

## **Baseball Myths, Old and New**

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

### **Introduction**

The word “myth” has come to have a negative meaning. We not only brand something we think is false as “myth” but also imply that the persons writing or speaking it are doing so to deliberately mislead others.

That’s a far cry from the original intentions of the Greek myths, which were really attempts to explain the origins of the world, the celestial movements and even human nature.

Major League Baseball, like all great institutions, has had its share of myths. Not all of it was an attempt to distort the truth. References to the Greek myths still live on in our language – a person proposing a solution that may actually cause more problems is cautioned not to open a “Pandora’s box,” and a tremendous accomplishment might be labeled “herculean.” In like manner, some baseball’s myths still figure into our appreciation of the game.

### **Some myths not harmful**

No one believes that Abner Doubleday “invented” baseball. Yet the Hall of Fame is located in Cooperstown, N.Y., where the Mills Commission in 1907 declared baseball had been invented in 1839. The HOF building was formally dedicated in 1939, and has a baseball field named “Doubleday Field.” Cardinals radio broadcaster Mike Shannon occasionally introduces the ninth inning of a close game by telling listeners, “Old Abner has done it again!”

Some myths seem harmless. Did it really hurt anyone to believe that Babe Ruth called his shot in the third game of the 1932 World Series? The discovery of a home movie taken by a fan at that game some 60 years later would indicate that the Babe didn’t point at center field before the pitch he hit into the center field bleachers but rather was pointing the index finger of his right hand at the Cubs’ dugout to remind them he had one strike left. Even the Babe came to believe that he called his shot, as evidenced by a radio interview in later years. Whether he called it or not, it was a dramatic moment, still on the list of top World Series moments.

### **One myth that should continue**

One of the first great, and ongoing, myths is that today’s players just aren’t as good as they were in seasons past. Consider this: In 1886, a number of men who’d played professional baseball in the 1870s had a gathering in St. Louis, and some of them were quoted as saying they didn’t think the players of the mid-1880s were as good as they’d been a decade before. In 1897, right after being fired as manager of the Chicago Colts (later Cubs), Cap Anson was quoted as saying he didn’t think the players of the 1890s were as good as they’d been in the 1880s; in the 1880s they’d been “artisans,” while by the late 1890s they’d become “mechanics,” Anson said. In 1906, a number of men who’d played in the 1876 charter season of the National League were quoted as saying they didn’t think the players of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were as good as they’d been in the first National League season. In 1934, legendary Philadelphia Athletics manager Connie Mack told a *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* reporter while the A’s were in town to play the Browns that recently some men who’d played in the major leagues in the early 1900s told him they thought they were better than the players of the 1930s. Ty Cobb in the early 1950s said Stan Musial and Phil Rizzuto were two of the few who could have played in his era. And I’m here to say that the ballplayers of today (2012) couldn’t carry the cleats of the guys who played when I was growing up – late 1950s through the mid-1960s.

That’s a myth that should always be around, for while baseball players have been getting better and better, we should always have a sentimental devotion to the men who were playing the game when we fell in love with the sport, and for most of us that was when we were children. I

would expect today's youngsters to say thirty to forty years from now that the players of the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century aren't as good as the ones they'd watched in their childhood.

### **Once a game, now a business?**

Another myth of long duration is the one that many of us have often stated, and with a sigh: "Once upon a time baseball was a game, and now it's a business."

The truth is that from its very beginnings in the 1870s, professional baseball was always a business. The professional game was always about money. It's just that today there are so many more sources of income. In the early days it was ticket sales and concessions. Now, in addition to those, there are broadcasting rights revenues, advertising income, stadium naming rights, and the sharing of sales of MLB-licensed merchandise.

All the major leagues – the National League (1876 to the present), American Association (1882-1891), Union Association (1884), Players League (1890), American League (1901 to present), Federal League (1914-1915) were started for financial reasons, so that men with the money to own baseball teams could earn a profit, each of those upstart leagues causing players from existing major leagues to break their current contracts in hopes of earning better money with teams in the new leagues.

### **Baseball's 'modern' era**

One myth that has been most harmful, however, is that the year 1900 was the demarcation of the "modern" era. If we could build a time machine and travel back to that year, we wouldn't hear any fans talk of it that way. Nineteenth century fans were just as rabid about the game as are modern ones. True, there were some significant equipment and rules changes around that time – the introduction of the five-side home plate (rather than the old square-sized home plate that was set so that one of its points faced the pitcher) and the introduction of the rule that made the first two foul balls a strike.

When Babe Ruth set the home-run record by hitting 29 for the Boston Red Sox in 1919, sportswriters were in a tizzy trying to find whose record he broke, for home runs had never gathered much attention until he came along. The record book listed the 27 hit by Ned Williamson, a third baseman on the 1884 Chicago White Stockings (later Cubs). Yet writers who remembered those days immediately dismissed it because they pointed out that 25 of his homers came in a bandbox ballpark with a 200-foot left-field foul line that Chicago played in that year. Next they considered the 24 that outfielder Gavvy Cravath hit for the Phillies in 1915. But then someone pointed out that Buck Freeman, an outfielder for the Washington N.L. team of 1899, has hit 25 and should be considered the previous record holder. No distinction then between "ancient" and "modern" eras. Supposedly, according to one writer of the period, the unnatural distinction between 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century baseball came in during the 1930s, as a new breed of sports scribe replaced the older ones, some of who went back to the early days of the game.

### **The new myth: standardizing postseason records, regular-season rosters**

The old myths could sometimes be divisive – pitting a romanticized version of yesterday against the less than ideal image of today. The new myths, however, are often inclusive and stem from a sincere attempt to show the continuity of the game.

In truth, the only continuity of baseball is that since the 1870s it has been played between two teams of nine batters to a side who try to score more runs than the other in a nine-inning game. The modern myth is the attempt at standardizing

After the Cincinnati Reds won the Central Division title in 2010, a short newspaper item noted that the Reds' manager, Dusty Baker, had joined Bill McKechnie as the only managers to take three different N.L. teams to the "postseason." With no disrespect meant toward Baker and no attempt to proclaim McKechnie a better manager, that comparison is invalid. McKechnie managed in an era in which the only postseason was the World Series, and the only way to get

there was to finish in first place in an eight-team league without divisions or wild cards. Baker has piloted two first-place teams and one wild card.

Anyone looking at the year-by-year rosters on [baseball-almanac.com](http://baseball-almanac.com) will note that they list a “closer” for each team. Barney Peltz is listed as the closer for the 1906 St. Louis Browns. He pitched in 34 games, starting 30 of them, and got two “saves,” a statistic that didn’t exist then, in his four relief appearances. Those of us who know history realize that it’s an attempt to say “this is what he would have had” in saves. But I think of younger fans who may be exploring baseball history. They may not know that there weren’t closers until the modern era of relief pitching began about 50 years ago. And whose saves rule are we using, anyway? A look at the save stats on Lindy McDaniel, a great reliever for the Cardinals, Cubs, Giants, Yankees, and Royals, shows different totals for his great 1960 season, depending on how old the sourcebook is. Books closest to 1960 use the more stringent save rules then in affect while modern reference books used the more liberal save rules, meaning that different record books list McDaniel’s 1960 saves total from 22 to 27.

Before concluding, let me mention one more myth: That the accomplishment of the 2011 Cardinals can be compared to the comebacks of other Cardinal pennant and World Series champions. It cannot. That’s not to take away from the Cardinals’ achievement. By the rules that govern the game today, they accomplished something spectacular and should be commended. But their accomplishment as a wild card World Series champion can truly be compared only to that of other wild card teams since the wild card era began in 1995 since no second-place finisher could get into the playoffs before that year. When the second wild card in each league is added, either this year or in 2013, the spectacular nature of the final day of the 2011 regular season won’t be repeated. In a future year, all four of the teams battling for the wild card spot would have qualified.

### **Conclusion**

One does not have to be an expert on baseball history to understand the apples-to-apples concept of comparisons. Baseball history is a succession of eras shaped by changes in equipment, styles of play, development of player physique, etc. Let’s understand those eras and make apples-to-apples comparisons.