

RIGGS STEPHENSON

QRS: Riggs, talk a bit about your boyhood, your family, its activities, how you got started playing baseball, how, when, and where you got into organized ball, your minor league experience, and your signing with Cleveland.

RS: I was born in Hale County, Alabama, in 1898, January 5, and I had two brothers and one sister. My father was a rural mail carrier. My brothers played baseball. One pitched for the Univ. of Alabama, and the other played in the Georgia-Alabama League. After my brother graduated from Alabama, he had a job ~~with~~ at Guntersville, Ala. (I'm getting a little bit ahead of myself.) When I was about 15 years old, I played semipro ball all up and down the railroad. All the little towns around there had baseball teams in those days - Greensboro, Livingston, Dallas, Eutaw. That was about the only recreation we had during the summertime. Every now and then I'd get about two dollars for playing a game. Anyway, when I went to Guntersville my ~~bro~~ther had got a job teaching and coaching in the high school there, and so I went to that high school and played football, baseball, and a little basketball. Then I entered the Univ. of Alabama in 1917 and played my freshman year on the football team. And the next spring I played baseball. In 1918 we didn't have a football team because of World War I, so I played two more years of football later and kept on playing baseball. Our coach was ZinnScott from Cleveland, and he took me down to New Orleans to try out with the Cleveland Indians. They signed me for \$300 a month, and I went back to the University and played baseball until I graduated. In those days you could sign with a

pro team and still play in college if you hadn't played any pro games. I also got to train with Cleveland in Dallas, Texas, before I finished at Alabama.

In the spring of 1921 Cleveland came through the south playing exhibition games. And that time Bill Wambsganss had a broken arm and Harry Lunte, a reserve infielder, had a charley horse or something. They didn't have anyone else to play the infield except Dr. Joe Evans, who was an outfielder. So Speaker wired me and asked if I could come ^{play} second base at the opening of the season. Dr. Denny here at the University said that he didn't think I ought to go, because I had one more year of eligibility in football.

I saw Dr. Bauman and he told me I could come back to finish up my studies at Alabama, and so I went and joined the Indians. We opened the season in St. Louis against the Browns, which was ^a real good team at that time.

I just worked out the first day but played second base the next day. Got two hits and didn't have a single fielding chance at second base.

After Wambsganss got well and back into the lineup I was used as a utility man and pinch hitter. Then they traded Wambsganss to Boston ^{after the 1923 season} and intended for me to play second base. ~~in 1922~~ But I tripped over the White Sox first baseman, Earl Shealy, and fell on my knee and I couldn't walk for a couple of months. I had a try at third base for a few games, but I wasn't a very good third baseman. So, Speaker told me ~~he~~ he wanted to send me down to Kansas City to learn to play the outfield.

I went to Kansas City and while I was there Cleveland had a chance to get a second baseman from Indianapolis, Johnny Hodapp. So they sent me and 4 or 5 more fellows down to Indianapolis for Hodapp. I think I hit .325 there in the rest of the season. Next spring we trained at Hot Springs, Ark., with Donie Bush as our manager. I hit good there and was hitting pretty good when the season started (.370 or so), and the Chicago Cubs bought me and sent Shannon, a shortstop, and an outfielder and some cash

to Indianapolis for me. I stayed with the Cubs from 1926 through 1934.

Q: How was Tris Speaker as a manager, a player, and a person?

RS:: Tris, or Spoke as we called him, was a nice fellow and a great center fielder. There weren't any better center fielders at that time than Speaker.

Q: What happened in 1925 when you played in only 19 games and had a .296 average?

RS: That was when Speaker decided to send me down to the minors to learn the outfield, since it looked like I wasn't going to make a good infielder. I was pretty fast and could catch the ball and hit pretty good, so they thought I belonged in the outfield.

Q: Were you sold to the Cubs or traded, and if traded, for whom?

RS: I think I already covered that, but I was traded to the Cubs from Indianapolis, like I said. When I got to the Cubs I signed for \$6500, with the promise that I might ^{get} more the next year if I did well.

Q: Obviously, you didn't find the National League pitchers any great mystery, either. Eight straight years at well over .300. And just as evidently, you became a good outfielder. Did you notice any real difference between the two leagues?

RS: They always said that the American League was a fastball league and the National League went for the curve ball, but I couldn't tell much difference. I hit about the same thing in both leagues.

Q: In recent years they say that the two leagues have a different strike zone. Do you think that was true then? Did the ump's call them any different in the two leagues?

RS: Well, it's more different now than it was then. They don't call that high pitch around your shoulder a strike any more. To be a strike the pitch has to be down a good bit more, and a fellow ought to hit more now that he doesn't have to swing at that high pitch.

Q: Comment on Joe McCarthy, Rigers Hornsby, and Charlie Grimm as managers.

RS: McCarthy was the best manager I ever played under. I played under 4 of 5. Hornsby was pretty strict and a little bit rough. Grimm was a good-natured fellow and hardly ever got on anybody. McCarthy was the best strategist and had the best baseball mind, by far.

Q: Comment briefly on the following teammates of yours in regard to their skills, as players, their personalities, and any peculiarities:

RS: Steve O'Neill - He was catching for Cleveland when I joined the club, a good catcher but kind of slow. A big Irishman, kind of easy-going.

Stan Coveleski - He was a great spitball pitcher and won 3 gam s in the 1920 Series. He was quiet and when he was asked how he would to a certain batter, he's say, 'I'm going to fire that spitter in there.'

George Uhle - He was just starting while I was there and he got to be a real good pitcher later on.

Joe Sewell - Joe's got more records than anybody. At the University I was playing short and ^{he} was at seond base. In Cleveland we were switched.

He entered the Univ. a year before me, and we met when I went up there and we both were out for football practice. I remember that we were sitting out in front of the dormitory after somebody introduced us, and after a while he said, 'Steve, come here.' I went to where he was and he said, 'Bend over.' I bent over and he jumped up on my back and he said, 'Let's go up on the stoop.' So that's how I met Joe. And you know, in the 63 years since we met I think maybe we've had only one argument. I missed the sign once when I was on first base and he was hitting behind me. He got on me and we jawed a little bit, but it didn't last and we went on home together.

Bill Wambsganss - He was a good bunter and a good second baseman. He could really make the double play where you have to run over the bag and jump up in the air to get the throw to first base. He didn't hit too much.

Of course, that's a pretty good average nowadays.

Jim Bagby - He had a great year in 1920. I think he won 31 games. He had a fast curve and another that was a good breaking curve. He was only there a couple of years after I reached Cleveland.

Joe Wood - Was a great pitcher when he was with the Boston Red Sox. He came over with Speaker and played the outfield for Cleveland. Mostly against lefthanded pitchers. His arm went bad.

✓ Hack Wilson - Old Hack was a good ball player. A lot of people just dwell on his night life, but he was a good outfielder, had a good arm, could go back for a ball, and could come in and slide on his stomach and catch those little pop flies. And as you know, he hit 56 home runs in 1930. He had good speed too.

✓ Gabby Hartnett - Gabby in my opinion was the best catcher I saw in the majors. Had a great arm except for one year when it was hurt. That year they bought Zach Taylor from the Boston Braves and we went ahead to win the pennant. Gabby was used as a pinch hitter. He was good handling pitchers and his arm was so good that hardly anybody ever tried to run on him.

Charlie Root - He won 26 games the year after I joined the Cubs. He had a good sidearm fastball and a fair curve. Nice fellow.

Guy Bush - He was from Mississippi and when I first got there he only had a fastball. He developed a screwball later on and was good pitcher. He got to where he had pretty good control of the screwball.

Kiki Cuyler - He had a lot of ability. He could run and he could throw and he hit well. He was pretty quiet, didn't say anything bad about anybody, and didn't use any profane language. He wasn't much on the night life and hardly ever even took a glass of beer.

Pat Malone - Pat and Hack Wilson kind of ran together in their night time activities. They got into a few skirmishes. Pat was awfully wild when I

played against him down in the American Association. Later he got control and he had a good fastball and good curve. He was a winning pitcher.

Lon Warnecke - Warnecke came up while I was there, from down in Arkansas. He had a good fastball and curve ball, and after he was through playing he became an umpire.

Burleigh Grimes - Old Stubblebeard, as they called him. He was a spitball pitcher and he was a good one. He's in the Hall of Fame now and also is on the Old-Timers Committee for voting older players into the Hall of Fame. He had a pretty good fastball too, and he'd knock you down. You couldn't take a toehold on him.

Billy Herman - Billy came up from Louisville while I was there. He came to be a good second baseman with a fine arm. A good hit-and-run man.

Q: How funny was Charlie Grimm? Can you give some examples?

RS: Well, I can't think of any examples right now, but Charlie was very original. He'd pick up the canvas bag that held the supply of balls for practice and play it like it was an accordion.

Q: The 1929 World Series. Comment on the Athletics' 10-run inning in the 4th game. How could it happen? If Root had held that 8-run lead and Malone ~~for~~ his 2-0 lead in the bottom of the 9th the next day, the Cubs could have won the Series, right?

RS: The A's got all the breaks in that 10-run inning. I used to know the whole inning play-by-play, but I still remember 2 or 3 plays that happened that made a big difference. There was a double play ball hit to McMillan at third which bounced over his head. And two balls hit to Hack Wilson in Center field that were in the sun. One of them went for a home run by Mule Haas when it bounced in front of Hack and got away from him. Cuyler had to run it down in center field. They hit good too, though. They had some good hitters. Root was pitching well up to then and maybe it would have been better to leave him in there, but that's second-guessing.

The next day we were leading 2-0 in the bottom of the 9th and I think Bing Miller hit a line drive to right center and that started it.

Q: How about the bitterness between the two teams in the 1932 Series, and did Ruth really call his shot?

RS: That's been asked a lot of times. Our bench got on Ruth and he was responding. All of it was because we had voted to give Mark Koenig just half a share of the Series money. Babe and the Yankees were mad because Koenig had played shortstop for them previously. As far as the "called" home run, Joe Sewell was sitting right near Ruth and said Babe pointed to center field. He did put up his fingers and I don't know for sure if he pointed or not, but I do know that he hit it over the scoreboard. I was in left field. I really couldn't tell whether he was pointing or not.

Q: What was your best game ever in the majors? Your greatest thrill? And the toughest pitcher for you to hit? And the easiest?

RS: I can't really remember what might have been my best game. There were various times when I had four hits in a game. The toughest pitcher against me was Dazzy Vance. My greatest thrill was getting to play in those two Series in '29 and '32. I think our Series share in those days was about \$4000. One time Jimmie Wilson was catching for the Cardinals and Dizzy was pitching and he told Wilson he thought he could slow up on me and give me a change of pace. Wilson told me this later on. So I came up to bat with nobody on base and Wilson went out to tell Diz that this was the time to throw the change of pace. He threw it and I hit it over the left field fence. I liked to hit against any lefthanded pitchers.

~~Q~~ Q: Can you name the best players you ever saw in either league at each position, including a lefthanded and a righthanded pitcher?

RS: Well, for pitchers I'd take Moses Grove and Walter Johnson. George Sisler or maybe Gehrig on first base. Second base would be Eddie Collins. I'll put Joe Sewell at shortstop, and Pie Traynor on third. In the outfield

I'd put Cobb, Speaker, and Ruth. And Hartnett for catcher. I didn't see fellows lik Warren Spahn and Bob Feller pitch, so I can't name them.

Ted Williams is another I didn't see.

Q: Can you think of some amusing or unusual plays or incidents?

~~RS:~~ Who were some of the real characters in the game in your day, like Rabbit Maranville?

RS: Rabbit was a little fellow and a good shortstop. His folks didn't want him to play baseball but he played anyway. Toward the last part of his career he drank a little bit. The Gas House Gang was a good bunch of ball players - old Pepper Martin and Diz and Paul Dean. I never did see a triple play, but everybody has heard about Bill Wambsganss' triple play unassisted in the 1920 World Series.

✓ On train trips there used to be a lot of fun and pranks. Once we were leaving Pittsburgh and Pat Malone had some of those firecrackers that will shoot twice, you know. He was throwing them out on top of the houses along the railroad as we were leaving the station. And we used to play cards (hearts) on the train. McCarthy wouldn't let us play poker. No poker and no crap shooting. And I never saw anyone doing that.

Q: What about the Cub fans? Are they among the greatest and most loyal?

RS: I think the Cub fans were certainly good to me while I was there. They were great and I appreciated being there 9 years. I enjoyed every one of them.

WQ: After you finished playing in the majors in 1934, what did you do?

RS: I went to Indianapolis and signed with them and played one year. I hit about .340 and then Birmingham offered me the job as manager and I went there and managed for two years. The first year we finished third and in a series with Tulsa of the Texas League they beat us. And the next year we finished fifth and they fired me. I would much rather play than manage. I didn't like the responsibility too much. I always wanted to be

a coach but never did get a job as one. Then after leaving Birmingham I coached the high school baseball team for two years down at a little place called Akron, Alabama. Then I went into the lumber business with another fellow. I did coach a semipro team here in Tuscaloosa, and we went to the tournament in Wichita and came within one game of winning the championship. I coached a little football at that high school but we didn't have many players and when we scrimmaged I'd have to play against the varsity. While I was doing that the coach of football at Marion Institute, a college prep school, called me up and wanted to arrange a game with our high school. Their coach was an old boy who had gone to the U. of Alabama and he wanted to play us. I said, 'heck, I ain't got but 13 men.' So he said, 'I'll tell you ^{what} we'll do. I'll play with my team and you play with yours.' I said, 'All right, come on.' So they came to Akron and played us and we beat them 20 or 30 to 7. And I played the whole game.

Q: How disappointing is it to you that with your 14 seasons in the majors, 1310 games, .336 career batting average, and .378 average in two World Series, you still haven't been voted into the Hall of Fame?

RS: Well, of course everybody would like to get into the Hall of Fame.

I watched the induction proceedings this year, and if all the ones who get voted in talk as long as Happy Chandler and Frank Robinson did, I don't know whether I want to go or not. But I'm not worrying about it, it doesn't worry me at all. I guess if they don't put me in pretty soon I won't be able to go.

Q: What do you think of the artificial surfaces they have in many stadiums today? Night baseball? The importance today of relief specialists? Free agency?

RS: I didn't play on any artificial surfaces but it seems like they are a lot faster. I think the batter would probably get more hits on that stuff.

The balls really get through the infield in a hurry. I played two years in the minors. with night baseball/and I think it makes it harder to see and to hit.

A good fastball can get there before you're ready for it. There weren't as many relief pitchers in my day, because starters usually pitched complete games. The good relief pitchers, like Elroy Face of Pittsburgh some years ago and Bruce Sutter today, are probably better than any we had. And as a whole the players are bigger and stronger than we were, but I don't think they play as hard as we did. The relief specialists have changed the game somewhat from the way it was when I started out. With regard to free agency, I'm sorry I'm not in there for that big money, but I'm not going to worry about that either. I think free agency hurt the owners when it got started, and I don't know how they're going to get along. Of course, I'm always for the ball player.

Q: What were your feelings about the Wrigleys and the front office during your playing days in Chicago? How about Judge Landis?

RS: William Wrigley, the one who started the chewing gum business, was a great fellow and used to come and sit on our bench. P.K. Wrigley didn't take too much interest in the ball club in my opinion. He liked mechanics and everything. And Judge Landis was a stern old fellow. I remember one time he called O'Doul and me up to his office because we had let Herb Hunter have some money to go to Japan on. I didn't know anything about it; he had taken us over there a few years before and we had a good time. and played a lot of baseball over there. That was about 1922, I think it was. Landis wanted to know about it. ~~and I said~~ And we just told him what it was. I said, 'I just loaned him some money.' Well, he did bring us back some kimonos.

Q: What did baseball mean to the players in your day? Do you think it's the same with the players of today?

In my day it meant having a uniform. There was always somebody standing

back behind wanting to take your job and I guess that's still true today. Even if the salaries are a thousand times more than they were in my day.

There was more competition in those days, and that's the reason I think the ball players were better then. Some clubs had dozens of minor league teams, while nowadays they have maybe five or six. Not so many players went right from college to the majors then, so most people got more experience playing in the minors before going up.

Q: Did you ever have any run-ins with umpires? If so, what was the most serious one?

RS: No, I never did have any run-ins with them. I never questioned them, figuring I'd do better by not getting after them. One time I said to Eddie Ainsmith, who was umpiring, 'I think you missed that one.' 'Well, you're allowed to miss eleven.'

Q: Would you like to talk a bit about the kind of money ball players made in your day. You mentioned signing for \$300 a month.

RS: Yeah, my first year in baseball I signed with Cleveland for \$300 a month. Or \$1800 for the year. The next year I got a total of \$3000. My first year with the Cubs I reported to them in June and they signed me for \$6500 a year. I guess my best year was in 1929, when I hit 17 home runs and batted .362. My best salary was about my/last year, and I got \$14,000. That was pretty good in those times. They cut me back to \$10,000 the next year.

Q: Comment a little about playing expenses in your time. Who paid for the shoes, gloves, bat, uniforms, etc.?

The club furnished the bats and the uniform. The player had to furnish his own shoes and glove. The team paid all expenses on the road - hotel bills and everything. Sometimes we signed for meals in the hotels, but most the time they'd give us \$3.50 a day to eat on.

Q: When they sent you to Kansas City in 1925 to learn to play the outfield, how did you learn? Were there coaches to teach you?

RS: Well, they just put me in there to play, and every day before the game I'd have one of the pitchers hit me fly balls until I'd nearly give out. I just practiced every day a lot and that was it. Coaches and managers never did tell me anything. I practiced going back on fly balls a lot.

Q: As the player with the 18th highest batting average in the modern history of baseball, you must know something about the art of hitting. Some players these days, for example, say that they can see the ball or the stitching on the ball from the minute it leaves the pitcher's hand and can tell which way it's rotating and whether it's going to be a curve or a fastball, could you do that?

RS: Well, I couldn't see the stitches on it and I couldn't see it leave the bat, but I had a pretty good eye. At first I had some trouble with the curve ball, but I got some pitchers to go with me in the morning and just throw curve ball after curve ball until I got tired. Finally I got to where I could hit a curve ball pretty good, hitting it to the opposite field. The pitchers hardly ever slowed up on me, because I kind of dragged my bat, as they said, and hit to right field. If they slowed up I would hit it hard to left field. The secret of hitting was to watch the ball and hit at the ball, like Joe Sewell says. With curves you have to guess where it's going and if it's a big curve or fast curve or slow curve. The spitball was a hard thing for me to hit. Eddie Rommell was one of the few pitchers in my time who threw the knuckler. I had trouble that that pitch.

Q: Some ball players say they spend a lot of time studying the pitchers and they get to know the strengths and weaknesses of the pitcher, as well as all his movements. Did you spend a lot of time at that?

RS: Well, yes, you knew about how most pitchers were going to pitch to you. So you prepared for the way he pitched. But a lot of times they

would fool you and throw the fastball when you were expecting a curve.

Q: Some good hitters say they like to hit the first pitch if it's in there. Did you have a preference one way or the other on that?

RS: Sometimes that's true, for most pitchers try to get the first pitch over to get ahead of you. If we weren't familiar with the pitcher, Speaker would tell us, 'Let's all take the first pitch to size this guy up.'

Q: Today most good hitters will be given the green light by the manager on a 3 and 0 count. How was it in your day?

RS: No, we didn't swing at the 3 and 0 pitch very much. Some fellows like Babe Ruth would swing at it sometimes. I saw him hit one over the right field fence on 3 and 0 off Ray Caldwell. I only remember hitting a 3 and 0 pitch one time, down in Kansas City, and I bounced it right back to the pitcher.

Q: What was your favorite pitch in terms of where it was over the plate? High or low or belt buckle, or where?

RS: I believe they thought I could hit the high outside pitch into right center. I thought I was a better low ball hitter.

Q: When you first went up to the majors, did you have trouble swinging at bad balls like some hitters do until they get more experienced?

RS: Yes, sometimes I'd hit at that high ball inside, around the shoulders. The strike zone was a little higher then than it is now.

Q: When you got more experience, were you pretty good at not swinging at bad pitches?

RS: I guess so. About average, I suppose.

Q: You told me a story one time about a utility infielder who talked about having something on every pitcher in the league.

RS: Yeah, that was Clyde Beck, a little infielder we had with us on the Cubs. He said, 'I've got something on every pitcher in the league.'

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I asked, 'How much you hitting, Clyde?' He said, '~~He said~~, '.240.'

And when Dazzy Vance used to pitch, he'd go hide his bat.

Q: You told me another story about a ball being hit to you in the outfield.

RS: Yeah, that's right. I think we were playing in St. Louis. Somebody hit one over my head. I ran back and grabbed at the ball after it hit the ground. They told me later that on the bench McCarthy said, 'Steve'll get it.' And after a while I finally picked it up, and he said, 'Now he's got it.'

Q: When you hit 17 home runs and batted in 110 runs in 1929, you must have been batting fourth or fifth. Right?

RS: Yes. I was batting behind Hack Wilson, who hit cleanup.

Q: Did it matter much to you where you hit in the lineup? Some hitters claim they hit better in one position or another.

RS: No, it didn't make much difference to me. I remember one time in Cleveland I was hitting in the eighth spot and Luke Sewell said to me, 'You're the second cleanup man.'

Q: In your first years with Cleveland you played a few games at third base in each of your first three years. And then you never ^{played} third any more until 1927, when it shows you at third in 6 games. How come?

RS: Well, really, I wasn't a very good third baseman, but McCarthy thought I might improve the team hitting if I was at third base. And so he tried me over there and I wasn't hitting much so he said, 'I believe playing third base is hurting your hitting and so you're going to go back to left field. And all the time thereafter I stayed in left field.'

Q: Do you think you worried about playing defense at third enough for it really to hurt your hitting?

RS: I suppose so, but I really don't know.

Q: Now tell us about the time Walter Johnson hit you with a pitch.

~~A~~ RS: When I first went up there to Cleveland (of course, they always test you by throwing at you or pretty close to you to back you off the plate), so I got hit several times on the left arm. One time Walter Johnson, who supposedly didn't throw at anybody, in a game in Cleveland threw one of his high fastballs and hit me on the hard part of my head, I presume. And it bounced away up on the screen behind home ~~plate~~. That was the only time I ever ~~hit~~ got hit bad. I just lay there a few minutes and then trotted on down ~~to~~ first base. And I never had any after effects from it.

Q: When we were talking about beanballs the other day you also ~~was~~ mentioned the time in Philadelphia, I guess, when you'd had a couple of pretty good hits and the manager had something to say about throwing at you. What was that about?

~~A~~ RS: That was when I was with the Cubs and we were playing the Phillies. I can't remember who the manager of the Phillies was. I had hit a home run into the left field stands and then one over the right field stands. When I came up the next time he hollered, 'Knock that big so-and-so down.' Only he didn't say 'so-and-so.'