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"Lou Gehrig: Baseball's Modest 'Iron Horse.'" -by Shirley Povich

The death of Lou Gehrig was meaty subject matter for the obituary writers. They faithfully recounted and dramatized the 20-odd major league records he set, they rhapsodized on his durability as the Iron Horse of baseball, and muffed little of the valor with which he met the tragic turn that ended his life at 38.

The Lou Gehrig I knew was a big, friendly fellow with the deepest dimples ever worn by a masculine face. Typical of his self-negation was his custom of parking his automobile inconspicuously three blocks from Yankee Stadium and entering the park by a side entrance. Babe Ruth traditionally drove to a screeching stop at the main gates to make a gusty entrance for the fans assembled there. Even when his own feats surpassed the fading Ruth's, Gehrig would not horn into the Babe's party.

Somehow, Gehrig always seemed to miss out on top billing until he was stricken down by the dread germ that took him out of baseball, but more on that later. Of the millions who thrilled to his feats in baseball, only a few could know of the great depths of this man.

Last Christmas Eve, Lou Gehrig knew he was not long for this world. Ravaged by a disease known to medicine as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, but recognizable to the layman as a form of poliomyelitis that was inducing a hardening of the spine, Gehrig was bed-ridden. The once-massive 220-pounder was reduced to an emaciated 150 pounds. Already he had been forced to abandon his desk at the office of the New York Parole Board.

Gehrig had scant control of his facial muscles and his once-grim jaw was slackened. On Parole Board papers that required his signature, he could make only a feeble mark. Newsmen shrank at reporting the pathos of his physical condition. But they were aware of it, and in newspaper offices throughout the land, Gehrig obituaries were already in type against the day, not far removed, when death would come to Lou Gehrig.

Yet last Christmas Eve, Gehrig's friends received the following greetings: "These are the times when all of us have much to be thankful for and much to be thoughtful about, times when it is particularly good to feel the warm, strong clasp of a friend's hand and so, this Christmas more than ever, we say Merry Christmas. Eleanor and Lou Gehrig."

Stricken in 1939

Baseball was not prepared, in 1939, for the shocking succession of events that projected Lou Gehrig among the front-page news. The headline that was expected some day, of course, read "Lou Gehrig Benched." That would mean that the most amazing consecutive-game performance in baseball's history had ended. With thunderbolt effect came the flash three weeks later: "Lou Gehrig Paralyzed."

Here was the epitome of physical hardihood stricken down by a dread germ. The man who had broken all records for baseball durability with his play in 2,130 consecutive big league games over a stretch of 15 seasons now walked with a halting, fumbling gait at the age of 37.

The sickening flash that Gehrig was a paralysis victim marked the first time, actually, that the man whose heroics had been a bright chapter of baseball history had the headline all to himself.

Gehrig and his feats on the diamond were always in the shadow of his more spectacular teammate, Babe Ruth, and Lou was seemingly content that it should be so. But the consistency with which Gehrig missed the headlines for himself was aptly described by New York Columnist Franklin P. Adams who once referred to Gehrig as "the man who hit all those home runs the year that Babe Ruth broke the record for home runs."

Never Hero No. 1

For a few brief years, after Ruth's retirement in 1934, it seemed that Gehrig would finally come into his own as the top man of the Yankees. He was the league's leading home run hitter. There no longer was a Babe Ruth to overshadow him. Possessor of none of Ruth's flamboyant color, Gehrig was about to step into the No. 1 role by a sort of default. He was getting nicely squared away for a plunge into this new acceptance in the Yankees scheme when along came the sensational Joe DiMaggio to surpass him as Yankee Hero No. 1.

On June 2, 1932, Gehrig hit four home runs in a game at Shibe Park, the first player in modern baseball history to accomplish that staggering feat. Surely there could be no denying Lou a place on the front page this time. But again his timing was bad. He hit his four homers on the same afternoon when John McGraw announced his retirement as manager of the Giants after fifty years in the majors, and top billing of the day went not to Gehrig but to McGraw.

When he was benched that day in May 1939, and when, three weeks later, it was revealed that he was a paralysis victim, Gehrig in his sadness did command the headlines. He made the front pages, too, when he died this week, but even then his was not the top obituary of the week. The Woodchopper of Doorn, Kaiser Wilhelm, got top billing over Lou. Gehrig was always in somebody's shadow.

Tough Luck Pursued Him

Things could happen to Gehrig. I remember the year when Ruth was no longer the home run champion. Lou was in a race with Jimmy Foxx for the league's home run honors. That was in 1931. Gehrig missed tying Foxx for the championship by one home run, hitting 47. Actually he had hit 48 that season, but he could not be credited with that figure. The home run that didn't count was hit by Gehrig at Griffith Stadium in May.

It was another demonstration of Gehrig making news in a tragic sort of way. The home run that didn't count was a tremendous swat into Griffith Stadium's center field bleachers. Lyn Lary was on base at the time. That was Gehrig's tough luck. The ball landed high into the concrete bleacher seats, and Lary, who was running with the pitch, looked up in time to see Center Fielder Sammy West make a catch. Lary did not know that West was catching the ball after it had bounced high out of the concrete seats back onto the playing field. He assumed that West was making a putout, and at third base Lary continued to the Yankees' dugout. Gehrig, thinking Lary had scored, jogged around to the plate only to learn that he was out for passing a runner on the bases.

Tough luck pursued Gehrig with a sort of relentlessness. A few years ago he was the guest on a national radio network as an endorser of the breakfast cereal "Huskies." When the point in the interview arrived where Gehrig was to say one word, coast to case, he muffed it. The announcer asked him what breakfast food he ate to help him hit all those home runs. Said Gehrig: "Wheaties." Thus unwittingly he publicized the product of a rival firm.

Gehrig refused at first to accept the \$1,000 check that was given him for his radio appearance, until the manufacturer of Huskies convinced him that his error had actually resulted in many times the normal publicity their product would have received.

Gehrig was up from the city streets and he had a pride in that fact. He liked to tell interviewers of the tough going in those early days and how lucky he considered himself. On a day when the Yankees played an exhibition game in Sing Sing, Lou was seen chatting familiarly with two convicts. Later he explained, "They used to be kids who lived in my block in East Harlem. They didn't get the breaks I did."

Strangely, Lou Gehrig, the perfect physical specimen, was the only one of four children of Henry and Christina Gehrig who survived childhood illness. Lou was born a few years after his parents emigrated from Germany. His father was an art metal worker at \$9 a week, and his mother hired herself out as a cook among the fraternity houses at Columbia University, where her pig knuckles and sauerkraut were campus favorites. The lad known as Lou was a tyke in Public School 132.

Started with Giants

His baseball background is well known; how he gained notice by hitting a home run with the bases full, as a high school boy in a game against Lane Tech, of Chicago, at Wrigley Field in 1920 when his team was playing for the national championship; how he was signed later by the Yankees after his hard-hitting for Columbia University, and how he was farmed out to Hartford for two years before being recalled by the Yankees.

But not generally known is the fact that actually Gehrig should have been a National Leaguer. Andy Coakley, the old big league pitcher who was Gehrig's baseball coach at Columbia, recommended him to the Giants. Gehrig was paid scant attention by Manager John McGraw on a visit in the Polo Grounds. Half-heartedly the Giants sent him to Hartford where he played for most of a season under the name of Henry Louis. Lou, chagrined at his cold reception by McGraw, quit the Hartford team to go back to college.

When the Yankees signed him at the end of his sophomore year at Columbia, he still belonged technically to the Giants, but McGraw was not sufficiently interested to pursue his claim, and gave Gehrig up to the Yankees.

Walter Johnson relates the first time he ever saw Gehrig. Lou was sent in as a pinch hitter for the Yankees in 1923. "He looked like a young blacksmith, with those big arms," Johnson recalls. "Anybody could tell he had power."

Long before he so gallantly met the test of those last doomed days, Gehrig's physical courage had many times manifested itself. The little finger of his right hand was broken on four occasions, but he insisted on playing every day to continue his consecutive-game streak. He had to be helped out of bed on a day in Detroit after a severe attack of lumbago, but he was in the lineup that afternoon. Earl Whitehill beamed him with a fast ball, but he did not miss the next day's game.

En route to Washington a few years ago, Gehrig played in an exhibition game at Norfolk with the Yankees and was a hospital case after being struck in the head by a bush league pitcher's high hard one. He reached Washington in time for the next day's game, and if he was plate-shy it was not evident. That afternoon, he hit three-baggers before rain stopped the game.

Not Spectacular

I knew him as a fellow who had harmless superstitions. In a week when he was in a baffling batting slump, I saw him unload his pockets of various luck pieces. "I am Episcopalian," he said, "but look at these things I'm carrying." He displayed a Catholic medal that had been blessed in Rome and a Hebrew mazzuzah that contained a miniature scroll. "I carry these," he said, "because people who want me to do well sent them to me. If they are that interested in me, I appreciate it."

Aside from his feats with the bat, Gehrig did not know how to be spectacular. He had none of the color and flamboyancy of Ruth, which is one of the reasons that his top salary with the Yankees was only \$34,000 compared to one \$80,000 annual wage commanded by the Babe.

Tributes of His Friends

It was in Washington, in the spring of 1939, that Gehrig first hinted that his consecutive-game streak was about to end. He had fumbled a ball hit by Buddy Myer and was forced to throw to the pitcher to make the put-out at first. In the dressing room after the game, he said: "If I can't field that kind of a hit without the pitcher's help, I'm not doing this team any good."

His friends knew that something was pathetically wrong with Gehrig long before it was learned that he was in the throngs of paralysis. I saw him at dinner at O'Donnell's Restaurant in April 1939. He

seemed gay. He wasn't though. After leaving their car at the restaurant parking lot, Gehrig's party made a run for it through the rain. Gehrig took a few steps and fell. They had to help him up. They walked, not ran, the remaining distance.

Lou had retired from baseball in the summer of 1939 when he accompanied the Yankees to Washington on an off-day and accepted an invitation to go marine fishing at Ocean City, MD, with the late Paul Townsend, Bucky Harris and Bill Dickey. He was a sick man, but fishing was one of his loves. When a 60-pound marlin struck Gehrig's line, Lou worked to reel him in. Townsend proffered the harness that would make the task easier, but Gehrig refused it. "This may be the last marlin I'll ever catch," said Lou. "I want to beat this one without any help." He did.

When Quentin Reynolds, former sports writer and now an ace on the staff of Collier's, was asked if he had ever witnessed such courage as was displayed by the people of London during the heaviest bomb attacks, Reynolds had an answer. The author of the vivid "The Wounded Don't Cry" said he had seen the courage of Londoners equaled - "by a professional ball player, Lou Gehrig, who is my champion."

June 8, 1941

Digging JFK Grave Was His Honor

Jimmy Breslin

Newsday's Jimmy Breslin wrote the following article for the New York Herald Tribune in November 1963.

Washington -- Clifton Pollard was pretty sure he was going to be working on Sunday, so when he woke up at 9 a.m., in his three-room apartment on Corcoran Street, he put on khaki overalls before going into the kitchen for breakfast. His wife, Hettie, made bacon and eggs for him. Pollard was in the middle of eating them when he received the phone call he had been expecting. It was from Mazo Kawalchik, who is the foreman of the gravediggers at Arlington National Cemetery, which is where Pollard works for a living. "Polly, could you please be here by eleven o'clock this morning?" Kawalchik asked. "I guess you know what it's for." Pollard did. He hung up the phone, finished breakfast, and left his apartment so he could spend Sunday digging a grave for [John Fitzgerald Kennedy](#).

When Pollard got to the row of yellow wooden garages where the cemetery equipment is stored, Kawalchik and [John Metzler](#), the cemetery superintendent, were waiting for him. "Sorry to pull you out like this on a Sunday," Metzler said. "Oh, don't say that," Pollard said. "Why, it's an honor for me to be here." Pollard got behind the wheel of a machine called a reverse hoe. Gravedigging is not done with men and shovels at Arlington. The reverse hoe is a green machine with a yellow bucket that scoops the earth toward the operator, not away from it as a crane does. At the bottom of the hill in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Pollard started the digging (Editor Note: At the bottom of the hill in front of the Custis-Lee Mansion).

Leaves covered the grass. When the yellow teeth of the reverse hoe first bit into the ground, the leaves made a threshing sound which could be heard above the motor of the machine. When the bucket came up with its first scoop of dirt, Metzler, the cemetery superintendent, walked over and looked at it. "That's nice soil," Metzler said. "I'd like to save a little of it," Pollard said. "The machine made some tracks in the grass over here and I'd like to sort of fill them in and get some good grass growing there, I'd like to have everything, you know, nice."

James Winners, another gravedigger, nodded. He said he would fill a couple of carts with this extra-good soil and take it back to the garage and grow good turf on it. "He was a good man," Pollard said. "Yes, he was," Metzler said. "Now they're going to come and put him right here in this grave I'm making up," Pollard said. "You know, it's an honor just for me to do this."

Pollard is 42. He is a slim man with a mustache who was born in Pittsburgh and served as a private in the 352nd Engineers battalion in Burma in World War II. He is an equipment operator, grade 10, which means he gets \$3.01 an hour. One of the last to serve John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who was the thirty-fifth President of this country, was a working man who earns \$3.01 an hour and said it was an honor to dig the grave.

Yesterday morning, at 11:15, [Jacqueline Kennedy](#) started toward the grave. She came out from under the north portico of the White House and slowly followed the body of her husband, which was in a flag-covered coffin that was strapped with two black leather belts to a black caisson that had polished brass axles. She walked straight and her head was high. She walked down the bluestone and blacktop driveway and through shadows thrown by the branches of seven leafless oak trees. She walked slowly past the sailors who held up flags of the states of this country. She walked past silent people who strained to see her and then, seeing her, dropped their heads and put their hands over their eyes. She walked out the northwest gate and into the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue. She

walked with tight steps and her head was high and she followed the body of her murdered husband through the streets of Washington.

Everybody watched her while she walked. She is the mother of two fatherless children and she was walking into the history of this country because she was showing everybody who felt old and helpless and without hope that she had this terrible strength that everybody needed so badly. Even though they had killed her husband and his blood ran onto her lap while he died, she could walk through the streets and to his grave and help us all while she walked.

There was mass, and then the procession to Arlington. When she came up to the grave at the cemetery, the casket already was in place. It was set between brass railings and it was ready to be lowered into the ground. This must be the worst time of all, when a woman sees the coffin with her husband inside and it is in place to be buried under the earth. Now she knows that it is forever. Now there is nothing. There is no casket to kiss or hold with your hands. Nothing material to cling to. But she walked up to the burial area and stood in front of a row of six green-covered chairs and she started to sit down, but then she got up quickly and stood straight because she was not going to sit down until the man directing the funeral told her what seat he wanted her to take.

The ceremonies began, with jet planes roaring overhead and leaves falling from the sky. On this hill behind the coffin, people prayed aloud. They were cameramen and writers and soldiers and Secret Service men and they were saying prayers out loud and choking. In front of the grave, Lyndon Johnson kept his head turned to his right. He is president and he had to remain composed. It was better that he did not look at the casket and grave of John Fitzgerald Kennedy too often. Then it was over and black limousines rushed under the cemetery trees and out onto the boulevard toward the White House. "What time is it?" a man standing on the hill was asked. He looked at his watch. "Twenty minutes past three," he said.

Clifton Pollard wasn't at the funeral. He was over behind the hill, digging graves for \$3.01 an hour in another section of the cemetery. He didn't know who the graves were for. He was just digging them and then covering them with boards. "They'll be used," he said. "We just don't know when. I tried to go over to see the grave," he said. "But it was so crowded a soldier told me I couldn't get through. So I just stayed here and worked, sir. But I'll get over there later a little bit. Just sort of look around and see how it is, you know. Like I told you, it's an honor."

Jackie's Debut a Unique Day - by Mike Royko

All that Saturday, the wise men of the neighborhood, who sat in chairs on the sidewalk outside the tavern, had talked about what it would do to baseball.

I hung around and listened because baseball was about the most important thing in the world, and if anything was going to ruin it, I was worried.

Most of the things they said, I didn't understand, although it all sounded terrible. But could one man bring such ruin?

They said he could and would. And the next day he was going to be in Wrigley Field for the first time, on the same diamond as Hack, Nicholson, Cavarretta, Schmitz, Pafko, and all my other idols.

I had to see Jackie Robinson, the man who was going to somehow wreck everything. So the next day, another kid and I started walking to the ballpark early.

We always walked to save the streetcar fare. It was five or six miles, but I felt about baseball the way Abe Lincoln felt about education.

Usually, we could get there just at noon, find a seat in the grandstand, and watch some batting practice. But not that Sunday, May 18, 1947.

By noon, Wrigley Field was almost filled. The crowd outside spilled off the sidewalk and into the streets. Scalpers were asking top dollar for box seats and getting it.

I had never seen anything like it. Not just the size, although it was a new record, more than 47,000. But this was twenty-five years ago, and in 1947 few blacks were seen in the Loop, much less up on the white North Side at a Cub game.

That day, they came by the thousands, pouring off the northbound Ls and out of their cars.

They didn't wear baseball-game clothes. They had on church clothes and funeral clothes: suits, white shirts, ties, gleaming shoes, and straw hats. I've never seen so many straw hats.

As big as it was, the crowd was orderly. Almost unnaturally so. People didn't jostle each other.

The whites tried to look as if nothing unusual was happening, while the blacks tried to look casual and dignified. So everybody looked slightly ill at ease.

For most, it was probably the first time they had been that close to each other in such great numbers.

We managed to get in, scramble up a ramp, and find a place to stand behind the last row of grandstand seats. Then they shut the gates. No place remained to stand.

Robinson came up in the first inning. I remember the sound. It wasn't the shrill, teenage cry you now hear, or an excited gut roar. They applauded, long, rolling applause. A tall, middle-aged black man stood next to me, a smile of almost painful joy on his face, beating his palms together so hard they must have hurt.

When Robinson stepped into the batter's box, it was as if someone had flicked a switch. The place went silent.

He swung at the first pitch and they erupted as if he had knocked it over the wall. But it was only a high foul that dropped into the box seats. I remember thinking it was strange that a foul could make that many people happy. When he struck out, the low moan was genuine.

I've forgotten most of the details of the game, other than that the Dodgers won and Robinson didn't get a hit or do anything special, although he was cheered on every swing and every routine play.

But two things happened I'll never forget. Robinson played first, and early in the game a Cub star hit a grounder and it was a close play.

Just before the Cub reached first, he swerved to his left. And as he got to the bag, he seemed to slam his foot down hard at Robinson's foot.

It was obvious to everyone that he was trying to run into him or spike him. Robinson took the throw and got clear at the last instant.

I was shocked. That Cub, a hometown boy, was my biggest hero. It was not only an unheroic stunt, but it seemed a rude thing to do in front of people who would cheer for a foul ball. I didn't understand why he had done it. It wasn't at all big league.

I didn't know that while the white fans were relatively polite, the Cubs and most other teams kept up a steady stream of racial abuse from the dugout. I thought that all they did down there was talk about how good Wheaties are.

Late in the game, Robinson was up again, and he hit another foul ball. This time it came into the stands low and fast, in our direction. Somebody in the seats grabbed for it, but it caromed off his hand and kept coming. There was a flurry of arms as the ball kept bouncing, and suddenly it was between me and my pal. We both grabbed. I had a baseball.

The two of us stood there examining it and chortling. A genuine major-league baseball that had actually been gripped and thrown by a Cub pitcher, hit by a Dodger batter. What a possession.

Then I heard the voice say: "Would you consider selling that?"

It was the black man who had applauded so fiercely.

I mumbled something. I didn't want to sell it.

"I'll give you ten dollars for it," he said.

Ten dollars. I couldn't believe it. I didn't know what ten dollars could buy because I'd never had that much money. But I knew that a lot of men in the neighborhood considered sixty dollars a week to be good pay.

I handed it to him, and he paid me with ten \$1 bills.

When I left the ball park, with that much money in my pocket, I was sure that Jackie Robinson wasn't bad for the game.

Since then, I've regretted a few times that I didn't keep the ball. Or that I hadn't given it to him free. I didn't know, then, how hard he probably had to work for that ten dollars.

But Tuesday I was glad I had sold it to him. And if that man is still around, and has that baseball, I'm sure he thinks it was worth every cent.