

“The Great Bambino and Three Homeruns in One World Series Game (Twice)”

A presentation by Dwayne Isgrig at the SABR Day in America luncheon of the Bob Broeg Chapter, St. Louis, January 28, 2012

After watching Albert Pujols hit three homeruns in Game Three of the 2011 World Series, and thus tying the mark for three homeruns in a single game with two other great sluggers, Babe Ruth and Reggie Jackson. I began to wonder about the other men who preceded Albert Pujols' feat. The impressive thing about Reggie Jackson is that when he did it, he did it on three straight pitches in three straight at bats. The impressive thing about Babe Ruth's feat is that he did it twice. Curiously, both times were here in St. Louis at Sportsman's Park and both times it was in a Game Four versus the Cardinals, once in 1926 and once more 1928.

So I wanted to back to the old newspaper stories from the Series and dig out some examples of the great writing used to describe Babe Ruth's exploits at Sportsman's Park. After all this was the golden age of sports writing with some famous, nationally known names on the job, Grantland Rice and Shirley Povich, as well as local names such as John Sheridan and J. Roy Stockton. This was in the days long before sportsfans watched the games on TV and then watched the highlights and listened to the experts on ESPN or Fox Sports. These were the days when radio was in its infancy, game highlights were only available on a newsreel film shown at a movie theatre and so, the many daily newspapers in the cities across the land, with their saturation of early editions and late editions and extra editions were the ways in so many baseball fans received their daily doses of baseball news.

On October 6, 1928 the stage was set for Game Four in St. Louis. The first two games of the series were in New York at Yankee Stadium, the “House That Ruth Built.” The teams were split at one victory a piece as the teams left the Bronx for St. Louis. Game Three of the Series was the first time that the city of St. Louis had ever hosted a World Series game. The Cardinals won, 4-0, to take a two-games-to-one lead in the best of seven series. The hometown fans were confident that the Cards could win again in Game Four to take a more decisive edge in the series. But George Herman Ruth and his bat had other ideas.

Babe Ruth homered in the 1st, the 3rd and the 6th innings.¹

Two of Ruth's homeruns that day completely left the stadium. One of them broke the window of the showroom of Wells Motor Co., the Chevrolet dealer located on North Grand across the street from the rightfield pavilion (by the way, I initially thought the Wells Motor Co. building was still standing today but based on its address it is not).

Grantland Rice, writing in the *Boston Daily Globe*, summed up Ruth's work at the plate:

“After the manner of a human avalanche hurtling on its downward way from blue Missouri heavens, the giant form of Babe Ruth fell upon the beleaguered city of St. Louis today and flattened it into a pulp of anguish.”

¹Boxscore and play-by-play from www.retrosheet.org and The Sporting News, October

In a similar vein, Rice continued later in the same article:

“An enraged bull in a china shop of fragile bric-a-brac was a mere kitten playing with yarn compared to the astonishing infant.

Once he smashed the ball into the right field pavilion, a second time he knocked it high over the stand into Grand av, and finally he hammered another home run into the center field seats, 430 feet away, for the first time in Missouri history.”²

James R. Harrison wrote in the *New York Times*, “Contrary to reports, the king is not dead. Long live the king, for today he hit three home runs and smashed six world’s series records as completely as his fellow-Yankees smashed the Cardinals, to tie the world’s series at two victories apiece.”

Harrison continued:

“After all, there is only one Ruth. He is alone and unique. Tonight he is securely perched on the throne again, and the crown does not rest uneasy on this royal head. For to his record of fifty-nine homers in one season he added today the achievement of three home runs in one world’s series.

Besides setting world’s series records that may stand for all time, George Herman Ruth hit a baseball where only two other men had hit it—into the centerfield bleachers of Sportsmans Park. It is 430 feet to the bleacher fence. The wall is about twenty feet high. Back of it stretches a deep bank of seats, and almost squarely in the middle of this bank Ruth crashed the third homer that made all the history.

It was not one of his longest drives but it was by all odds his best, for it automatically wiped four marks off the record book. It was, as noted above, the first time anybody had hit that many homers in a series game. It made Ruth’s number of homers for all series games seven, beating by one the former record of ‘Goose’ Goslin. It made his total bases in one game twelve, three more than Harry Hopper in 1915. His extra bases on long hits amounted to nine. Again three better than any other man had ever done. . . . He scored four runs, the most which any player has scored in a world’s series game Ruth also raised his own record of eighteen extra bases achieved in world series games to a grand total of twenty-seven.”³

Martin J. Haley of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* noted that Babe Ruth’s third homer of the day put Ruth in a place all his own. “. . . it set a new Sportsmans Park record, as no player before Ruth had ever located the dead center field seats.”⁴

2! *Boston Daily Globe*, October 7, 1926.

3! *The New York Times*, October 7, 1926.

4! *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, October 7, 1926.

Another writer from the *Globe-Democrat* added, “Marty McManus of the Browns once hit a terrific home run into the corner of the far-away right center field pavilion. For total distance, including the bounce and the roll, McManus’ clout was longer than Ruth’s, as McManus’ drive skipped off a pavilion seat and sailed out through the rear of the pavilion into Grand boulevard. Ruth’s drive, however, was longer than that by McManus when distance traveled on the fly only is considered.

In the old Sportsmans Park Ruth once hit the dead center field wall on a fly, and is the only man in memory to achieve that feat. Now he has gone that record one better. He is the only batter we know of that ever reached the center field bleachers in back of the flag pole.”⁵

John B. Sheridan, the longtime St. Louis sportswriter and organizer of the famous Wabada semi-pro baseball team that sent many young men to careers in professional baseball, wrote this about Rogers Hornsby’s decision to pitch to Ruth during the series: “However, I cannot escape the conviction that when Hornsby decided to pitch to Ruth at all times he was advised most illy.” And he added that Hornsby’s assertion that Ruth was no different than any other player in the game of baseball: “That is obviously incorrect. Ruth is not an ordinary baseball player. He is the most extraordinary baseball player that has ever lived.”⁶

Sheridan also commented on the Babe’s importance as a team leader for the Yankees:

“The entire Yankee attack is based on Ruth’s hitting. When Ruth does not hit the Yankees do not hit. When Ruth hits the Yankees all hit. Ruth is the spark plug of the Yankee club, the motor, the running gear, the whole works. Therefore, the important thing to do is to prevent Ruth from hitting.”⁷

Babe Ruth tied his mark of three homeruns in a series game again in 1928 vs the Cardinals. Ironically, the Babe’s three homers came in Game Four at Sportsman’s Park (10-9-1928): Once in the fourth, once in the seventh and once in the eighth inning. In the 7th, Ruth and Gehrig went back to back.

In 1928, the Babe was back in fine form for a rematch in the World’s Series between the Cardinals and Yankees. Hornsby was gone from the Cardinals’ dugout with Bill McKechnie replaced him and piloted the Cards back to the Fall Classic. As the series progressed, the Cardinals were in a different position than they had been in when they faced the Yankees in 1926. This time around the Yankees were leading three games to none and the Cards had their backs against the wall.

As luck would have it, as it was in 1926, Bill Sherdel was on the mound again for the Cardinals.

5! *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, October 7, 1926.

6! *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, October 7, 1926.

7! *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, October 7, 1926.

In Ruth's first trip to the plate, Sherdel had the upper hand, he got the Babe to ground into an inning-ending double play.

The game was shaping up as pitching duel with Sherdel of the Cards and Waite Hoyt of the Yankees in control through the opening frames. In the bottom of the third, the Cards manufactured a run from a double, a bunt single and a sac fly, to go up, 1-0.

Then came the Babe to lead off for New York in the top of the fourth. Sherdel was behind in the count, two balls and one strike. Ruth took Sherdel's next offering over the pavilion to tie the score, 1-1.⁸

An example of fine writing from Shirley Povich of the *Washington Post* on Ruth in Game Four in 1928:

“In a maze of home runs that found Babe Ruth securely ensconced on the throne that has been his for a decade, the Yanks won the game, 7 to 3, won the world's series in four straight games, and the unalloyed acclaim of a nation's fans as the greatest ball club in history.

For the Babe did not hit one homer, nor two. He hit three large, luscious wallops out of the park—first for the disillusionment of 40,000 fans who blotted out every bare spot in the St. Louis Park; then for their delectation and all for the glory of the Yanks who have now won eight consecutive world series games and two major league championships in four straight.”⁹

James R. Harrison of the *New York Times* summed up the Babe's exploits in Game Four of the 1928 Series as:

“If there was any lingering doubt, if anywhere in this broad land there were misguided souls who believed that Babe Ruth was not the greatest living ball player, they should have seen him today.

They should have seen him hooted and hissed, come to the plate three times, twice against Wee Willie Sherdel and once against the great Pete Alexander, and send three mighty drives whistling over that right-field pavilion.

They should have seen him swaggering and waving a friendly fist at the world as he romped out to left field—the play boy of baseball—to be greeted by a barrage of pop bottles thrown by a few sportsmen who thought that the Babe had been struck out in the seventh, a moment before he clouted his second homer to tie the score. Misguided sportsmen who could not appreciate the incredible feats of this incredible man.”¹⁰

8! 1928 World Series Game Four play-by-play from www.retrosheet.org and *New York Times*, October 10, 1928.

9! *Washington Post*, October 10, 1928.

10! *New York Times*, October 10, 1928.

According to the play-by-play account of Ruth's at bat in the seventh inning, Sherdel did not go into his wind up before bringing the ball home to Ruth. "On the return of the second pitch, Sherdel, without taking a wind-up, again whipped the ball over the plate, but Umpire Pfirman declined to make a decision. Sherdel rushed to the plate, along with the other Cardinal players, and objected vigorously, while Ruth drew a laugh from the crowd by standing to one side and applauding the protest. The Cardinals' protest was denied, and the game went on. Sherdel then wasted two balls on Ruth, but stuck the next one over. The Babe struck a tremendous blow that sent the ball sailing high over the right field pavilion."¹¹

Curiously, the Post-Dispatch chalked up the dismissed third strike in a different way. "Ruth's second homer in the seventh inning came after Umpire Pfirman had ruled that a third strike, sneaked across the plate by Sherdel, wasn't a strike at all, because time had been called."¹²

And though the 1932 World Series is famous for the famous "called shot" at Wrigley Field against Charlie Root and the Cubs, some believe the Babe called his shots against the Cardinals in 1928 in Game Four at Sportsman's Park.

The United Press wire service carried a story in which the writer quoted the Babe on his interactions with the inhabitants of the leftfield bleachers.

"They began to kid me," Ruth said, and I told 'em I'd hit two home runs. I hit three, one for good measure."¹³

In the end, the Babe himself, or his ghostwriter, paid Sherdel a nice compliment in a newspaper column written by Ruth, once the dust of the 1928 Series had settled a bit. Referring to two games from Sherdel in 1926 Series and two games in the 1928 Series, "The tough luck champion of the series is Willie Sherdel. Unless I had seen with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it possible for any pitcher to pitch four such games as he has pitched against the Yankees and lose them all."¹⁴

Miscellaneous Info on the Babe:

11! *New York Times*, October 10, 1928.

12! *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 10, 1928.

13! *Washington Post*, October 10, 1928.

14 Babe Ruth, "We Say It With Base Hits; That's All—Babe Ruth," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 10, 1928.

In his storied career, the Great Bambino hit 58 of his 714 regular season homeruns at Sportsman's Park.

In 1915, the Babe's rookie season with the Boston Red Sox, when the Babe was just a pitcher, he homered 4 times all year long. But, one of those homers was vs the Browns at Sportsman's Park (7-21-1915) and, interestingly enough, the ball completely cleared the pavilion roof and landed on Grand Blvd. One account indicated that the ball "went clear over the right field bleachers across Grand Avenue and landed on the far sidewalk." Another account reported that the ball rolled down the street on the other side of Grand. Regardless of where the ball came to a rest, more than one newspaperman acknowledged the circuit clout as the longest homerun ever struck at Sportsman's Park.¹⁵ In 1916, Ruth hit only three homeruns all season and two of them were at Sportsman's Park on back-to-back days, June 12 and 13.

Perhaps as a warmup for the World Series, the Babe hit three homeruns in a doubleheader with the Browns at Sportsman's Park on September 25, 1926, one in the first game and two in the second game.¹⁶

Babe Ruth hit 15 homeruns in the World Series over the course of his career. That is 10 trips to the World Series in a time period when the only "postseason" records were made in the World Series.¹⁷

15! *Boston Globe*, July 22, 1915; *The New York Times*, July 22, 1915; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 22, 1915. Career homerun stats for Babe Ruth from www.baseball-reference.com

16! *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, September 26, 1926.

17! Career World Series stats from www.baseball-almanac.com