Alumni

Lou Gehrig: Columbia Legend and American Hero

"Columbia Lou" got his start smashing home runs from South Field to the steps of Low Library—and went on to become one of the greatest and most beloved players in baseball history.

By
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Not too many years ago, when I was a guest at a forum about Lou Gehrig at the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, a questioner asked me what kind of a man Gehrig was. The answer is not as simple as it may seem at first glance, for Gehrig, a professional athlete, was more complex than most modern-day baseball players. What I told him was that Gehrig had to be judged by the totality of his tragically short life and not just by his batting statistics. I pointed out that Gehrig was shy and pursued by insecurity. I also volunteered that he was a person of quiet dignity who departed life with exemplary grace. But above all, I emphasized that he was a person who always believed in striving to do his best, no matter what the circumstances. It is that last characteristic that made Gehrig such a dynamic force on the baseball diamond—and also made him into a figure who transcended his sport. It is remarkable that even today many young people regard him as an icon and valuable role model.

Gehrig's words of hope, grace, and humility on July 4, 1939, as he bid farewell to baseball and his team, the New York Yankees, have often been referred to without sarcasm as the game's Gettysburg Address. The speech is included in William Safire's *Lend Me Your Ears*, a collection of the world's greatest speeches throughout history.

I was one of the celebrants that melancholy afternoon, sitting in the right-field bleachers where he had deposited so many home runs on behalf of his team. I was an eighteen-year-old admirer, and like so many there that day, I sat teary-eyed as I listened to the man who was called “the Iron Horse” deliver his valedictory. Most of us present were not aware that Gehrig was dying of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (a disease ultimately named after him). But we did suspect that this man, who had played in a record 2,130 consecutive games, all with the Yankees, from 1925 to 1939, would never put his spikes on again.

In writing about Gehrig’s speech, author Wilfrid Sheed said that “all present in Yankee Stadium that day had been given a license to love a fellow human to the limit, without qualification, and to root for that person as they’d never rooted for themselves. . . . If the Stadium had emptied out suddenly, and he had been left standing there alone, Gehrig would have felt no less lucky, because the appearance merely confirmed what he already knew, that he was having a very good day. . . . A day like that was worth a thousand of the old ones.”

In the early days of the Great Depression, I lived across the street from Columbia. I never got to see Gehrig hit his legendary home run off the dial outside of South Field, or off the steps of Low Library (“He gave his Alma Mater many a nervous moment,” wrote Bill Corum, a New York sports columnist who was also a graduate of Columbia’s School of Journalism), because by the late 1920s Columbia had stopped playing its ball games there.

But as a ten-year-old grammar school kid I had composed a letter, with the help of a friend, asking Gehrig if we could come to Yankee Stadium for an interview on behalf of our school paper. We never expected a response, for we thought Gehrig would have little time to speak to such tiny hero-worshippers. But our certainty of failure was soon proved wrong when a handwritten letter from Gehrig arrived several days later. We were struck by the careful, graceful penmanship, considering the size and strength of the writer. Yes, Gehrig had written, “I’ll be happy to talk to you. Just use this letter to come to the clubhouse.”

Unfortunately, when we went to Yankee Stadium the next day, the policeman guarding the clubhouse door denied us entrance. We were invited to wait—and that’s what we did. Games started in those days at 3:30 p.m. (the Yankees were celebrated as the team of the “five o’clock lightning” in recognition of their propensity for late rallies), so we had a long wait. We kept listening for crowd noises

that might hint how the Yankees were doing, and once, when we heard a swelling roar, we were convinced it must have been a Gehrig homer. Finally, the game was over, and within a short time, Gehrig appeared. He was hatless, coatless, and tieless, and his thick brown hair—no blow-dry in those simpler times—was still damp from the shower. He had the kind of deep tan that today's players have forfeited to night games.

As he walked by us at a fast pace, we set out after him, calling out his name. He stopped and looked at us, and we waved his letter at him. He took a quick look at his letter and then asked if we had enjoyed the game. When we answered that we weren't able to get in, he appeared genuinely sorry. Then, when we brought up the interview, he said he was in a hurry to get home, but maybe we could do it another day. Then he took two crumpled tickets from his pocket and handed them over. "Did you really wait all afternoon?" he asked as he stepped into his car. "Yes, we did," I answered, hoping he'd reverse himself and grant us an interview on the spot. But that wasn't to be the case. Waving his hand at us in a friendly gesture, Gehrig said, "I'm really sorry." Then he was gone.

I never forgot Gehrig's kindness and manner, and over sixty years later wrote what I hoped was a fair-minded biography of him.

The early days

Henry Louis Gehrig was born on June 19, 1903, at 94th Street and Second Avenue in the lower-middle-class section of Manhattan's Yorkville. His parents were Heinrich Gehrig and Christina Fack, part of the large number of German immigrants who had come to America at the turn of the century. Of the four children born to Christina, Lou was the only one who survived infancy. He was raised in a poor household, close to the poverty level, but when Lou became famous his mother always insisted that he was not "a product of the slums."

As a shabbily-dressed Yorkville youngster, and later when his family moved to Washington Heights, Lou played in the streets and schoolyards and swam in its rivers. His father was often ill, and sometimes drank too much. He had some skills as a metal worker, but often found it hard to obtain employment. Christina, on the other hand, worked almost constantly. She cleaned floors, cooked for others

(including a job at the Columbia Sigma Nu fraternity house), and worked as a laundress—anything to bring money into the house.

Gehrig attended Commerce High School, where he became proficient at football and baseball. As a Commerce senior in 1920, he hit a ninth-inning home run with the bases loaded in an inter-city game at Chicago's Wrigley Field. The feat earned him his first newspaper kudos, including some comparisons to Babe Ruth—rather a crushing burden to impose on a young ballplayer off the streets of New York. In the process of hailing his achievement, one newspaper misspelled his last name.

Impressed by Gehrig's skills, and with his eye mainly on the young man's football talents, Bobby Watt '16c, graduate manager of athletics at Columbia, encouraged Lou to enroll at Columbia. At the time, Christina Gehrig was convinced that her son might wind up as an engineer or architect. But even as he played on the line and in the backfield for Columbia's footballers (where he joined Wally Koppisch '25C, a running back with All-American credentials), Gehrig's destiny turned out to be baseball.

Gehrig spent two years on Morningside Heights, which later won him the nickname of "Columbia Lou" in the nation's press. That was far preferable to "Biscuit Pants," which he was also called on occasion. By leaving Columbia in his junior year, Gehrig became Columbia's most eminent dropout since Alexander Hamilton. On one level, Gehrig's time at Columbia was quite productive. It was on the Lion campus that he apprenticed for stardom in major league baseball, and it was where he gained the friendship and advice of baseball coach Andy Coakley, a former big league pitcher, who recognized and nursed Lou's large talents.

On the other hand, Gehrig felt that he never gained full acceptance from his fellow students at Columbia. At Phi Delta Theta fraternity, where he was pledged, he waited on tables and often performed other tasks. In an era when many fraternities emphasized the social backgrounds and bank accounts of its members, Gehrig lacked such credentials. He had to rely on his athletic prowess to win the condescending approval of his fellows. His family background, with two parents who had difficulty with English, plus his own meager interpersonal skills and clumsiness, exposed him to frequent ridicule. He was often disparaged for his awkwardness and lack of social polish. He ran up a small debt to the fraternity, which he was reluctant to repay even in his halcyon years. Such treatment by his associates gnawed at his own sense of unworthiness and didn't help him to overcome his basic shyness. He

was never able to forget the snobbery he confronted, although he did appear as a guest lecturer at Columbia's Teachers College in the 1930s, an indication that he held no grudge against the school itself. Also, in conversations with his wife, Eleanor, whom he married in 1933, he commented on the role that his Columbia education had played in his learning to appreciate reading, good books, and classical music.

From Columbia to the big time

On April 18, 1923, when Yankee Stadium opened for the first time, Babe Ruth fittingly christened the spectacular new edifice with a home run. On the same afternoon at Columbia, pitcher Gehrig struck out seventeen Williams batters for a team record. Somehow, Columbia still managed to lose the game. Only a handful of collegians were at South Field that day, but more significant was the presence of the bow-legged Yankee scout, Paul Krichell, who had been trailing Gehrig for some time. However, it wasn't Gehrig's pitching that particularly impressed him. Instead, it was Gehrig's powerful hitting from the left side of the plate. During the time Krichell had been watching Gehrig, the bulky Columbian had hit some of the longest home runs ever seen on various Eastern campuses.

Within two months Gehrig had signed his name to a Yankee contract. A bonus of $1,500, a veritable fortune for Gehrig and his family, was enough to get him to leave his studies. Two years later Gehrig would become part of a symbiotic slugging relationship with Ruth in the heart of the vaunted Yankees lineup. Batting fourth as the cleanup man behind the Babe, Gehrig became half of the most devastating one-two punch in the game's history. His consecutive game streak began in June 1925, he appeared as a pinch hitter for Peewee Wanninger. The next day, Gehrig replaced Wally Pipp at first base and stayed there for fourteen years. Ultimately, he became the all-time player at that position, which he played unfailingly through broken bones, split fingers, aches, pains, and menacing beanballs.

Gehrig accumulated 493 home runs, had a lifetime batting average of .340 (only a few points behind the Babe) and batted in 175, 174, and 184 runs in the years between 1926 and 1930. To this day his 23 home runs with the bases loaded surpass all players in history. In a 1932 game against Philadelphia, he became the first player in the twentieth century to hit four home runs in one game.

Yet, through the years of the Roaring Twenties, Prohibition, the Jazz Age, the Great Depression, and the New Deal, Gehrig constantly played in the bulging shadow of his Rabelaisian teammate, Ruth. The Babe outhit, outhomered, outate, and outpublicized Lou. Even in the 1928 World Series against St. Louis, in which Gehrig knocked out four home runs and batted in nine runs, the Babe hit .625, an all-time high in a four-game series. When a fatigued Ruth left the Yankees after the 1934 season, along came the San Francisco phenom, Joseph Paul DiMaggio, in 1936, to deprive Gehrig of the press attention he so richly deserved.

It’s hard to know exactly how Gehrig felt about all of this. On the surface he seems to have been content being the Yankees captain—essentially a symbolic role. But what also seems clear is that he had a profound sense of himself as a public figure, with a self-designated role as a loyal team player, a loyal son, a loyal citizen, and a loyal employee. Such an unquestioning commitment may have placed a heavy burden on him, at times costing him dearly in human relationships. For example, he assigned himself the role of preserving, certifying, and codifying all rules of Yankee behavior. On a ball club with more than a few rogues and rapscallions on the premises, such a posture was hardly designed to win him great popularity. Gehrig’s relationship with the Babe was a case in point. In the early years, Gehrig had expressed great admiration for Ruth, but as time went by the two men barely spoke to each other, on or off the field.

Twilight

In the spring of 1939, after a relatively mediocre season in 1938, Gehrig’s sturdy body started to fail him. He wasn’t connecting solidly with the ball, nor was he fielding his position properly. He even had trouble tying his shoelaces. Disturbed by his inadequacies, Gehrig informed Manager Joe McCarthy that he was going to step down for the good of the team. McCarthy, who was tremendously fond of Gehrig, had difficulty accepting his decision. He was convinced something was terribly wrong with Gehrig, but encouraged him nonetheless to keep trying. Gehrig thought otherwise. Within a short period of time the Mayo Clinic, where Gehrig had seen physicians for a physical examination, issued a chilling report indicating that he was suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, an incurable disease. Only a few, including Eleanor Gehrig, knew that Lou was a dying man. It is possible that Gehrig himself didn’t know, although some things he said in the last two years of his life

sounded as if he had such suspicions.

The depth of Lou's feeling toward Eleanor was underlined by a handwritten letter he sent from Detroit the day after he terminated his active career. In part, this is what he wrote:

"My sweetheart—and please grant that we may ever be such—for what the hell else matters—that thing yesterday I believe and hope was the turning point in my life for the future as far as taking life too seriously is concerned. It was inevitable, although I dreaded the day, and my thoughts were with you constantly—how the thing would affect you and I—that was the big question and the most important thought underlying everything. I broke before the game because I thought so much of you. Not because I didn't know you are the bravest kind of partner but because my inferiority grabbed me and made me wonder and ponder if I could possibly prove myself worthy of you. As for me, the road may come to a dead end here, but why should it? Seems like our back is to the wall now, but there usually comes a way out. Where and what, I know not, but who can tell that it might not lead to greater things. Time will tell. . ."

On the special day in his honor on July 4, 1939, Gehrig spoke his farewell words without a hitch, and with no notes in his hand. This was surprising, since slurred speech is often characteristic of ALS victims. After that day Gehrig chose to remain with the team, even as he found it increasingly difficult to walk the few feet out to the home plate umpire to deliver the Yankees lineup. That year the Yankees won the pennant, then defeated Cincinnati in the World Series. On the trip to Cincinnati, New York's mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, sat next to Gehrig on the train and spoke to him about joining the New York City Parole Commission. When La Guardia told Gehrig that he could be an inspiration to many youngsters in trouble, Gehrig reminded the mayor that he knew little about the law or the workings of the Parole Commission. But the mayor was insistent. "All you need is common sense, and you have that," he told Gehrig. La Guardia followed up his proposal by sending Gehrig a number of books on criminology, sociology and psychology. Gehrig diligently read them, and then informed the mayor he would accept his offer. Before arriving at this decision, Gehrig consulted Eleanor, who told him, "It is a fine chance to do something good for the old hometown."

Last days

Prior to joining the Parole Board, Gehrig was unanimously voted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame by the Baseball Writers' Association in December 1939. A rule was waived that would have required him to have been retired for one year. At the same time, the Yankees retired Gehrig's uniform, making him the first major leaguer to be honored in such a way.

Gehrig was sworn in to his new civic role on January 2, 1940, for a ten-year term, with the mayor on hand to give the inductee his official blessing. Gehrig's primary duty was to render judgments about the time of release for prisoners in the city's penal institutions. The commission's caseload was over 6,000 a year, and Gehrig was assigned his share of cases.

For one year, while he was still physically able to travel downtown to lower Manhattan by car, with Eleanor doing the driving, Gehrig maintained a regular schedule. He had almost daily contact with street criminals, hoodlums, vagabonds, pimps, prostitutes, and con artists, a rung of society he had hardly known anything about in his years as an athlete.

In reflecting on his role, Gehrig said that "only a small percentage of men have to go back to prison. I think that many convicted fellows deserve another chance. However, we not only have to play fair with the fellow who's gotten bad breaks, but we must also consider the rights of taxpayers and our duties towards them. We don't want anyone in jail who can make good."

By the spring of 1941, Gehrig had become too ill to pursue his parole tasks, and he requested from the mayor a leave of absence. Until then La Guardia had not been aware of how frail he had become. By that time it had become difficult for Gehrig to even sign his name or to lift a piece of paper.

As his body wasted away, Gehrig's mind remained active and untouched by the disease. When friends came to visit, he rarely complained. A good deal of the time he listened to music and opera. On June 2, 1941, seventeen days before his 38th birthday, Lou Gehrig died in his sleep at home.

Tributes poured in from everywhere, from President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who sent flowers, to New York's Governor Herbert Lehman to the redcaps at Grand Central Terminal. Over 1,500 telegrams and messages flooded his home in Riverdale. One of

his mourners, Bill Dickey, a former teammate who had once roomed with him, said, “He doesn’t need tributes from anyone. His life and the way he lived were tribute enough. He just went out and did his job every day.”

The Iron Horse says goodbye: Gehrig’s farewell speech

"Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth. I have been in ballparks for seventeen years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans.

Look at these grand men. Which of you wouldn’t consider it the highlight of his career just to associate with them for one day?

Sure, I’m lucky. Who wouldn’t consider it an honor to have known Jacob Ruppert; also the builder of baseball’s greatest empire, Ed Barrow; to have spent six years with that wonderful little fellow Miller Huggins; then to have spent nine years with that outstanding leader, that smart student of psychology—the best manager in baseball today—Joe McCarthy!

When you have a wonderful mother-in-law who takes sides with you in squabbles against her own daughter, that’s something. When you have a father and mother who work all their lives so that you can have an education and build your body, it’s a blessing! When you have a wife who has been a tower of strength and shown more courage than you dreamed existed, that’s the finest I know.

So I close in saying that I might have had a tough break; but I have an awful lot to live for!"

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