot Springs, Arkansas, Ruth made some of the other players angry when he wanted to take daily batting practice; thus forcing some to wait while he batted. Ty Cobb, one of the greatest of all hitters, claimed that Ruth, being a pitcher, could experiment with his swings at the ball and not be criticized for pitchers were usually poor hitters. Finally, Ruth developed a swing that utilized the full 215 pounds of weight and often when he missed the ball, would fall and land on his knees. It was awkward but effective. When the farm team at Providence, Rhode Island needed good pitchers, Ruth was sent there and assisted the team in winning the championship of the International League. When the International League completed its season, Ruth was recalled by the Red Sox and was able to win 2 games and lose one. Ruth’s record in his first year in the minors was twenty-three wins and eight losses.4

With the outstanding hitting and equally outstanding pitching, it was difficult for the Red Sox manager to designate Ruth for one
Babe Ruth, celebrating his birthday in St. Petersburg.

Photo courtesy of *Tampa Tribune*
position. At first he was in the line-up as pitcher and pinch hitter but by May, 1918 he was shifted to first base and hit two home runs two days. Within a short time he was shifted to left field; a position where he remained for some time. Despite the effects of World War I and a players’ strike the Red Sox won the league championship and World Series.

During negotiations in salary for the following year 1919, Ruth secured the services of a part-time agent and set the figure for his salary at $15,000 a year - a raise of $8,000 and second highest in baseball. When owner Harry Frazee refused to grant the hefty sum, Ruth became a hold-out. He was not with the team when it boarded the Clyde steamer at New York bound for the new training site in Florida or when it boarded the Seaboard train at Jacksonville bound for Tampa. When an agreement was signed with the New York Giants for a series of games at Tampa and on the trip northbound, it became absolutely necessary to sign Ruth so that large crowds could be attracted to watch his home runs and Frazee agreed to a contract which paid $10,000 a year to Ruth. Shortly, Ruth left New York bound for Tampa on a midnight train.

Tampa at this time was going through a difficult period. Two hundred and thirty-eight persons had died during the October-November, 1918 influenza epidemic and the two shipyards that had employed more than five thousand persons in 1918 closed down in 1919 and the former employees found it difficult to secure other employment. On May Day of 1919 one hundred special guards were hired to guard against possible Communist violence but no disorder at all took place. Yet the city council tried to stimulate prosperity in the tourist trade by printing free post cards and brochures to advertise Tampa, providing free public band concerts and community "sings" and the luring of the Boston Red Sox from Hot Springs to Tampa was a good move.

First of the Red Sox contingent to arrive in Tampa was Dr. M. P Lawler the trainer who proceeded to the Tampa Bay Hotel and adjacent Plant Field where the practice and games would be held. The field, located in the center oval of a race track maintained by the South Florida Fair Association and Tampa Bay Hotel, had been winter quarters of major league baseball teams since 1913 when Chicago had trained. Lawler saw that the infield had been improved and the hot and cold showers in the clubhouse had been reconditioned but he was more impressed by the facilities of the Tampa Bay Hotel.

Despite the holdout Lawler claimed that Ruth was the most capable baseball player in the world. When the team arrived in Tampa on March 22, 1919 and eighteen players began practice at 10:00 a.m. on the following day, manager Ed Barrow observed the rough condition of the infield and outfield but he, like Lawler, was pleased with the Tampa Bay Hotel.

Plans had been made by manager Barrow and owner Frazee to play several practice games with the reserves in Tampa, play the two home games with the New York Giants who were training at Gainesville and then travel with the Giants northward playing games with them in Gainesville; Columbia, South Carolina; Spartanburg, South Carolina; Winston-Salem, North Carolina and concluding the series in Richmond, Virginia. Barrow was glad to see Ruth when he arrived saying that the outfielder-infielder pitcher was needed as a pitcher by the team. No one in Tampa was sure about the figure
Ruth had signed for: $15,000 a year or $30,000 for three years.

With the players in camp, preparations for the long season proceeded at a fast pace. When rain forced a cancellation of work-outs on one day, two a day practices were scheduled on the following days. Billy Sunday, the well known evangelist who was presenting crusades against sin in the area, took part in the workouts by chasing balls in the outfield and bunting at batting practice. The members of the team who had gone to the Palma Ceia Golf Club for food and golf gave in return a party for the members of the club at the Tampa Bay Hotel. With a reward of 150 cigars to the winning team, two games were played between the regulars and substitutes. In these two games, Ruth pitched one inning and played first base the rest of the time.

Everyone awaited the arrival of the New York Giants, led by John McGraw, who would meet the Red Sox in the first spring training game. There was a heavy advance sale of the tickets which sold for 55 cents and $1.10. Thirty-five players, reporters and members of the Giant organization arrived by train from Gainesville on the night before the game and stayed at the Tampa Bay Hotel.

In an April game attended by a record crowd of 4,200 persons, the Red Sox beat the Giants 5-3 but the score did not matter, it was a home run by Ruth that was remembered for many years. In his first time at bat in the second inning, left fielder Babe Ruth batting fourth in the line-up, studied Giant’s pitcher George Smith who would win only thirty-nine games in eight seasons. It seemed easy to hit against the pitcher and Ruth took a powerful swing which propelled the ball deep into right center field. Right fielder Ross Youngs tried to make a catch but the ball sailed high above his head beyond the outfield located in the inner part of the race track and into the sand beyond the track. After the game reporters were able to find Youngs and have him point out the exact spot where the ball had landed. The distance from the landing spot to home plate was measured but no exact figure has been given. Probably the ball was hit a distance between 500 and 600 feet; manager Barrow took a middle ground by estimating the distance at 579 feet. It was the longest home run that Ruth ever hit and probably longer than any other man had hit at that time. The ball was found, signed by Ruth and Barrow and given to Billy Sunday.

The Red Sox went on to beat the Giants again on the following day and beat them in the final game of the series at Baltimore where Ruth hit four home runs in one game. When Ruth hit his home runs, he was hitting a dead ball that was thrown by a pitcher who could use spitballs and other freak deliveries which were later banned. Despite the home run hitting of Ruth, the Red Sox did not win the championship in 1919. Ruth would hit 714 home runs in his career doubling the figure of the second man on the list of home run hitters and hit a record sixty for one season but the Tampa home run was probably his best remembered single time at bat.

ENDNOTES


2 Lawrence Ritter and Donald Honig, The Image of their Greatness: An Illustrated History of Baseball from the 1900 to the Present (New York, 1979), 72.

3 Creamer, Babe, 184, 186.

4 Ibid., 100.
5 *Tampa Tribune*, March 18, 1919.

6 *Tampa Tribune*, March 25, 1919.

7 *Tampa Tribune*, March 28, 1919.

8 *Tampa Tribune*, March 29, 1919.

9 *Tampa Tribune*, April 2, 1919.

10 Creamer, Babe, 189.