

FIFTY YEARS
AFTER HIS
DEATH,
BABE RUTH
STILL
CAPTIVATES AS

Man, Myth, LEGEND



**BILL
PLASCHKE**

Whether you believe he actually pointed to center field and predicted the most fabled hit in baseball history, there is one shot Babe Ruth did call.

Sitting in her New Hampshire home today, an 81-year-old woman sighs.

"Daddy rarely read books or went to movies, he said it would hurt his eyes, he warned me about the same thing," said Julia Ruth Stevens. "I ignored him. Now look at me."

Today, on the 50th anniversary of George Herman Ruth's death, with the country celebrating its first sports hero through print and television and ceremony, his lone surviving child can see little of it.

A degenerative eye disease has left her legally blind.

But she knows what we are just beginning to understand.

"What happened with Daddy, it was always something you could just feel," she said. "It still is."

Indeed, today we feel it, embrace it, the majesty and the mishaps, the talent and the turmoil, the legend and the big galoot of a right fielder who swallowed it whole.

Fifty years after his death, all of Babe Ruth's important records have been broken, yet he is larger than ever, a symbol of mammoth strength and childlike frailty during a time when our heroes are no longer big enough to handle both.

With a face like a seat cushion, a body like a bonbon, legs like twigs, and the smile of a little boy, he ran pigeon-toed on to the landscape as our war-weary country was looking for a personality.

During 21 years of big swings, he defined it.

Babe Ruth made America believe that nothing succeeds like excess.

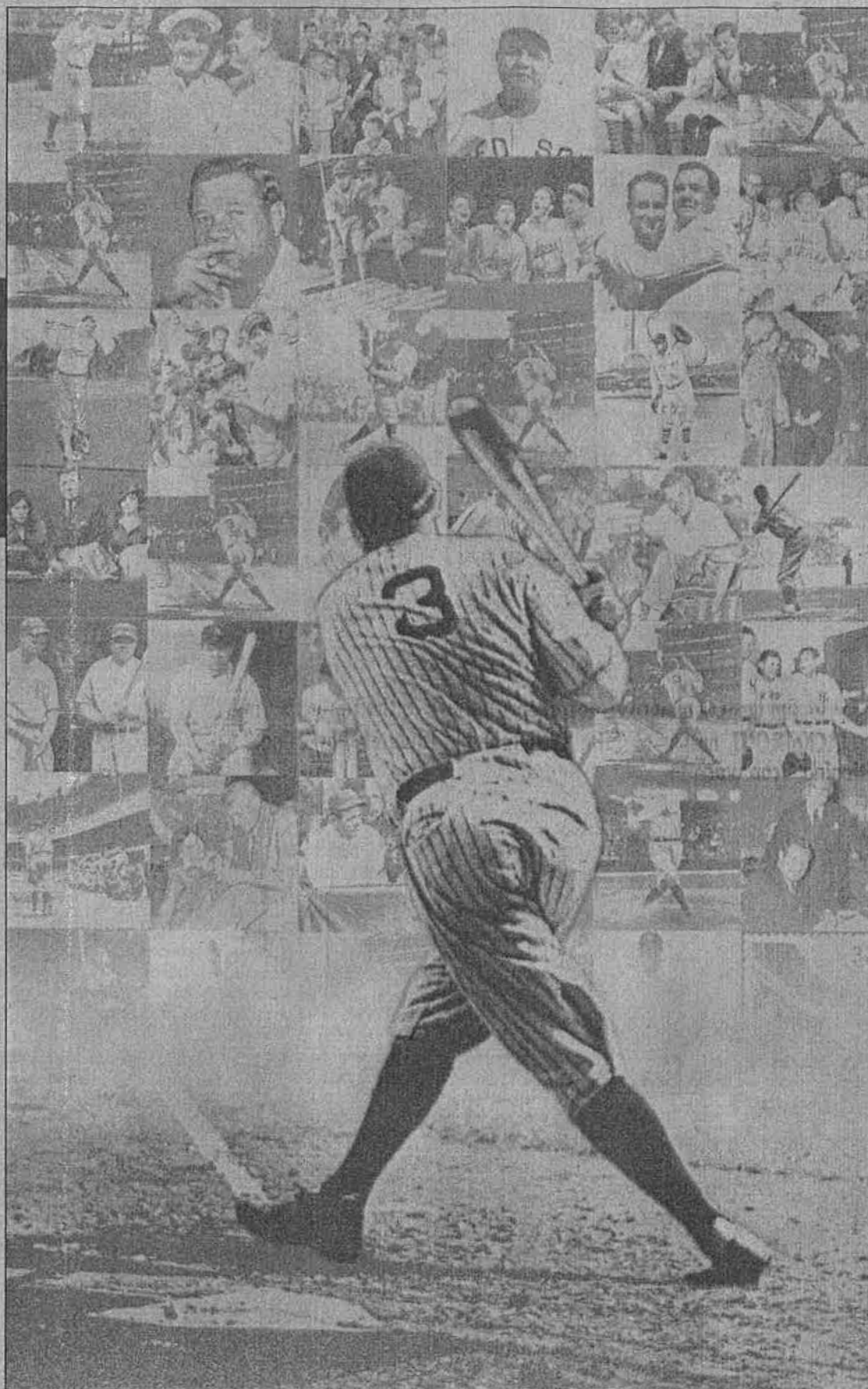


Photo illustration: REBECCA PERRY/Los Angeles Times

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PLASCHKE

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Today we love home runs. We love to eat until we fall away from the table, grunting. We buy expensive things, throw expensive parties. We aren't afraid to laugh like a horse or cry like a baby. Sometimes our desires get us into trouble, but hey, kid, we mean well, we'll try harder next time, OK?

Babe Ruth made America believe, going from the hopelessness of Baltimore streets to the glory of the world stage and nearly back again.

In his final years, he fell into despair when nobody would hire him as a manager. Owners chuckled that they didn't think he could manage himself.

He died of throat cancer on Aug. 16, 1948, at 53, gray and thin and wondering how his wonderful life had so quickly disappeared.

"I'm so glad to see you," he told his daughter shortly before his final breaths, as if he thought she had departed as well.

The thing is, our love for him didn't disappear. We had just momentarily grown bored. Not anymore. Today he's making a comeback as big as that final career home run he dramatically knocked out of Pittsburgh's Forbes Field.

Babe Ruth's image is on TV commercials, print ads, beer mugs, shirts, even a restaurant in London. And what must this street-educated man be thinking if he looks down and discovers that he has his own Web site.

The more we know about Babe Ruth, the more we want to know. Thus the theme of this 50th anniversary column:

Fifty things about Babe Ruth you may not know.

Things like, he referred to his daughter Julia as "Butch."

Things like, as she was doing a recent telephone interview, she was sitting in her home next to a manicured field.

A field where, that night, a bunch of kids would be playing baseball.

In the local Babe Ruth League.

□

1. The "Baby Ruth" candy bar has nothing to do with Babe Ruth. The Curtiss Candy Co. named it after the late daughter of President Grover Cleveland. When Ruth tried to sell his own candy bar, the patent office rejected it.

2. For years, for unknown reasons, Ruth thought he was born on Feb. 7 instead of Feb. 6, which was on his birth certificate. When he realized his error, he shrugged, and continued to celebrate on Feb. 7.

3. He was not an orphan—his parents owned a bar, and he was placed in an orphanage/reform school because they couldn't handle him. Yet he circulated the story throughout his life to inspire orphans.

4. The incident that many agree led to his banishment to St. Mary's Industrial School for Boys, in Baltimore, occurred when he stole a dollar from his parents' bar and bought ice cream cones for all the children on his block.

5. In his final two years at St. Mary's—with his mother dead of tuberculosis and his father busy in the bar—he had no visitors.

He said, "I am too big and ugly for anyone to come see me."

6. He began his career at St. Mary's as a left-handed catcher. He would put the right-handed mitt on his left hand, catch the ball, throw it in the air

talk about him, write me letters about him," Julia Ruth Stevens said of her father. "And none of them ever knew him."

Oh, but we all knew him. Maybe not for what he did back then, but for how he affects us today.

Babe Ruth practically invented the autograph. Nobody in history had signed as many, or as often, always for kids who reminded him of himself. Collectors be warned: He signed so much, he taught Yankee trainer Doc Woods to sign for him.

Babe Ruth's presence inspired phrases such as "Ruthian," meaning huge, and "out in left field," which referred to any kid dumb enough not to sit behind him in right.

Babe Ruth was one of the first stars to appear in ads in his underwear, squelching the long-held rumor he did not wear any.

There is one thing it appears Babe Ruth did *not* do. Ruth did not call his home run against Chicago Cub pitcher Charlie Root in the third game of the 1932 World Series.

Research for this column, which involved several books, including "The Life That Ruth Built," as well as ESPN and HBO documentaries, point to the same thing.

It seems Ruth was not pointing, but just angrily waving at the center field crowd after someone had tossed yet another lemon at his foot.

If he really did call the shot, why did none of the newspapers mention it the next day? Why didn't even Ruth mention it until the myth had grown the next spring?

Another myth is that baseball's greatest player was always embraced by the game he helped make famous.

When he retired during the 1935 season at 40, nobody would give him the one job he wanted, that of a manager.

"It was almost like baseball blacklisted my father," said Stevens, who recently published a warm family photo collection. "All this talk about him not being able to manage himself, that was baloney. They were just mad at him for salaries as a player."

Whatever the reason, many days in his early retirement were spent playing golf, then hustling home with the same question.

"He always asked Momma if there had been any calls for him," Stevens recalled. "And she always said no."

After losing out on one managerial opening, he returned home, put his head on the table, and wept.

The other legacy that Babe Ruth never produced was that of another Babe Ruth.

He had two adopted daughters, but no sons, fittingly confirming he would be the first, the last, the only.

□

26. Ruth once picked up Yankee Manager Miller Huggins—whom he despised and called "Little Boy"—and dangled him off a train.

27. During one day at Coney Island with Yankee teammates, Ruth ate four porterhouse steaks, eight hot dogs, and washed them down with eight sodas.

28. Ruth would end his all-night parties after Saturday Yankee games with a visit to dawn Mass, where he would throw \$50 into the collection plate.

29. Ruth, whose boarding school was segregated, once called a team of Cubans "preasers" and said one

After Babe Ruth hung up his jersey for the last time, and later a replica of his locker was put on display at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y., he couldn't get back in the game. "He always asked Momma if there had been any calls for him," his daughter Julia said. "And she always said no."



TIM ROSKE/For The Times

“
It's amazing that so many people still love him, talk about him, write me letters about him. And none of them ever knew him.
”

JULIA RUTH STEVENS,
ON HER FATHER, BABE RUTH

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