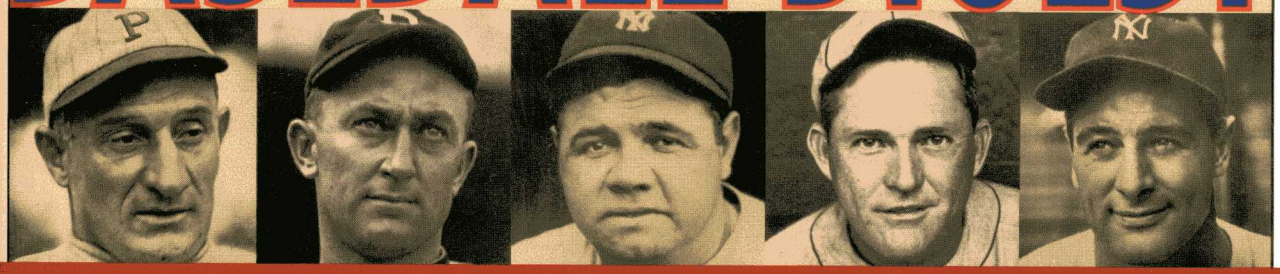
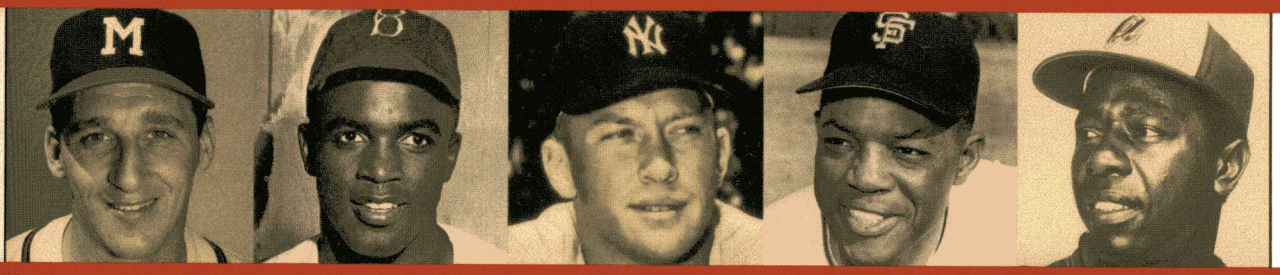
THE BEST OF BASEBALL DIGEST



MORE THAN 60 YEARS OF CLASSIC BASEBALL STORIES BY THE

GAME'S LEADING WRITERS—ALL THE THRILLS, STRANGE PLAYS,



TERRIFIC PLAYERS, MEMORABLE PERFORMANCES,

DARK MOMENTS, AND HUMOR OF THE GREAT AMERICAN GAME

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JOHN KUENSTER

walls, not less. So the next time you celebrate the old ballparks, save a kind word for Baker Bowl, League Park, Griffith Stadium, and Braves Field. Reputations to the contrary, they deserve it.

[1996]

The Day I Collected Babe Ruth's Autograph

BY JOHN DEEDY

When I was growing up in the 1930s in central Massachusetts, baseball cards were for play. We pitched them against walls or a flight of stairs until the corners were rounded and the cards so bent that they fluttered instead of sailing crisply toward their target.

Autographs of the stars? We collected them, sure, but we pinned them to the bedroom wall, where they stayed until the paper yellowed and rolled up on itself or, if in an autograph book, we stuck them in a drawer and as often as not forgot about them. Certainly we didn't run around the corner, as many kids do now, and hawk them with some dealer in sports memorabilia. Anyway, those dealers didn't exist in our Worcester neighborhood.

Which is to say the collecting of sports memorabilia wasn't the passion for us that it is for kids today. We had our stacks of baseball cards, sure, but they weren't any more precious than Indian cards. I'd have swapped a Lou Gehrig for a Geronimo or a Sitting Bull anytime. Autographs? You couldn't pitch them like baseball cards and you didn't swap them around. They were of secondary interest.

Thus when Lefty Grove stopped by the house one day after pitching for East Douglas in a Blackstone Valley League game, neither I nor any of my pals asked him for an autograph. My brother, Ed, was even disdainful. "Just because he can throw a ball better than me . . ." he said.

Ed was 8, maybe 9. The rest of us, a little older and naturally a lot wiser, were awed by Grove—his size (when you're 10 or 11, 6-feet-3 is mountainous), his huge hands, his rural Maryland accent. We had never heard anything like that in our land of the broad a's. We posed for a snapshot with him by the copper beech tree in the back yard, and it was like standing alongside the biblical Moses. To have solicited an autograph would have been unseemly. Besides, he was a guest.

In fact, I don't even remember Grove being approached for an autograph at the park in East Douglas, though it's likely he was. If so, there was no circus. In those days it was satisfaction enough to behold one of baseball's luminaries in the flesh, even if as a ball player on that particular day

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he wasn't breaking a sweat. At batting-practice speed, Lefty Grove could zip it by most any Blackstone Valley batter.

Again, we're talking about the 1930s. Grove was a member of the Boston Red Sox, but the Red Sox weren't scheduled to play that day, and on days off a player's time pretty much was his own. If there were a few bucks to be picked up in a semi-pro game, why not? Major league salaries were not that great. Besides, there was the Depression. Fifty, 75 or 100 bucks wasn't small change when 35 bucks was a week's pay—if you were lucky enough to have a job.

New England towns took their baseball rivalries seriously in those days and, Depression or not, money could be found for a ringer if it was to prove a town's superiority over, say, Uxbridge or Mendon or Woonsocket. Bragging rights, as they say. East Douglas wasn't the only team that shopped for outside talent. I recall Bo Bo Newsom of the Washington Senators pitching for one town team or another. Newsom wasn't the sure-bet Hall of Famer Grove was. Still, he spent 20 years in the majors, and journeyman or not, he wasn't traveling to the Blackstone Valley for the scenery. There's precious little of it there, if truth be told.

Anyway, Lefty Grove was at our house—I should say our flat, for home was the third floor of a three-decker at 12 Wabash Avenue on Worcester's Vernon Hill. He was there because East Douglas' coach, Jack Barry, was dropping me off en route back to Boston with his prize for the day. Barry was my uncle, and I had traveled to the game with him. It was late afternoon, hospitality was in order, and my father was ever the good host. Lefty Grove was in no rush to get back to a hotel room in Boston.

My uncle, be it said, had the contacts necessary to get a Lefty Grove to East Douglas. A former big leaguer himself—11 years with the Philadelphia Athletics and the Boston Red Sox—he had ties to the Red Sox still as a scout and friend of general manager Eddie Collins. Twenty years before, the two had comprised half of Connie Mack's famous Philadelphia A's $100,000 infield—Eddie Collins being at second base and Jack Barry at shortstop. I have a picture of myself sitting smack-dab between the two of them. Come to think of it, I never asked either of them for an autograph. From a half-century's distance, there was a mass of autographs I could have collected as a kid had it occurred to me. This was mostly because Jack Barry was also the baseball coach at Holy Cross, and for years I was the team's batboy. The signatures were mine for the asking. One didn't even need an eye for the sure-fire prospect. Ex–major leaguers were all over the place, it seemed, when Holy Cross was playing. Jesse Burkett, a Hall of Famer, living in Worcester, would be in the stands. When Harvard came to town, it was with Stuffy McInnis as coach; McInnis was the first baseman on that Philadelphia A's infield. One year a radio network sent Frankie Frisch, the

Fordham Flash, to broadcast a Holy Cross game. Frisch, another Hall of Famer, was just out of baseball and testing a new career as a sportscaster.

In fact, there were scores of sports celebrities I could have asked for autographs. I never did. It seemed tacky, a bit gauche. A person's privacy was not to be intruded upon, his fame not to be exploited. It was a rule that followed me through life.

Thus, years later, when I spotted Joe DiMaggio in the gallery at a Westchester Golf Classic, I forgot all about Arnold Palmer, Johnny Miller, Paul Harney and the likes of them. I followed DiMaggio for several holes and never approached him about signing my program book. Another year, Joe Garagiola was in the gallery, and I didn't approach him either, although I suspect he would have welcomed the move. That Joe was from a different mold than DiMaggio, much more extroverted.

All of which is preliminary to a confession. One memorable day, I did break my code of respect for the privacy of the famous. I not only got Babe Ruth's autograph but, "Bless me, Father, . . . " went to shameless lengths to do so.

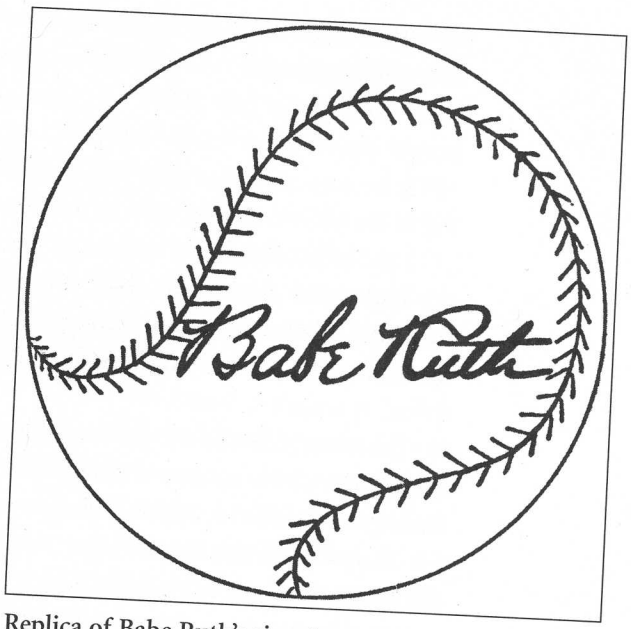
It was back in 1935—April 15, 1935, to be exact. Babe Ruth had signed on with the Boston Braves after 21 glorious years with the Red Sox and the New York Yankees, and was embarking on what would prove to be his last season in baseball. In those days the Braves traveled to Worcester each spring for an exhibition game with Holy Cross. So, too, did the Red Sox, and being an American League partisan, ordinarily that visit would have interested me more. But this was Babe Ruth who would be in town, The Bambino, Mr. Baseball himself. I bought myself an autograph book, determined to get his signature.

I knew I'd be in a position to do so. A crowd of 10,000—huge for Fitton Field—was expected, but as the Holy Cross batboy I'd be right there on the same field as the god of the diamond. I was a 12-year-old, and I plotted my strategy.

Obviously I could ask my uncle to get the autograph for me. After all, he and Ruth were teammates on the Red Sox before that infamous trade that sent Ruth to the Yankees for 30 pieces of silver. In 1917—the year Ruth, a pitcher then, won 24 games—my uncle had actually been Ruth's manager. A winter or two before, Ruth and his first wife, Helen, had stopped by the Barrys' second-floor flat in my grandmother's house at 1 View St. in Worcester, ostensibly for a short visit; they stayed until it was time to leave for spring training. Yet I felt that to ask my uncle to solicit an autograph would have been like asking Muhammad to go to the mountain. I couldn't do that. People asked him for his autograph.

So maybe I should approach Ruth myself, invoking my mother's name. She was a child, at home still with her mother on the first floor when the

Ruths were staying upstairs. Babe Ruth would ruffle her blond hair when they passed one another. Indeed, my mother's first pair of ice skates was given to her by Helen Ruth. Mrs. Ruth was off to Florida with the Babe—and the Barrys—and certainly she wasn't going to need ice skates there. Problem was, there was no guaranteeing I'd be able to get close to Ruth, given the anticipated crowd and the police security.



Replica of Babe Ruth's signature.

Ah, but what about the Holy Cross first baseman? Babe Ruth would be at first for the Braves and at that position for Holy Cross would be Nick Morris, a classy fielder and strong hitter out of Medford and an idol, too, of mine. He and Ruth would be exchanging positions each inning, and one would expect there would be opportunities for him to pick up an autograph. I talked to Nick and he was agreeable. "Just wait for the right moment, Jackie, OK?" he said.

That moment didn't come in the first inning, which had drama enough of the diversionary kind. Ruth stepped up to bat, third in the batting order, when a man bolted from the stands and headed toward the batter's box. People startled, and the police detail of more than 20 officers tensed. But the "intruder" was only Mayor John C. Mahoney making an impromptu presentation of the key to the city to Ruth. Ruth accepted it graciously, stood to the plate and, in the *Worcester Telegram*'s phrase, "rolled weakly" to Morris at first.

The second inning came and went. Nick Morris still hadn't made an approach and I was becoming a trifle nervous. It was a chilly afternoon with occasional clouds appearing, carrying the threat of rain. Surely a valuable property like Babe Ruth wouldn't be playing the whole game. "Don't worry, Jackie," Morris told me. "I haven't forgotten. I'll get your autograph."

Third inning. Ruth walked on a three-and-two pitch and trotted to first. He and Morris chatted, and an arrangement was agreed upon. The inning over, Morris returned to the bench, took my autograph book, tucked it in his hip pocket. As the teams exchanged sides in the fourth inning, Ruth paused, signed the book—and all hell broke loose.

Thousands of people poured out of the stands, overwhelming the police, and converged on Ruth for autographs of their own. Players on both sides took cover. Jack Barry was livid and directed at Morris a barrage of purple prose he probably hadn't used since being spiked by Ty Cobb in 1912; he was mad that day, too, I understand. Morris said, simply, "I only did it for your nephew," and handed me the autograph book.

I got a dark look, no chastisement. The volcano gradually subsided.

The police cleared the field, but the fans weren't to see much more of the Babe. Ruth had promised at a press conference in Boston the day before the game, "I'll do my level best to bust one on the nose for the home folks." It wasn't to be.

He came to bat in the fifth inning and walked again, whereupon he was lifted for a pinch runner and whisked away. He left waving good-byes and calling out to the bleachers, "Hope to see you again."

That was all the baseball for Babe Ruth on April 15, 1935, but no one felt cheated. From the moment he had entered the ballpark, a motorcycle escort shooing away the advance guard of autograph seekers, he had put on a grand show, accommodating pre-game demands for his signature, horsing around with the fans, even taking a seat with the Holy Cross College band and tooting on a trombone.

However, though Ruth was gone, the fourth-inning autograph incident had set the tone for the rest of the afternoon. It seemed all a Boston Braves player had to do was glance toward the stands and eye contact would set off another stampede, the targets now Wally Berger, Billy Urbanski, Randy Moore, Pinky Whitney and other stars, albeit of a lesser kind. The game was played to the last out, but as sports editor Roy Mumpton observed in the *Worcester Telegram,* "interruptions were many, and long."

The Braves won the game with three runs in the ninth, 5-2, but the outcome was anticlimactic. The real winner had been Ruth. The day had belonged to him.

Twenty-eight games later, the Braves now into their regular season, Babe Ruth retired from baseball. The years had caught up with the greatest hitter in the history of the game. Ruth realized it as well as the rest of the world; he was batting only .181, some 160 points below his career average.

That was a sad day for baseball—and for me—although there was the consolation of having been present at one of Ruth's last games, even if it was only an exhibition contest. And, of course, there was that autograph.

I had tucked the autograph away, and though decades were to pass I never forgot it. I moved on from Vernon Hill—to the army, a stretch in Ireland, journalism jobs in several cities. But in my mind's eye I could still see that 3-by-5-inch autograph book with the black cover in the top right-hand drawer of a desk in the bedroom, just waiting to be picked up.

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Larry Doby: An
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BY IRA BERKOW

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By 1985 that 1935 autograph had solid value. Only a few years before, I had seen an autograph of Babe Ruth at B. Altman's in New York City with a price tag of more than $2,000. Indeed, the autograph was probably the most valuable single item in my parents' house. But it wasn't value I was looking to recoup. I was after a piece of my youth.

My parents died within a few months of one another in 1985, and my brothers and I closed the flat out. I had only one thing in mind: finding that autograph. I went to the bedroom desk. There was no autograph book. I hunted room by room, fearing the worst the more I looked. I picked among a stack of old football and baseball programs in the shed out back, relics in their own way but not what I was after.

The autograph of Babe Ruth wasn't there. It had vanished, and I was left with a sorrow, one that lingers yet. Except there is the memory, a memory that disappointment cannot dislodge and which $2,000, or whatever the current value of a Babe Ruth signature is, cannot buy. I had stood on the same diamond as the greatest player in all of history. I had gazed on immortality.

And six decades later, I still had my own field of dreams. Who needed an autograph?

[1997]

Larry Doby: An Overlooked Black Pioneer in the American League

BY IRA BERKOW

Larry Doby remembers clearly his first day in the major leagues, that day 50 years ago when he broke the color barrier in the American League. It was 11 weeks after Jackie Robinson had played his first game for the Brooklyn Dodgers in the National League. Doby remembers the excitement of that day when he became only the second black player in the major leagues—he had hardly slept in four nights leading up to it—and he remembers the dismay.

Saturday, July 5, 1947, a sunny morning in Chicago: Lou Boudreau, the manager of the Cleveland Indians, took the 22-year-old second baseman into the visiting team's locker room in Comiskey Park and introduced him to the players. Each of Doby's new teammates stood at his locker and looked over the young black man who had just been purchased by the Indians' owner, Bill Veeck, from the Newark Eagles of the Negro National League. Doby and the manager went from player to player.