



Baseball Doubles as a Symbol of the Country

July 4 Games and Other Developments Helped Define the Nation. **By Craig Muder**

Independence Day falls right in the heart of baseball season, and that's only fitting for America's national pastime. Baseball, it seems, grew up with America.

From its origins as a New York City-area club game in the 1820s to the powerful healing it provided after the Sept. 11 attacks of 2001, the sport has time and again demonstrated its link to patriotism and other all-American values.

Lou Gehrig made history on July 4, 1939

For instance, Lou Gehrig uttered his most famous public speech, his farewell to the game — "Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth" — on the nation's 163rd birthday: July 4, 1939.

Less than two years later, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis — a neurological disease that would one day bear his name — would claim the life of the 37-year-old Iron Horse, who played 2,130 consecutive games for the New York Yankees, a record of endurance that stood until 1995.

The 61,808 fans at Yankee Stadium that day paid tribute to Gehrig, as did his Yankee teammates and friends, thanking him for his dignity and service — two causes our country respects and embraces. Gehrig was forced into immediate retirement because of health reasons — what the self-professed "luckiest man on the face of the earth" called his "tough break." Yet Gehrig ended his farewell (hear it at www.lougehrig.com) by proclaiming that he still had "an awful lot to live for."

People in the stands and across the country saw in him some of the best qualities of themselves: gratefulness and modesty, perseverance and perspective.

A silver cup from Yankee employees and a trophy from his teammates that commemorate his courage and humility reside at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y.; the artifacts suggest the impact he made on the sporting conscious of the United States and mark an iconic moment in this country's history — a moment that does not exist but for a game that has been woven into America's fabric.

The game provides fireworks in the sky and for the soul

Gehrig isn't the only baseball player to be associated with American patriotism in general and our nation's birthday in particular. From its earliest days, baseball players have embraced and embodied the pioneer spirit of America — playing a game built on hard work and independent thinking, the bedrock on which the United States sits.

And from the start, owners and players felt that connection — especially on the nation's birthday. Hall of Fame pitchers



▲ Hall of Famer and Cleveland Indians pitcher, **Bob Feller**, became the first Major League Baseball player to enlist in the Armed Services following the bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. Feller missed three full seasons and part of a fourth while serving in the Navy. (All photos courtesy of National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, N.Y.)



Hall of Famer **Joe DiMaggio** (with bat) talks to troops during his stint in the Army during World War II. Hall of Famer **Jackie Robinson** (top right) served in the military before breaking the color barrier in the major leagues. Hall of Famer **Hank Greenberg** (bottom right) served in the Army Air Corps in 1941 after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Rube Waddell and Cy Young squared off in a July 4, 1905, matchup that drew a huge crowd in Boston and proved memorable for all sorts of reasons. The contest lasted 20 innings — and so did each pitcher, both going the distance. Waddell drove in the winning run for his Philadelphia squad in the 4-2 victory.

“The fact that it was the Fourth of July kept me going,” Waddell said. “I guess the shooting of revolvers, and the fireworks, and the yelling made me pitch better.”

A week later, Young wrote, “For my part, I think it was the greatest game of ball I ever took part in,” according to Daniel O’Brien as quoted

by the Philadelphia Athletics Historical Society (<http://www.philadelphiaathletics.org/history/rubevscy.htm>).

And in 1983, Yankee pitcher Dave Righetti hurled a no-hitter on July 4. How fitting that near “perfection” (Righetti walked four) occurred on that most American of days for the 41,000 fans rooting for the Yankee Doodles in the Bronx.

“If baseball is a text, and I maintain it is, then it’s about something,” said former Major League Baseball commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti in a famous observation. “It’s about stability of values and the worshipping of tradition.”

FDR stepped up to the plate during World War II

Baseball is linked with American values and tradition in ways that are downright presidential: President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “Green Light” letter of Jan. 15, 1942.

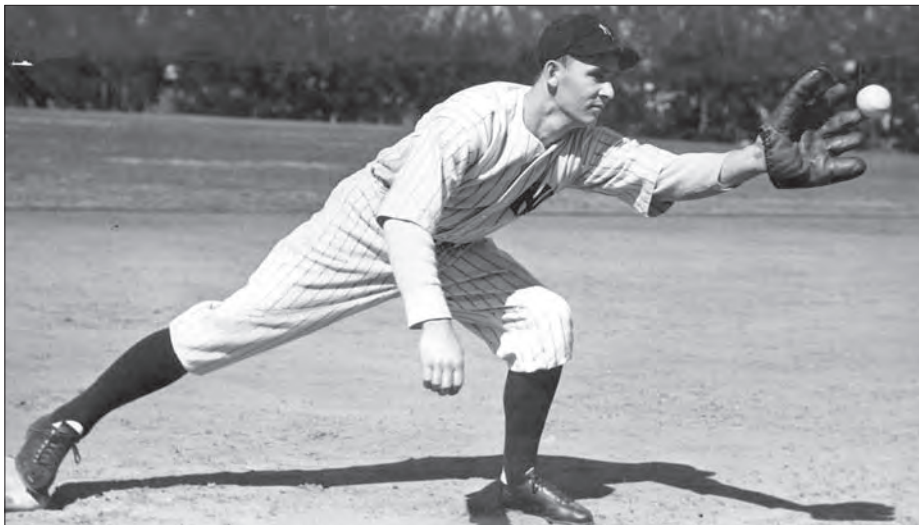
One day earlier, Roosevelt — with the country still reeling from the Dec. 7 attack on Pearl Harbor — received a letter from baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis, who asked Roosevelt if the 1942 baseball season should be canceled because of World War II.

Roosevelt responded immediately and with passion, writing: “I honestly feel that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going. There will be fewer people unemployed and everybody will work longer hours and harder than ever before. And that means that they ought to have a chance for recreation and for taking their minds off their work even more than before.”

The president added: “Here is another way of looking at it — if 300 teams use 5,000 or 6,000 players, these players are a definite recreational asset to at least 20 million of the fellow citizens — and that in my judgment is thoroughly worthwhile.”

Notable players sacrificed their careers to protect the nation

If baseball serves the country, baseball players do, too. Since the start of professional baseball, its players aided their country in times of war.



Joe Gordon, who fought in World War II, will be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame on July 26, 2009, alongside Rickey Henderson and Jim Rice.

Hall of Famers like Cleveland Indians pitcher Bob Feller and Boston Red Sox slugger Ted Williams lost significant portions of their big league careers while defending America's freedom — contributions that are recognized by the Hall of Fame. Entering the Plaque Gallery, a monument and bronze plaque greet visitors with this message:

"MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME WHO SERVED IN THE ARMED SERVICES OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA DURING WARTIME"

Listed below are the names of the Hall of Famers who served America, and next to their individual plaques hangs a medallion commemorating their service. In all, 68 Hall of Famers — including 2009 electee Joe Gordon, a second baseman for the Yankees (1938-43 and 46) and Indians (1947-50) — served in the Armed Forces. That's almost a quarter of the Hall's membership of 289.

"I made the Hall of Fame, but the greatest thing I did was serve my country," said Feller, who almost assuredly would have won at least 100 more games — he finished with 266 victories — had he not spent four years in the Navy in the Second World War. Feller was the first major leaguer to enlist in the military after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

"Because of these men (who served their country), I get the opportunity to play a game and live in freedom," New York Mets All-Star third baseman David Wright told MLB.com, Major League Baseball's official Web site.

Baseball sings the country's praises, literally

It was during World War II that the national anthem became a permanent part of the national pastime.

The "Star-Spangled Banner" was written by Francis Scott Key after watching a British siege on Baltimore's Fort McHenry in 1814, and by the 20th century it had become America's unofficial anthem. With the country immersed in World War I in 1918, a band at Game 1 of the World Series that fall spontaneously launched into the song during the seventh-inning stretch of the contest between the Red Sox and the

Cubs at Chicago's Comiskey Park.

The fan response was so overwhelming that the band played the song again at the same point of Game 2 and Game 3. When the Series switched to Boston's Fenway Park for Game 4 on Sept. 9 (the regular season was cut short that year due to the war), Red Sox owner Harry Frazee ordered his band to play "The Star-Spangled Banner" before the start of the game — a first for baseball.

The habit was lost in the next two decades — despite the fact that the song became the official national anthem in 1931. Then in World War II, clubs resurrected the tradition, which has been in place ever since.

Even today, multimillionaire players pause before the game, remove their caps and salute their country.

There are reasons why we take ourselves out to the ballgame

Baseball has been played in America since the 18th century, and the bond between game and country remains strong. The two have grown together, marking history and changing society through a partnership that is unique in America's history.

"Baseball is basically in the business of reminding people of their first memories, of their best hopes," said Giamatti. If baseball forgets that, it will lose its basic appeal."

"America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers," said James Earl Jones as Terence Mann in *Field of Dreams*, the 1989 hit movie with a baseball theme. "It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. ... It reminds us of all that once was good, and it could be again." ■

Author's note: Most of the examples mentioned in this article are included among the 35,000 three-dimensional objects housed at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y. Opened in 1939 to "preserve history, honor excellence and connect generations," the museum houses 2.7 million documents and 500,000 photos and hosts more than 300,000 visitors annually. Of the more than 17,000 men who have played Major League Baseball, less than two percent — 289 — are enshrined at the Hall of Fame. For more information, or to support the Hall of Fame's educational mission through membership, visit www.baseballhall.org.



▲ Lou Gehrig won six World Series Championships as a member of the New York Yankees.

▲ Hall of Famer Ted Williams was a Marine pilot in both World War II and the Korean War. Williams is shown boarding his F9F Panther jet.



For more photos and a complete list of war veterans in the National Baseball Hall of Fame, go online to: <http://www.PhiKappaPhi.org/Web/Publications/Forum/summer09/baseball>



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