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I Prelude to the World Series

By 1921 the World Series had become America's greatest sporting event. Even those who paid little attention to baseball during the regular season were cognizant of the multigame struggle between the champions of the American and National leagues. And while no one individual game could create the furor and excitement of the previous July's heavyweight title fight between champion Jack Dempsey and his French challenger, Georges Carpentier, no other event could hold the sporting public's protracted interest that the battle for baseball's championship could.¹

Dempsey was one of the two 1920s athletes whom American sports fans would come to idolize and who would symbolize the era of the Roaring Twenties. The other was New York Yankee slugger Babe Ruth. No player before (or since) has so captured the imagination of the American sporting public, many of whom had begun following the Babe's at bats on a daily basis. His fame spread nationwide and even beyond, with more words written about him than about President Warren Harding. Ruth's presence in the Yankee lineup assured that the 1921 Series between the Yanks and John McGraw's New York Giants would be the most closely followed championship series ever. Even before the first pitch was thrown, fans were discussing whether McGraw's pitchers would be able to handle the Yankee sluggers as a group and in particular, Ruth.

With the Polo Grounds, the home park for both teams, hosting all the games, Ruth appeared to be even more of a looming threat to the Giants' pitchers. The seats down the right-field line at the Polo Grounds were a mere 256 feet away, not that the Babe needed the help. Fifty-two of his 113 home runs in two seasons with the Yankees had come on the road.

The glamour and prestige surrounding the World Series had come a long way since that day seventeen years earlier, when, after the Giants had won the 1904 National League pennant, manager McGraw

famously announced, “The Giants will not play a postseason series with the American League champions.”² Now the Giants were preparing to do just that. They had done so before, of course, although with limited success, much to the chagrin of McGraw, who passionately hated the American League and its president, Ban Johnson.³ After having defeated the Philadelphia Athletics in the 1905 World Series, McGraw’s Giants had lost four consecutive Series to the American League pennant winners: to the Athletics in 1911 and 1913, to the Boston Red Sox in 1912, and to the Chicago White Sox in 1917.

Back in July 1904, when McGraw, backed by owner John T. Brush, issued his refusal to play a World Series against the champion of the upstart new league, there was a strong possibility that the Highlanders, as the Yankees were then called, might be that champion. But the Highlanders lost the pennant to Boston on the last day of the season, whereupon Highlanders co-owner Frank Farrell proposed to Brush and McGraw that the Giants meet his second-place team in a postseason series. Brush’s refusal was brutally and mockingly short. “Who are these people?” he asked dismissively. “We do not know them at all. The Giants do not care to play minor leaguers, so this absurd challenge from a lot of nobodies will be ignored.”⁴ Recognizing the new team in New York as being on a par with the lordly Giants was something neither their manager nor their owner wanted to do.

Two years later, in 1906, Farrell had his revenge. The Yankees had again been involved in an exciting pennant race, finishing in second place, three games behind the Chicago White Sox. Moreover, they had surpassed the Giants in attendance for the first time. Hoping to convert the Yankees’ popularity into dollars for the Giants, Brush and McGraw suggested a postseason series between the two teams. Farrell, who had hoped the Yanks’ postseason play would be against the Chicago Cubs in the World Series, turned the Giants down flat.⁵ The “nobodies” had gotten their revenge.

Now that the Yankees, a team McGraw despised above all others, had won their first pennant, these two New York teams would meet, with the world championship at stake. That the Yankees’ potent offense was led by Babe Ruth, the game’s greatest attraction and the antithesis of the “inside baseball” McGraw had helped foster, only heightened the drama of this match.⁶ There were many reasons for McGraw’s current antipathy

to the Yankees. Perhaps foremost was that the American Leaguers had now shed their image as New York's "other team" and taken their place as the Giants' equals in the estimation of New York's fans.

Furthermore, by 1921 the hordes of early twentieth-century immigrants who had descended on New York City, mostly Jewish and Italian, had changed not only the ethnic composition of the city but also the fan base of its baseball teams. Author Harry Golden's tales of his childhood attachment to the Giants were symbolic of a generation of newcomers to America who had taken to America's game without assistance from, and often as an act of revolt against, their old-world fathers. Eric Rolfe Greenberg touched on a similar theme in his novel *The Celebrant*, a story centering on a young Jewish immigrant's devotion to pitcher Christy Mathewson.

Neither the National League team that had been in neighboring Brooklyn since the 1890s nor the American League entry relocated to Manhattan from Baltimore in 1903 had done much to change the Giants' entrenched position as the team of choice for the vast majority of New Yorkers. Brooklyn, despite becoming a part of the city in 1898, was just too far away; and its inhabitants did not fully embrace New York either. Just four years earlier, Brooklyn had voted for the merger by only 277 votes out of more than 129,000 cast; and on the eve of 1898, the editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* had declared, "Though borough it may be, Brooklyn it is, Brooklyn it remains, and Brooklyn we are."⁷

Because the Yankees rarely generated much excitement, a good portion of the American Leaguers' attendance came from fans anxious to see the great stars of the American League rather than to watch the home team. Only by going to watch the Yankees play at Hilltop Park, located at Broadway and 168th Street, not too far from the Polo Grounds, could older fans and those youngsters new to the game have the opportunity to see players like Nap Lajoie, Ty Cobb, Eddie Collins, Tris Speaker, Rube Waddell, Cy Young, Addie Joss, and Walter Johnson.

John McGraw's constant bullying of umpires and complaints that everyone was out to get the Giants had alienated fans in the league's seven other cities. Over time, his behavior came to alienate and drive away a significant number of New Yorkers. Yet despite the defections, New York had remained a strong National League town through the end of the First World War. That began to change when the Yankees

became serious pennant contenders in 1919, and accelerated with the coming of Babe Ruth to New York in 1920. Ruth's arrival had won new converts for the Yanks and the American League. On the eve of the 1921 Series, New York was evenly divided in its sentiment. "A few years ago, the Giants had the big following in New York, and the Yankees were given little consideration. McGraw and his men have still as great a grip on one part of fandom as any Giant team of the past had, but in the meantime a new army of fans has rallied to the Yankee standard where there once was a scattering few."⁸

Sid Mercer, of the *New York Evening Journal*, also recognized the inroads made by Yankee rooters and credited Ruth for bringing it about. "This is a National League town. John J. McGraw put his label on it years ago, and the Giants are firmly established. Up to a couple of years ago, the Yanks were just the 'other New York team.' But the immense personal popularity of Babe Ruth and the dynamite in the rest of that Yankee batting order have made the Yanks popular with the element that loves the spectacular."⁹

Unlike in future years, when rooting for one New York team meant rooting against the others, many New Yorkers had been happy to see both teams win. New York fans wanted and demanded winning teams, and they had not had a pennant winner since the Giants in 1917. The Brooklyn Dodgers had won the National League pennant in 1920, but that World Series had not generated much interest or excitement in New York.¹⁰ People in Manhattan just could not get very enthused about a team from Brooklyn.

When the Dodgers reached that Series to play the Cleveland Indians, one New York newspaper noted in an editorial that "the honor will go to a new city."¹¹ Another paper sarcastically editorialized that there would be a World Series "in town," if Brooklyn would concede that "Manhattan is part of New York and admit the inhabitants of this inconsiderable suburb to a humble share in their triumph."¹² Should Brooklyn repeat as National League champions in 1921, "there'd be nothing but thick gloom from the Statue of Liberty to Westchester County," unless the Yankees thrashed them in the World Series, wrote sportswriter Joe Vila.¹³

This year was different. New York fans were certain of one thing: for the first time since Christy Mathewson and 1905, a New York team would be baseball's world champions.

The cleaner brand of play in the American League, along with its star-studded rosters, contributed to the Yankees gaining a foothold in New York.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the overwhelming factor was the addition of Ruth. The bigger-than-life Babe, now playing on the nation's biggest stage, won the hearts of New Yorkers immediately. After having hit twenty-nine home runs—a record at that time—with the Boston Red Sox in 1919, Ruth shattered that mark with an unprecedented fifty-four in 1920, more than any other *team* in the American League and thirty-five more than runner-up George Sisler. He also led by similarly large margins in runs scored, runs batted in, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, and walks.

Yet despite the Babe's accomplishments, McGraw remained defiant, convinced his pitchers could handle the Yankee slugger. When asked before the Series if the Giants would pitch to Ruth, he responded, "Why shouldn't we pitch to Ruth? I've said it before, and I'll say it again, we pitch to better hitters than Ruth in the National League."¹⁵

Despite McGraw's disdain for Ruth, the Babe had impressed him since he first saw the young slugger back in 1914, when the Giants were playing a spring-training game against the International League Baltimore Orioles. Ruth was, of course, a pitcher then; and McGraw envisioned him some day pitching for the Giants. When Orioles owner Jack Dunn sold Ruth to the Red Sox without even contacting him, McGraw was so upset he never forgave his old Baltimore teammate.¹⁶ Nor, seemingly, did McGraw ever again have a kind word to say about Ruth. In the spring of 1919, Ruth was pestering Red Sox manager Ed Barrow to allow him to play every day. "If he plays every day," said McGraw, "the bum will hit into a hundred double plays before the season is over."¹⁷ The Red Sox and Giants played a series of exhibition games that spring, and whenever Ruth had a hit he would direct a "How's that for a double-play ball, Mac?" at the Giants' bench.¹⁸

Now a full-time outfielder, Ruth had almost single-handedly begun changing the game from the old-style inside baseball practiced by McGraw to one that featured power hitting and home runs.¹⁹ McGraw had been the embodiment of that old style of play—a low-scoring, scientific game that had prevailed in baseball since the turn of the century, a game dominated by pitchers, many of whom threw "trick" pitches, a game where a walk, a stolen base, and a couple of sacrifices would



1. The Giants had shared their home ballpark, the oddly shaped Polo Grounds, with the Yankees since 1913. For the first time, all games of the World Series were played in one park. Since the arrival of Babe Ruth in New York in 1920, the tenant was outdrawing its landlord.
Private collection of Dennis Goldstein.

scratch out a precious run.²⁰ Even the introduction of the cork-centered baseball in 1910 had not changed the style of play.

Ruth did. The Babe represented the new power-hitting game, where one swing of the bat generated runs. Twenty-five Major Leaguers had slugged ten or more home runs in 1921, a steep increase from the usual three or four who had done so during a typical year of the Deadball Era. As recently as 1917, Yankees first baseman Wally Pipp had led the American League with nine home runs.

McGraw hated this new style of play. “I do not like the lively ball,” he said. “I think the game far more interesting when the art of making scores lies in scientific work on the bases.” He believed that while fans liked to see home runs hit, there were times when they got weary of the long ball.²¹

But evidently the fans were not getting weary of it. More than 1 million of them had paid their way into the Polo Grounds in 1920 to watch

the Ruth-led Yankees stay in contention all season before finishing third, behind the Chicago White Sox and the pennant-winning Cleveland Indians. The Yankees' failure to win that year emboldened those in the New York press who had never cared for manager Miller Huggins to call for his removal, just as they had after the 1919 season.

Huggins also had to deal with unrest among his own players, who often second-guessed his moves. Yankees co-owner Tillinghast "Til" Huston was in favor of firing Huggins, but his partner, Jacob Ruppert, had faith in Huggins and wanted him to remain. Ruppert had prevailed, and now Huggins had rewarded him and Huston with the Yankees' first American League pennant.

While the *Sporting News* complained in an October 13 editorial that "baseball is a national game, not just a diversion for Manhattanites," the *Detroit News* more accurately reflected the opinions of baseball fans everywhere: "Never before have two teams as colorful as the contending clubs in this Series met for the title. Never has personality and individuality entered so strongly into a clash for baseball supremacy."²²

The Giants had finished in second place in each of the three preceding seasons. Over that same period, the Yankees, under Huggins and with the addition of Ruth in 1920, had become legitimate pennant contenders. As a result, supporters of both teams had spent countless hours arguing which was the better team. Now, finally, the first all-New York Series was here, and the answer would be determined on the field.²³ In one corner stood John McGraw and the old, established Giants, a fixture in the city since the Rosie O'Grady days of the Gay Nineties. In the other, stood Babe Ruth and the brash Yankees, the perfect sports symbol for what would come to be called America's Jazz Age.

Also at stake was the battle for who would be New York's team of choice. From a vantage point ninety miles away, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote, "It is more than possible that the victor in this combat will plunge ahead as the chosen team of the city, and if the American Leaguers bring home the bacon it will mean much, very much to them. . . . McGraw has never lost his hold on the popular imagination of New York, and the legend that he is the greatest still exists and is still potent."²⁴