

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Man of the day:

Christy Mathewson

“What are you doing, you crazy Indian!” yelled the shortstop. “Pull me up!”

“Ain’t nothing to worry about,” says his teammate. “You’re so skinny, I could hold you with two fingers.”

“Don’t you try it, Jim. Just get me back up in the room. Hey, you down there,” the shortstop cried out, “what are you all looking at? Ain’t you never seen a guy hanging from the twentieth floor of a hotel before?”

The shortstop’s name was Rabbit Maranville, and the big Indian was Jim Thorpe,

holding him by one ankle and dangling him headfirst out of the window of their hotel.

That was baseball, in the old days. It was the national pastime. Every boy played it. You didn’t even need a field. City boys played it right out in the streets. But the players were sometimes not the most decent people in the world. Some of them drank a lot. Some of them got into fist fights with

other players, with their managers, with the umpires, and even with fans. If you were a Christian mother or father, you wouldn’t necessarily want your son to play baseball for a living.

But there was a man who helped to clean all of that up, when nobody thought it could be done. His name was Christy Mathewson.

Christy – short for Christopher – came from a

devout Christian family a few miles from where I grew up in Pennsylvania. He worked on his father’s farm, he didn’t drink, and he sang hymns in church on Sunday. He went to Bucknell College to study forestry, but he was too good an athlete to stay away from the playing fields.



It wasn’t just baseball. He was a football star too. His teammates called him Gun-boots. Do you know what a “drop kick” is? Try it – not in the house, because your mother likes that lamp next to the couch. Try it outside. You hold the ball in front of you, you take a step forward, you drop the ball, and then just as it bounces off the ground you kick it. It’s not easy to do and get the ball to go straight, but

if you could do that in the middle of a football play, and sail that ball through the goal posts, it would be worth *five points*, almost as much as a touchdown! And Matty, which was what his friends called him, could do it, and that's why they gave him that great nickname, Gun-boots.

So he was outstanding at football, but his finest talent was in flinging the horsehide – pitching a baseball, that is. He had a special trick pitch, which he called his “fadeaway.” It's harder to do than a drop kick. Take the baseball and put your fingers next to the seams – to the right of them if you are a right hander, and to the left of them if you are a left hander. Just as you release the ball, turn your wrist sharply in, *towards* your body, with your thumb down. That's not a natural motion. It produces an inside-out curveball, with the same twist a right hander makes to *loosen* a screw. It puts a lot of strain on your elbow, so you shouldn't get into the habit of doing it if you are still just a boy. The pitch is now called a “screwball,” and very few pitchers have the strength or skill to use it. Matty threw it to lefties, making it curve in the “wrong” direction, to the right, fading away from them – swing and a miss!

Mathewson won 373 games in his phenomenal career with the New York Giants, leading the league in Earned Run Average five times, winning 30 or more games three years in a row, and 20 or more games 12 years in a row. (If you don't know what Earned Run Average is, your father will explain it later on.) He was so well-known and respected, all you had to do to get a letter to him was to address it, “Matty,” or “Big Six,” New York City. That was

enough. He'd get it and he'd answer it too. The nation's boys made him their hero.

He was worthy of it. Matty wasn't a hot-dog. He was a man's man, and he rubbed elbows with the rougher men, and they respected him and liked him. Nobody had a bad word to say about him. Here is something we ought to honor him for. Matty was the last player in baseball history to refuse to play on Sunday, the Lord's Day. That is the day we are supposed to keep holy. That didn't mean that he

would miss his turn, though. Matty's manager, a feisty fellow named John McGraw, would let him pitch on Saturday instead. He was just as good on short rest as he would have been on Sunday. Mr. and Mrs. McGraw adopted Matty as the son they never had.

Now, in 1919, after Matty had retired as a player,

something happened that almost cracked the back of baseball. The World Series was coming up, between the Chicago White Sox and the Cincinnati Reds. The White Sox were easily the better team. But there was a group of rough men on the White Sox who thought they were not being paid well enough – and there was some truth to that. They got together with some gamblers to “throw” the Series to the Reds. That meant that they would pretend to be trying to win, but they would make errors on purpose, or strike out in a big inning on purpose, so that they would lose and the Reds would win, and the men who bet on the Reds would win too. For doing this, the gamblers would give them some of their winnings.

That was dishonest and shameful. And Christy Mathewson played a big part in ripping the cover off it. At the end of his career, Matty, whose left side

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was now in constant pain, took the job as manager of the Reds. They were terrible. He built that team up, fast. One of the best things he did was to get rid of a bad man. The Reds had a slick-fielding first baseman named Hal Chase. But Chase was evil. Mathewson got rid of him when he caught him offering bribes to teammates to influence the score of a game.

Matty's health and World War One got in the way of his career as a manager. He was a captain in the army and had volunteered to go to France to help train American soldiers against attacks of poisonous mustard gas. In a training accident Matty inhaled some of the poison himself. That began to eat away at his lungs, and finally the doctors found out that something else was wrong there. It wasn't just that he had sore muscles in his side. Matty had tuberculosis.

Matty couldn't manage in 1919, but he saw the club he built go 96-44, winning the National League pennant and going on to the World Series. When the Series began, he noticed Hal Chase in the company of the White Sox players. That aroused his suspicion, and he and a sports writer went on to analyze the Series closely, keeping score together and circling all plays that appeared to them to be "fixed." In doing so they were able to narrow down the players who were dishonest.

When everybody, even some pretty good people, wanted to look the other way, Christy Mathewson was the only man with an official role in the sport

who spoke out loudly and who declared what was wrong. If he had not helped to drag the scandal out into the open, who knows what would have happened to baseball in the end? You can't cure an infection by letting it fester, till finally it is so bad that you can't hide it anymore, but you also can't do anything about it, either.

Christy Mathewson never regained his health. He kept the tuberculosis at bay for a few years, often retreating to a sanatorium at Saranac Lake, New York, in the Adirondack Mountains. There he died in 1925, at the age of 45, survived by his wife and son. When baseball established the Hall of Fame, he was one of the five men inducted in the first year, with Honus Wagner, Ty Cobb, Walter Johnson, and Babe Ruth.

The farm country Little League to which my town's team once lost in the All-Star game was simply named, "Christy Mathewson," for the famous man who lived there as a boy. May God bless us with men as strong and good and manly as he was.



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