

Damn Senators

**My Grandfather and the Story
of Washington's Only
World Series Championship**

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ENCOUNTER BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

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Preface

REMEMBRANCE OF BASEBALL PAST

From where I was standing at Washington's Robert Francis Kennedy Stadium, it was hard to see my father, surrounded as he was by officials on the fifty-yard line. My mother and I and our relatives were stuck behind the end zone.

It was October 21, 1990, and my grandfather, Joe Judge, was being inducted into the stadium's Ring of Stars, a local hall of fame for Washington, D.C., athletes. Along with three other Washington greats—Redskins Joe Theisman and John Riggins, and former Washington Bullet Elvin Hayes—the name of Joe Judge was about to be added to a circle of names around the inner part of the stadium. The other inductees were there in person, but my grandfather had died in 1963, the year before I was born, and my father was representing him at the halftime ceremony. While I couldn't see Dad from where I stood in the bitter cold, I could hear RFK's public address announcer, as well as the anticipatory hum of the 55,000 fans in the stadium.

Washington has a reputation as city of transients who don't develop any attachment to the place; but that wasn't the town I knew. The city I grew up in was a place of local bars and rock bands, row houses, parks, rivers, diners and jazz clubs. And sports fans. Lots of them.

Indeed, Washington is a sports town with a long memory. It is also a place with baseball in its soul. The city has lost two versions of the Senators, one in 1960 and the other in 1971—two seasons of heartbreak. So today, bereft of a team, many fans make the trip down the Beltway to Baltimore; it is estimated that as many as a third of the Orioles fans come from Washington. But it's not the same.

The RFK announcer read my grandfather's statistics—his 19 years in major league baseball from 1915 to 1934, all but the last two spent in Washington; a .298 batting average; 2,352 hits; 433 doubles; 1,037 RBIs; 1500 double plays; 1,284 assists; a .993 fielding average, which was the standard for first basemen for 30 years; his leadership of the American League in fielding percentage six times—and the crowd began to cheer. When the announcer mentioned that Joe Judge had been part of the 1924 team, the only Washington Senators squad to win a World Series, the cheering swelled to a roar.

For our family, it was a moment of vindication. Joe Judge was one of the greatest baseball players of all time, yet today he is largely forgotten. He was not the kind of player, or the kind of man, who drew a lot of attention to himself. He exemplified virtues that seem in short supply today, both in athletics and in our larger culture. Family, friends, sportswriters all describe him the same way: polite, taciturn, unassuming. Baseball writer Huck Finnegan put it more elegantly when he called Granddad “intelligent, courageous, personable, industrious and sober.” A 1925 article in *Baseball* magazine emphasized his steadiness when it called him “the sheet anchor of the Washington infield.”

Relatives, players who knew him, journalists, everyone he came in contact with describes him in the same way: as a man who could not be ruffled. He coached at Georgetown University after he retired, and one of his former players once recalled that the most upset he had ever seen Joe get was when he bumped into a group of his players in a bar after a particularly embarrassing loss. “That was baseball that could bring tears to the eyes of a hobbyhorse,” he said with evident emotion.

My aunt Dorothy (Joe’s daughter) had another telling story. Joe was at the house in Chevy Chase, Maryland, where he moved in the early 1930s. Busying himself for some guests in the kitchen, he dropped a bottle of milk. There was a loud crash of breaking glass. The visitors braced themselves for the vulgar tirade for which baseball players were notorious. But from the kitchen came more restrained sounds of complaint: “Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear . . .”

Yet Joe Judge was a man sometimes capable of mischief and even, on very rare occasions, angry eruptions—at least on the diamond. Somewhat reclusive off the field, he could come alive as a moral presence in this intensely competitive team sport. In 1928, the Senators slugger Goose Goslin was leading the league in hitting. On the last day of the season, he was just a fraction of a point ahead of Heinie Manush of the St. Louis Browns for the batting title. The Browns were in town for the last game, and when it came time for Goose’s final turn at bat, Manush was at .378 and he was at .379. Senators manager Bucky Harris let Goose know that he didn’t have to bat if he didn’t want to. He decided not to. Then he heard a voice from the dugout.

“You better watch out,” Joe Judge said, “or they’ll call you yellow.”

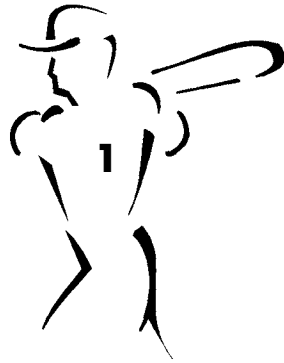
“What are you talking about?” Goose said.

Judge pointed to Heinie Manush in left field. “What do you think he’ll figure if you win the title by sitting on the bench?”

Goslin batted, and after trying unsuccessfully to get thrown out of the game by arguing a pitch call, he got a hit and won the 1928 batting title fair and square.

After the announcer at RFK read off the statistics for all the Ring of Stars inductees, the tarpaulin covering their names was dropped.

Joe Judge was a star in Washington again. How he became one the first time, and helped bring a championship to his city, is one of the great stories in baseball.



BASEBALL AND THE CITY

Baseball had been a feature of Washington's civic life for more than fifty years before my grandfather arrived on the scene to play for the Senators. That was in 1915.

The game first came to the city in the summer of 1859, when a group of government clerks formed a team named the Potomacs. Later that year another local team, the Nationals, was organized. In the spring of 1860 the Potomacs challenged the Nationals to a game, which was played on a field behind the White House called the White Lot—the site of today's Ellipse. The Potomacs won the game, scoring 35 runs. (Accounts differ on how many runs the Nationals scored.) A newspaper reported that after the game, the teams “partook of rich entertainment prepared for them . . . at the order of the Potomac Club”—in other words, they celebrated at a bar. The Potomac Club was then at the Ebbit Hotel, one block from the White House. And it's still there.

This vignette is a reminder that baseball was a middle-class recreation before farmers and immigrants (and their sons, in my grandfather's case) took over the game.

Baseball had its origins in the British game of rounders and took shape in the 1840s, mainly in America's growing cities. It was played by men of middle-class professional standing—after all, laborers couldn't take the afternoons off. The game grew in popularity, and in 1860 the Excelsior Club of Brooklyn went on the first baseball tour, traveling through Pennsylvania, Maryland and Delaware, to play, as baseball historian John P. Ross tells us, "before large crowds that were already deeply informed about baseball." He notes that the new game "perfectly fit the contours of the country—it was fast, dynamic and uniquely American."

In the years after that first game between the Potomacs and the Nationals, baseball quickly caught on in Washington. By 1865, six thousand fans, including President Andrew Johnson, watched the Nationals play the Brooklyn Atlantics and the Philadelphia Athletics. (Until the 1950s the true name of the team was the Washington Nationals; "Senators" was a nickname used by so many people that almost everyone assumed it was official.)

On July 11, 1867, the Nationals went on the first western tour in baseball history. (The frontier was then still expanding, so most of the territory they covered was actually what we know today as the Midwest.) The team paid its own way and was joined by Henry Chadwick, an English immigrant and one of the first sportswriters in America. A few years earlier, in addition to his other contributions to our national sport, he had come up with an ingenious system for organizing on paper the events of a baseball game: the box score.

The Nationals dominated the tour, blasting Cincinnati 53 to 10, then beating local teams from St. Louis, Indianapolis and Louisville. In Chicago, they lost their

first game to a 17-year-old pitcher named Albert Goodwill Spalding. At the time, Spalding was earning five dollars a week as a grocery clerk in Rockford, Illinois. His showing against Washington was so impressive that he was recruited by a man named Harry Wright who was putting together a team in Boston. A. G. Spalding would be the sole pitcher on Boston's roster in 1871, and gain a record of 20–10. In 1875 it would be 56–4. He would also go on to form his own sporting goods company, becoming one of the most successful sports entrepreneurs in American history.

The day after their defeat at the hand of Spalding, the Nationals trounced the Chicago Excelsiors, inducing the *Chicago Tribune* to accuse Washington of having thrown the game against Spalding so they could get better odds and clean up against Chicago. After a visit from Nationals president Frank Toner and player Arthur Gorman, the paper printed a retraction. Gorman would go on to become a U.S. senator; according to some, he was responsible for the “Senators” nickname.

Within three years, another Washington team had been formed, the Olympics. It was organized by Nicholas H. Young, who would later be credited with forming the National League of Professional Ballplayers. Young, who had learned to play baseball while fighting in the Civil War, was an outfielder for the Nationals, and ran a school for umpires in D.C. Along with the Olympics came other D.C. teams: the Capitals, the Empires, the Unions, the Jeffersons.

Baseball was rapidly developing a more organized structure. In 1869 the first professional team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings, was formed. The payroll added up to

\$9,300, and the fact that they were paid at all meant that players would be chosen for their skills, not whether they could get afternoons off. The game itself was also evolving: batters were learning to change their stances to avoid hitting fly balls, which had become easy outs thanks to improved fielding strategies; and while pitchers had previously tossed the ball underarm, merely trying to put it into play, by now they were throwing with vastly more force and cunning, eager to engage in aggressive duels with hitters in order to strong-arm outs at all costs.

In Washington, the Nationals had a new man leading the organization. Mike Scanlon had played baseball since joining the Union Army at age fifteen. At the war's end, he arrived in Washington nearly broke; by 1866 he was already able to buy a poolroom on Ninth and S Streets, just a few blocks north of the White House. But Scanlon was crazy for baseball, and his energy soon attracted the attention of the city's other enthusiasts: Frank Jones, president of the Nationals; Arthur Gorman, former player and future senator from Maryland; wealthy businessman Robert Hewit; and Nicholas Young, head of the Olympic Club. Scanlon began organizing games on the White Lot behind the White House, and by 1869 crowds averaged four thousand people. President Johnson had the Marine Band play at the Saturday games. His successor, Ulysses S. Grant, watched from the South Lawn of the White House.

While Scanlon was boosting baseball in D.C., in New York the game's owners, managers and players were also organizing professionally. At a 1871 meeting, the National Association of Baseball Players decided to form themselves into a league. The National League

would have teams in nine cities: New York; Philadelphia; Boston; Troy, New York; Chicago; Cleveland; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Rockford, Illinois; and Washington, which would be represented by the short-lived Olympics (the Nationals not joining the league until the following year).



IN 1886 THE NATIONALS ACQUIRED a catcher named Cornelius McGillicuddy, who would later become famous as Connie Mack, a name he came up with to fit in a box score. The Nationals were now playing at the Swampoodle Grounds, a field near what is now Washington's Union Station. An 1888 photograph shows the team facing the Chicago White Stockings, and Mack is unmistakable behind the plate. He had an Ichabod Crane body, and even in a picture taken from a distance he stands out like a flamingo among starlings. Mack made his major league debut for Washington on October 7, 1886, hitting a single and a triple in a 12–3 win over Kansas City. Mack would go on to own and manage the Philadelphia Athletics for half a century. Always a distinctive figure, emerging from the dugout in a business suit, not a uniform, he won championships in 1902, 1905, 1910 and 1911, and did not retire until 1950.

Cornelius McGillicuddy's destiny was emblematic of a new chapter in American sports: the rise of the Irish. Historian John Ross has noted that the first two sports heroes in America in the 1880s, boxer John L. Sullivan and Mike "King" Kelly of the Chicago White Sox, were both Irish. Ross adds that the anti-Irish and anti-immigrant American Protective Society was at its peak at this time, and "sport served to ease the path to acceptance of an outside group by the larger society."

While visiting Washington, players in the 1880s often stayed at the Willard Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue, just down the street from the Capitol. Because of the intense Washington heat, they kept chairs on the sidewalk in front of the hotel and lounged on them after or between games. Pedestrians would walk by and strike up conversations, even offering players cigars or plugs of tobacco. The players took to calling the street the “Boulevard of Base Ball.” One of the visiting players was “King” Kelly.

Kelly was one of the smartest and most flamboyant baseball players of the early era, playing every position (but mostly outfield or catcher). He was an early version of Babe Ruth, dressing in finely tailored clothes, spending lavishly and cutting a charismatic figure on the town at night. Kelly once told his manager he had to miss practice because he was taking a Turkish bath, only to have it revealed later that he had been at the racetrack. Chicago manager Cap Anson once said that Kelly “had one enemy, that being himself.” At a time when the game had only one umpire, Kelly was apt to cut corners when he ran the bases. And in one famous episode he leapt from the bench yelling “Kelly now substituting!” and ran out onto the field to catch a fly ball. A popular song, “Slide, Kelly, Slide!” was written for him.

When Kelly was lounging in front of the Willard Hotel one night, a passing fan asked why Washington could not win a pennant. Kelly pointed to the Treasury building across the street. “Because you are so damned busy making money in that place across the street that you don’t give enough to the honest occupation of playing baseball right.”



IN 1891, WHEN THE ROSTER of teams in the National League was still shifting, with some coming and others going, Washington entered what would become known as the Wagner era. A new Washington Nationals team was formed and owned by two cutthroat Philadelphia businessmen, the brothers George and J. Earl Wagner. As the legendary Washington sportswriter Shirley Povich put it, “For the next eight years the city’s fans found themselves in the cold clutch of a pair of baseball brokers who talked big, spent little, pocketed nice profits, and pulled out before they were kicked out.” By the eighth year of the Wagners’ reign, no Washington team finished better than a tie for sixth place. To make matters worse, a depression hit the country after farm prices collapsed in the South and Midwest. The number of fans attending baseball games in the United States dropped 40 percent from 1889 to 1894.

In order to boost attendance, owners sought to make changes in the game. In 1893 they strengthened offense by increasing the distance from the plate to the pitcher’s mound from 50 feet to 60 feet 6 inches, the standard today, thus giving batters more time to see the ball. But nothing was going to help the Nationals under the aegis of the Wagner brothers. They hired and fired managers at will, inevitably turning Washington fans against them. In 1893 they announced that three games against the Philadelphia Athletics scheduled for Washington would instead be played in Philadelphia, for the insulting reason that fans there would turn out in greater numbers. A *Sporting Life* magazine headline justifiably bellowed that this was “An Outrage on the

Washington Public.” The Wagners were fined \$1,000 by baseball authorities.

On another occasion the owners had their manager doing double duty: he had to lead the team and simultaneously oversee the production of “The Texas Steer Show,” a theatrical extravaganza the brothers were financing. Yet another cockamamie farce was having Tuesdays and Fridays, when the handsome player Win Mercer was scheduled to pitch, billed as “Ladies’ Days.” Unfortunately for the Wagners, Mercer suffered from bouts of depression and a lethal gambling addiction, and when he ran up a debt of \$8,000 and had a disastrous day at the horse track in Oakland, California, he took his own life. The suicide note he left behind read, “A word to friends: beware of women and a game of chance.”

Even if the Wagners had been more serious about the team, the players may not have been always ready to take the field. “What’s the matter with the Washington Baseball Club?” the *Washington Post* demanded in 1896, and then proposed a euphemistic answer: team members were “indulging in the flowing bowl.” Whatever the case, the Wagners went through four managers in 1898, and an epitaph for the dismal team was offered by the *Post* when the Nationals returned home from a western trip in which they went 1–11. “The Senators,” the *Post* reported, “passed through their home town unmolested on their way to Boston.”

In 1899 the team ended the season in ninth place. It was generally a season of poor performances and the league directors were talking of shrinking from twelve teams to eight. J. Earl Wagner began entertaining offers for the Nationals, even while insisting publicly that

“Washington will be in the major leagues when Baltimore and Brooklyn are in the minors.” At the winter meetings of the National League Board of Directors, his brother George was voted off the board. At a subsequent meeting on January 25, 1900, it was decided that Washington, Cleveland, Louisville and Baltimore would all be dropped from the league. The Wagners sold the team for approximately \$40,000.



WASHINGTON DID NOT HAVE TO wait long for another baseball team. In September 1900 in a Chicago bar there was a meeting between Clark Griffith, a pitcher for the Chicago Colts; Charles Comiskey, owner of the Colts; and businessman Byron Bancroft (“Ban”) Johnson. Johnson was a 300-pound, implacable cigar smoker who, as one reporter claimed, looked as though he had been “weaned on an icicle.” Icicle or not, he had a passion for baseball, which he had played in college; but his real gifts were as a businessman. In 1894 he had taken over a struggling enterprise called the Western League and turned it into a success.

Ban Johnson found himself under pressure to abide by an agreement that his expanding Western League—now called the American League—could not raid players from the established National League, which was allowed to raid players from his own teams merely by plunking down \$500 for any one of them. Johnson balked at such an inequitable deal, demanding that at least raids be kept down to two players per team and that the American League could expand into cities vacated by the National League.

National League officials retorted that Ban Johnson

could “wait until hell freezes over” before they would agree to such a proposal. Johnson, whose hero was the poet laureate of the self-made man, Horatio Alger, took matters into his own hands and arranged a summit meeting with Charles Comiskey and Clark Griffith, who was not only a great pitcher but also the vice-president of the Ball Players Protective Association.

Griffith, who would become the legendary “Moses of Washington baseball,” was born in 1869 and grew up poor in Vernon County, an outpost in western Missouri. His family lived in a log cabin until Clark’s father was killed in a hunting accident in 1872—this when his mother, Sarah, was pregnant with her fifth child. Griffith learned to hunt and trap animals to help his family survive. When he was twelve he was diagnosed with “malarial fever,” so the family moved to the healthier climate of Bloomington, Illinois. It was there that Clark met Charles “Old Hoss” Radbourn, one of the great pitchers of the day. Clark was tutored by this expert, and by age sixteen was making money playing baseball. In 1888 he signed his first professional contract for \$225 a month with the Bloomington club of the Interstate League. He was then sold to a Milwaukee team, where he went 27–7 in 1890.

Griffith spent the next few years playing for different teams and leagues that formed and folded quickly. In 1893 he and a teammate, Joe Cantillon, spent time in San Francisco’s notorious Barbary Coast district, working vaudeville skits in a honky-tonk. (Cantillon would go on to manage the Senators, and would be the man responsible for signing Walter Johnson.) In these burlesques, Griffith was the Indian gunned down by a cowboy, played by his partner.

In 1893 James Hart, who had managed Griffith in Milwaukee and had become the president of the newly formed Chicago Colts of the National League, heard that he was available. He wired the pitcher to come to Chicago and serve as player-manager for the Colts. The Colts were owned by A. G. Spalding, the legendary pitcher who had smoked the Washington club on its road trip years before, and managed by the equally renowned Cap Anson. The first superstar in major league baseball, Anson was a handsome right-hander who stood just over six feet tall and sported a handlebar moustache. He had come to the Colts in 1876, hitting .343 and playing on the first National League championship team. It was said that Anson's reflexes were so quick he never got hit by a pitch. He played outfield and second base before settling in at first in 1879. He won four batting championships, and led the Colts to pennants in 1880, 1881, 1882, 1885 and 1886.

Griffith would win over twenty games in six straight seasons for Anson and the Colts. He was also, or so he claimed, the inventor of the screwball. In 1894, finding that his arm was growing sore, he started to experiment with different grips in the hope that he could come up with a slower pitch that would fool batters; he found one that made pitches sink away from left-handed batters.

Griffith was still twenty-five when he got his nickname, "the Old Fox," a tribute to his cunning as a pitcher. Although he was only 5'6", he knew individual batters and threw to their weaknesses. He tampered with the ball (this was still legal), rubbing it with tobacco and licorice—even a nail file—to produce unusual effects. Griffith was wily and talkative—some said obnoxious—

and could annoy batters into striking out. The *Boston Post* once summed him up this way:

We have seen Griffith pitching for the old Chicago Club and what a pesky individual he was to opponents, hostile grounds and umpires. All he seemed to have was a slow ball, a prayer and control, yet he makes monkeys out of the men who face him.

Griffith would stall endlessly between pitches just to drive the other team into a frenzy, and if that failed he would wrangle with umpires or taunt batters mercilessly. As one reporter dryly commented, “he won more games with his head than his arm.”



AS A RESULT OF THEIR barroom meeting, Griffith, Ban Johnson and Charles Comiskey decided to create the American League. As vice-president of the Ball Players Protective Association, Griffith had access to players and their trust, and in the 1900 off season he traveled to various teams convincing players that his new league could give them a better deal than the National League. He promised higher salaries, and by the end of his tour he had signed forty new players. The one person who wouldn't sign was a shortstop named Honus Wagner.

In 1901, Johnson sent the 31-year-old Griffith to New York for a meeting with representatives of the National League. Griffith carried with him a petition from the National League players demanding that they be allowed to play in the new league. Upon entering the owners' headquarters Griffith felt a tug on his sleeve. Turning, he came face to face with Nicholas Young, president of the National League. “Son,” Young said, “they ain't

gonna give you anything in this meeting. I just wanted to tell you.”

Griffith spoke his piece, reciting complaints from players and handing National League vice-president A. H. Soden a petition. Soden assured Griffith that he would give the petition to the other owners.

Griffith retired to the bar in the basement of the hotel. By now players had gathered in the lobby, anxious for news. Griffith ordered a beer, then noticed someone coming down the stairs. It was A. H. Soden, trying to avoid the players in the lobby. Griffith, seeing the humor of the situation, invited him over for a beer. As Soden reached for his mug, Griffith noticed something in his pocket: the petition he had just delivered. The vice-president hadn't passed it on to the owners as he had promised. Griffith called him a liar, and Soden headed for the exit.

Griffith immediately went to the Associated Press and reported what had happened. Then he told players not to sign new contracts with National League teams. Ban Johnson started lining up backers for his new league, and declared that any previous agreements with the National League were null and void. In support, Ben and Tom Shibe, the Philadelphia sports goods manufacturers, got behind a team they called the Athletics. Charles Comiskey created a new team in Chicago called the White Sox and made Griffith the first manager. In the end, the league would consist of eight teams: Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit and Milwaukee (shifted to St. Louis after a year) from the old Western League, and four new teams—Baltimore, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. Ban Johnson, president of the new league, would have controlling interest in the Senators.

The American League was an immediate hit, outdrawing the National League in its first year. The pennant was won by the White Sox, led by the 24–7 record of Clark Griffith. Washington was less fortunate, beginning a dismal run that would keep them from finishing any better than sixth place over the next ten years. They would also lose one of their best players, and one of the most flamboyant figures in the history of baseball, Ed Delahanty.

When Washington had signed him in 1902, “Big Ed” had been a feared hitter and brilliant outfielder for Philadelphia who had hit over .400 twice. He was a handsome, well-built fellow with a powerful jaw who led the National League in slugging in four of his eleven years with them. Playing in the “dead-ball era” when trick pitches were legal and the ball was filthy with saliva, licorice and tobacco and cut and scuffed past all recognition by the fifth inning, Delahanty used his terrific power to turn the tables on the pitchers. He went after the ball, not waiting patiently for his pitch like players today; Pat Tebeau, the manager of the Cleveland Spiders while Delahanty was there, once said that the worst thing you could do was throw Delahanty a wild pitch, because the big man just loved blasting those out of the park.

Delahanty had barely signed with Washington when he got an offer from the New York Giants of the rival National League. The offer came from manager John McGraw, who would lead the Giants against Washington in the 1924 World Series. McGraw was a brilliant player and manager, already a legend. Brazen, temperamental, sometimes eloquent and often violent, he was a force of nature for whom baseball was not only a livelihood but a life.

When McGraw was twelve his mother and four siblings succumbed to diphtheria. In his struggle to survive, he turned to baseball, and in 1891 was signed by the Baltimore Orioles and soon became notorious for his temper and his toughness. He was known as “Little Napoleon,” and one writer summed him up this way: “If the bitter will to win could be rolled into one bundle and set on legs, it would probably have to look like the Little Napoleon from Truxton, New York.” When McGraw was playing in Baltimore, a local writer described him as “the most loved man in town and the most hated everywhere else in the country.” Another noted, “McGraw is a rattling good third baseman, but some [*sic*] of these mornings he will turn up missing. He will turn to give the wrong man the shoulder and somebody will drop.”

This last was a prescient comment. In July 1913 the Giants were playing the Phillies when McGraw started to razz Phillies pitcher Ad Brennan. Brennan wasn’t even playing until the next day, but McGraw wanted to rattle him early. He kept calling Brennan “yellow,” continuing even after the game as the two men left the stadium. McGraw was walking behind Brennan when the pitcher suddenly wheeled around and punched him, knocking McGraw down and out.

Yet despite his raw pugnacity, McGraw was actually quite refined. He had attended college at St. Bonaventure, and spent almost as much time with writers and actors as he did at the track. People hated him or loved him, but all agreed that he was a baseball genius. As a player he led Baltimore to three pennants in the 1890s and went on to manage the Giants for thirty years, bringing the team ten pennants and three World Series.

The attempt to lasso Delahanty particularly irked Clark Griffith, who had a long history of face-offs with McGraw. As a player, the Little Napoleon once fouled off fifteen consecutive pitches from Griffith. Another time McGraw, crowding the plate while facing Griffith, was hit in the leg by a pitch, but umpire Hank O'Day called a strike. Griffith hit him with the next pitch, again in the knee. Strike two. McGraw didn't budge, and was hit again. Strike three. Griffith often said that his opponent had a "reputation beyond his ability." When McGraw died years later, his old rival told Shirley Povich of the *Washington Post*, "It is a great loss to baseball." Then, under his breath he whispered, "but McGraw was still an overrated player."

In 1900 McGraw was chosen by Ban Johnson to manage the new American League's Baltimore Orioles. He accepted, but was soon causing trouble. In 1902 Ban Johnson suspended McGraw for umpire-baiting. McGraw, who couldn't stand the way Johnson defended umpires, jumped to the National League and the New York Giants, who purchased his release for \$100,000. So, on top of everything else, Clark Griffith always considered McGraw as the man who had sold out the American League. The two men would settle the score in the 1924 World Series.

McGraw's audacious effort to steal Delahanty from Washington didn't work. In 1903, leaders of the National League, sensing that the successful American League was a fact of life, made peace and agreed to work together. As a result, Delahanty was ordered to stay with Washington.

On Opening Day 1903, the players were taken in an open carriage to National Park, also known as

League Park, a new diamond on Fourteenth Street and Bladensburg Road not far from Capitol Hill. The park announcer, E. Lawrence Phillips, gave the opening line-ups by megaphone, a practice he had started the year before.

The players were then led by a marching band to home plate. The Senators' opponents were the Highlanders, a new American League team from New York. It was the very first game ever played by the Highlanders, who would eventually change their name to the Yankees. The team's pitcher, "Happy Jack" Chesbro, would win an astonishing 41 games in 1904—still a record. But on this occasion the Senators got the better of him, beating New York 3–1 before a crowd of 11,950. The hero of the game was Ed Delahanty, who drove in the winning run.

But despite this auspicious beginning, 1903 would be another terrible year for the Senators: they went 43–94 and finished last. They would also lose their star player in the middle of the season. Ed Delahanty was prone to excessive drinking and resulting bouts of despair, and on July 2, 1903, he boarded a train to upstate New York to visit his wife. He got drunk and began to misbehave, smoking in the sleeper car, ringing the car bell, breaking the glass case holding a firefighting ax, and then pulling at the bare ankles of a sleeping woman in the upper berth of a car. Near Bridgeburg, on the Canadian side of the Niagara River, Delahanty was kicked off the train. It was night, and he began crossing the International Bridge on foot. He never made it to the far side. He plunged into a ravine and died. A night guard testified to the smell of alcohol on his breath, but denied any physical contact. To this day, there is

speculation about a scuffle on the bridge and what may have happened.

The Senators would finish in last place again in 1904, but would do so in a new location. It was called American League Park, and was one of the largest, oddest ball parks in the majors. The distances to left, center and right fields were 421–400–399, making it a home run hitter's nightmare. When the park went up, designers were frustrated by homeowners who refused to sell their properties located where far-right center field was planned to be, so they simply built the park around them, cutting the fence into a V in right center. Where the fence cut in there was a giant tree and a flagpole. Near the flagpole was an old doghouse where flags were stored. On one occasion the Senators were playing the Philadelphia Athletics when a Senator drove a ball over the head of center fielder Socks Seybold. The ball rolled into the doghouse, and when Seybold gave chase he got halfway into the house before getting stuck. It took three minutes to get him out, by which time the batter had scored on the only inside-the-doghouse home run ever recorded.

American League Park was ten blocks from the White House; in 1915 it was a fifteen-cent cab ride from door to door. It would be renamed Clark Griffith Stadium in 1923. Because the stadium is universally known to Washingtonians and sportswriters simply as Griffith Stadium, I will refer to it that way.

The new digs wouldn't help the team, who finished in seventh place in 1905 and 1906. Yet in 1907 fortune would smile when they were lucky enough to sign a gangly young pitcher named Walter Johnson, who would become one of the greatest pitchers in the history of the game.



WALTER JOHNSON WAS BORN IN 1887 on a farm in Allen County, Kansas, and his astounding ability was evident from an early age. When Johnson was a child he was playing a game of “One o’ Cat,” a type of baseball. When it came his turn to pitch, the older boys thought Johnson was too young. To prove them wrong, he hurled the ball as hard as he could. The ball sailed over everyone’s head and broke the biggest window in the school. “From the first time I held a ball it sealed in the palm of my hand as though it belonged there,” he later said, “and when I threw it, ball, hand and wrist, arm and shoulder and back seemed to all work together.”

In 1902 the Johnson family moved to Olinda, a small town southeast of Los Angeles, so his father could take a job in the southern California oil fields. Walter became a regular at the local sandlots and soon gained a reputation as a strikeout king. Joe Burke, a bookkeeper for the semipro Santa Fe Railroad team and player-manager of the Olinda Oil Wells, heard the stories about him. One day Burke and Jack Burnet, a slugger for his team, decided to go down “and have some fun with the lads.” He asked young Walt to throw him a few pitches. Johnson struck both men out with ease. He was then given a tougher tryout in a real game. On July 24, 1904, Olinda had a commanding lead over another semipro team from Los Angeles, and Burke decided to put Johnson and some other “youngsters” into the game. “Walt turned things loose,” Burke would later recall, “and hanged if he didn’t drub that Los Angeles bunch worse than we did.” The final score was 21–6, and a local paper reported that “Johnson, the crack pitcher

of the Olinda ‘kid’ team, fanned six men in the three innings which he worked.”

Called “The Big Swede” because of his sandy brown hair, broad frame and sleepy eyes, Johnson actually traced his ancestry from the British Isles. He had what his grandson later described as “a short ‘windmill’ windup in which he rotated his arm in a circle while standing straight up on the mound, then swept the arm behind his back as far as it would go before whipping it forward in a smooth sidearm-underarm arc.”

It didn’t take long for word of Johnson’s ability to get about, and soon major league scouts were coming to Olinda. Burke wasn’t bothered. “I felt sure that if he had half a chance he would develop into something really great,” he recalled later. “He was our kind of fellow. . . . We gave the lad the best support we had in us.”

Johnson joined a minor league team in Tacoma, Washington. There a manager told Johnson he would make a better outfielder than pitcher, and released him. (The manager, Mike Lynch, would always be known as “The Man Who Let Walter Johnson Slip Away.”) From Tacoma, Johnson went to Weiser, Idaho, a town of gold and copper miners, farmers, ranchers and cowboys—“a big-hearted, hard-fisted town,” he would recall.

Before long Johnson, “The Weiser Wonder,” was coming to the attention of the big leagues. In 1907 Rube Ellis, an outfielder for the Los Angeles Angels of the Pacific Coast League, spoke with awe to his manager, Frank “Pop” Dillon, about the young phenomenon he had faced in an off-season game. The Angels were a farm team for the Chicago Cubs and Dillon arranged to have Johnson meet him and Angels owner Hen Berry at the Hoffman, a cigar store and billiard parlor in Los

Angeles. The episode would provide a comic example of two of Johnson's most outstanding traits: his humility and his diffidence. Johnson later described what happened:

I was on time for the appointment and sat near the door where they would enter. They came in a little while after I arrived and immediately started playing a game of billiards. They didn't ask for me and didn't seem to be much concerned whether I had come or not. I didn't feel as though I ought to go up and interrupt such important men. Pretty soon their billiard game was finished and they left without knowing I was present.

Los Angeles' loss turned into Washington's gain. In 1907 the Senators' manager was Joe Cantillon, a funny but irascible man who had formerly been an umpire. "Pongo Joe" had been Clark Griffith's vaudeville partner in San Francisco's Barbary Coast; he loved cigars, wore a bright red vest, and was as outspoken as his future star was reticent. At a game he was umpiring, a player—some say it was John McGraw—kept complaining about the calls. In those days the umpire stood behind the pitcher, and when McGraw got a hit Cantillon whispered to the pitcher, who happened to be a player called Clark Griffith, to go ahead and pick him off first base. After an obvious balk, Griffith picked him off. McGraw howled with outrage, but Cantillon ignored him. When the next batter got on base, Griffith tried the same thing, but this time Cantillon called the balk. The first call, he explained to Griffith, had been "a personal favor."

Cantillon was known for his bluntness and sarcasm. Once when he was manager and the Senators played Detroit, his third baseman twice overthrew bunts

by Ty Cobb, allowing Cobb to move to third base. The next time Cobb came up, Cantillon told the man to take the ball and, if it was a bunt, wait at third.

In the first two months of the 1907 season, the Senators struggled near the bottom of the standings. The team had no money for scouts, so Cantillon began sending players out to hunt for new talent. One of the players was catcher Cliff Blankenship, who was out of the lineup with a broken finger. In June, Blankenship was sent out west to take a look at an outfielder, Clyde Milan, and a young pitcher, Walter Johnson. Cantillon's friend, Joe "Mickey" Shea, had seen Johnson in California and had been sending Cantillon breathless notes about him for a year. "This boy throws so fast you can't see 'em," read one, "and he knows where he is throwing the ball because if he didn't there would be dead bodies strewn all over Idaho." The numbers for Johnson's 1907 Idaho season were staggering: 75 straight shutout innings, 166 strikeouts in 11 games. But on his scouting trip Blankenship was apparently kept in the dark about Johnson. He complained about having to go all the way to Idaho to see "some big busher that isn't even worth the car fare to scout."

Blankenship quickly changed his mind when he saw Johnson pitch. He offered him a contract to pitch for Washington, and was stunned when Johnson said no.

"Aren't you glad to get a chance in the East?" he asked.

"I've been East," was the innocent reply. "I was born in Kansas."

Johnson said he wasn't sure that he was ready for the majors. "I was nothing but a green country boy," he later said, "and jumping to a city the size of Washington

was a real sensation to me.” He doubted that his parents would approve. When they advised him to take the opportunity, Johnson agreed—but only after demanding that Blankenship give him enough train fare to return home if things didn’t work out. Blankenship wired Washington for \$250 in expenses and handed Johnson \$100. “I never did find out who got the change,” Johnson later said.

On Friday, July 26, 1907, Walter Johnson arrived in Washington. He took a streetcar down Pennsylvania Avenue, getting off at Fifteenth Street by the Regent Hotel, close to the White House. It was a hot summer night, and there were three men sitting on the porch—Joe Cantillon and two umpires.

“Is this the hotel where the Washington ballplayers stop?” Johnson asked.

“Only the good ones,” Cantillon replied sourly, not knowing who the young man was.

“Then I guess this is no place for me,” the tall stranger said. He picked up his suitcase and started to leave when Cantillon asked him who he was.

“My name is Walter Johnson.”

Billy Evans, one of the umpires there, said that Cantillon, who had been waiting for Johnson’s train for two days, “jumped to his feet and greeted the youngster like a long lost brother.”

The next day Johnson donned a Washington uniform to pitch batting practice to the Senators and the visiting White Sox. Cantillon told Johnson to take it easy, not to use too much speed. As one witness, umpire Bill Evans, put it, “The first ball Johnson sent up in practice looked like a small pea, and the more he pitched the smaller it seemed to get.” Players were missing the ball—this in bat-

ting practice—and began talking among themselves.

Probably the best account came from Jim Delahanty (Ed's brother, and one of five Delahanty brothers to play baseball), the Senators' second baseman and the best hitter on the team:

I never had time to take the bat off my shoulder. The ball shot right by me, right in the groove and was in the catcher's glove before I knew it had left the rookie's hand. And when he came back with another one in the same spot, I laid my bat down and walked over to manager Joe Cantillon, and said, "I'm through."

"What's he got?" asked Joe. "Has he got a fast one?"

"Fast one?" I replied. "No human ever threw a ball so fast before."

"Has he got a curve?" Joe queried.

"I don't know and I don't care," I said. "What's more, I am not going back to find out until I know how good his control is."

Delahanty asked Cantillon when he planned to start the youngster. When Johnson looked ready, the manager replied. Delahanty said, "If ever there was a pitcher in baseball that was ready, that rube out there is the guy."

On August 7, 1907, Walter Johnson made his major debut against Ty Cobb and the Detroit Tigers. Eleven thousand standing-room-only Washington fans found it hard to believe that this tanned, lanky kid with the strange delivery was the messiah they had heard about. Johnson's grandson Henry Thomas has speculated that this was probably due to Johnson's slow windmill windup, which made it appear that he wasn't throwing very hard.

Before the game, Ty Cobb and the other Tigers heard that the Senators were starting a rookie—from Idaho, no less. They began making mooring sounds at Johnson and hectoring Joe Cantillon, telling him he was going to need to send this hayseed “back to the barn.”

The Tigers’ first batter was Davy Jones. Johnson wound up and fired a strike. “It was the fastest pitch I ever saw,” Jones said later. He described Johnson as having arms “like whips.”

Johnson got out the next two batters. At the top of the second inning, he faced Ty Cobb, who bunted and made it to first safely when Johnson bobbed the ball, then moved up to third when the next batter bunted. The next man singled to left, scoring Cobb.

Detroit won the game, 3–2, largely owing to errors by the Senators and aggressive baserunning—including an inside-the-park home run by Cobb. (In 1907 Cobb would emerge as a star, leading his team to a pennant. They would lose in the World Series to the Chicago Cubs.)

Although they were opposites, Johnson and Cobb became good friends. Where Johnson was taciturn and modest, and had come from a stable and close family, Cobb was violent, aggrieved, ruthless. When he was eighteen, his father, suspecting that Cobb’s mother was cheating on him, tried to spy on her through the bedroom window. Cobb’s mother was startled and mistakenly shot him. Writer Al Stump said that Cobb’s desire to vindicate Cobb Sr. was the engine driving the “most violent, successful, thoroughly maladjusted personality ever to pass across American sports.”

Like most of those who played against him, my grandfather couldn’t stand the way Cobb slid into bases

with his sharpened spikes high, the better to wound the fielder. My father once told me a story about it that, while not in any Cobb biography I researched, has been verified by other family members. One day before a game against Washington, Cobb waltzed over to the Senators' dugout and began filing his spikes in front of the club. My grandfather, or so the story goes, picked up a bat and climbed out of the dugout. He told Cobb that if he wanted to go to the hospital, just go right on doing what he was doing. Cobb backed down.

Cobb was disliked even by his own teammates: he had dined and traveled to the park alone since arriving in Detroit in 1905. But they were in awe of his ability. Indeed, upon his retirement Cobb's statistics would be unparalleled: a lifetime batting average of .367, over 4,000 hits, played in more games than any other player and stole more bases.

It would be hard to imagine a man more ill-suited to be friends with Walter Johnson, but they genuinely liked each other. "In eighteen years, I have never had an unfriendly word with Cobb," Johnson once said. "I consider him to be one of my friends." Cobb concurred: "We were friends at all times—on the diamond or across a poker table." Cobb once took Johnson for a ride in a new car, a trip that resulted in a speeding citation. Cobb bribed his way out by offering the policeman two tickets to that day's game. The cop responded that Cobb could pay for the citation by hitting two home runs, which he did.

Walter Johnson's first game serves as an epitome of most of the Senators' games until the mid-1920s. For years Johnson was surrounded by some of the most inept players in baseball, yet he managed to win games, or

keep them close, and break records. In 21 seasons with the Senators (10 with second division teams), Johnson would win 417 games, second only to Cy Young. He pitched 110 shutouts, 38 by the score of 1–0, which is still a record.

Pitchers during Johnson's era were not restricted by pitch counts or five days' rest between starts, and Johnson's stamina had to be phenomenal. In 1908, he shut out the New York Yankees three times in four days. His first game was a six-hitter and a 3–0 victory. The next day he pitched a four-hitter, giving Washington a 6–0 victory. After a day off—there was no Sunday baseball in New York at the time—Johnson was forced to pitch when two Washington players were benched due to injury and a cold. He tossed a two-hitter, and the New York crowd gave him a standing ovation. The *New York Times* commented archly:

We are grievously disappointed in this man Johnson of Washington. He and his team had four games to play with the champion Yankees. Johnson pitched the first game and shut us out. Johnson pitched the second game and shut us out. Johnson pitched the third game and shut us out. Did Johnson pitch the fourth game and shut us out? He did not. Oh, you quitter!

Johnson's power was such that, at least in the early days, there was apparently only one man who could catch him, Charles "Gabby" Street, who got his nickname from his constant talk during games. "Gabby was always jabbering," Johnson once said, "and he never let a pitcher take his mind off the game." Street had a powerful arm, and when there was a man on first he would

exclaim, “Let ’em run, Gabby’ll get ’em!”

Street was the only man who could handle Johnson’s heat, but in July 1910, as the Senators were limping through another dismal season, Street got hurt. The Senators had two backup catchers, but neither of them could cope with Johnson. The first catcher was, as the *Washington Post* reported, “put out of commission after about six pitched balls.” The second, added the *Post*, “would never have lasted the game had Johnson not stopped hurling smoke balls over.” Years later umpire Billy Evans would call a game because of darkness when an inexperienced catcher mishandled a Johnson pitch and it grazed Evans’s ear. Evans quipped that a couple more innings weren’t worth dying for.

At the end of the 1908 season the Senators had a chance to avoid the bottom of the standings for the first time. The Philadelphia Athletics arrived in Washington on September 11 for a five-game series, and if Washington could win a game they would end the season in seventh rather than eighth place. During the opening game, Johnson faced a young player named “Shoeless” Joe Jackson, playing in his second major league game. Jackson, who would become infamous in the 1919 “Black Sox” scandal when his teammates threw the World Series, got one of the nine hits the Athletics managed off Johnson. The Senators won 2–1.

Johnson called Jackson “the greatest natural hitter I ever saw.” He also felt that Washington hadn’t deserved to win against Philadelphia because the Senators hadn’t played very well. Ed Grillo, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, was impressed by this admission. He wrote of Johnson:

There is something about this boy aside from his ability as a pitcher, that makes him popular with patrons of the game. He is absolutely honest in everything he does. He never complains of the umpires' decisions and is modest to a fault, believing that his teammates, more than himself, are entitled to the credit for what his team accomplishes when he is playing.

Years later Grillo would witness another display of Johnson's embarrassment at winning ugly. In a close game, the Senators let three men on base due to errors, and Johnson had to strike out the next three. Heading back to the dugout, he kept his head down. "Look at him!" Senators manager Cantillon exclaimed. "He's ashamed he did it!" It was no surprise when Johnson was voted the most popular player in the *Washington Post* poll of 1908.

Walter Johnson was virtually a one-man team, but he couldn't win games entirely on his own. The 1909 season would be even worse for him—indeed, the worst season the Senators would ever have. The team still holds two records from that year: the fewest runs scored in a season, 380, and the most times shut out in one season, 24. Johnson went 13–25. The pennant was taken by Detroit, led by Ty Cobb, who hit .377 and led the American League in homers and RBIs.

But there was hope for better days. The arrival of a new manager, Clark Griffith, a man who would bring Washington to unprecedented baseball glory, was right around the corner. And a young Irishman named Joe Judge was turning heads playing first base on the sandlots of New York.