

# Ty Cobb and the Mud Hens Beat Babe Ruth

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Pose the question of who was the greatest baseball player of all time and many will suggest Babe Ruth or Ty Cobb. Fans at Toledo's Swayne Field saw the storied pair face off on April 7, 1917. Ruth was then a star pitcher for the World Champion Boston Red Sox who were here to face Roger Bresnahan's Toledo Iron Men in a preseason exhibition game.

How Ty Cobb came to be wearing a Toledo uniform that day is a story in itself. That story began in Texas and is told by Charles C. Alexander in his book about the famed New York Giants manager, John McGraw.



*Ty Cobb*

On March 31, 1917, in Dallas, the Giants met the Detroit Tigers in the second of what was intended to be a dozen or so exhibition games. The teams would play as they moved north together. In the second inning the ferocious Ty Cobb slammed into second base and knocked over Buck Herzog, ripping Herzog's pants and inflicting a minor spike wound. Cobb and Herzog and subsequently Art Fletcher [Giants' shortstop] as well flailed and rolled around for a bit before they were pulled apart. At McGraw's insistence, Bill Brennan, accused of favoring the Giants when he'd umpired in the national league, ordered Cobb out of the game. Despite Hughey Jennings' [Detroit manager] demands, he wouldn't also eject Herzog and Fletcher. Cobb remained on the Tigers bench for the remainder of the game and periodically exchanged epithets with McGraw across the diamond.

That night at the Oriental Hotel, Herzog and Cobb staged a remarkable fist fight that ended only when the Detroit trainer, acting as referee, stepped in to prevent Cobb from beating his foe to death. The next morning, in the hotel lobby, McGraw cornered Cobb and cursed him roundly. Somehow keeping his rage under control, Cobb finally walked out after telling the Giants manager that he would kill him if McGraw were a younger man.

Complaining that "McGraw is a mucker [a vulgar, illbred person] and always has been and I don't intend to stand for his dirty work," Cobb refused to play in the rest of the Tigers-Giants series. The teams split up anyway after snow flurries kept them from playing in Kansas City. Then the whole New York team, sarcastically wired Cobb, in Cincinnati awaiting the Tigers, that inasmuch the Giants had left, it was safe for him to rejoin his teammates.

The Toledo News-Bee picked up the story in Cincinnati where Cobb was waiting to join his Tiger team. Also in Cincinnati was the Toledo team, in town to play the Cincinnati Reds. According to that newspaper:

When the Peach [Ty Cobb] arrived in Cincinnati, he found the Toledo club there. He at once accepted manager Bresnahan's invitation to practice with the Iron Men and decided to come on here [Toledo] with the team.

On account of the rain there was nothing doing in Cincinnati. Then the Duke [Bresnahan] conceived the idea of using Cobb in a Toledo uniform. That matter was quickly arranged. President Navin of the Tigers gave permission to Cobb to work with the Bresnahan crew.

Manager Barry of the Boston team agreed to let the Georgian [Ty Cobb] play with the Iron Men. Cobb in a Toledo uniform will be a novel and unusual attraction and will undoubtedly draw many people to Swayne Field.

The Toledo club, then known as the Iron Men, was owned and managed by Toledoan and future Hall of Fame inductee, Roger Bresnahan. Bresnahan had arranged an ambitious preseason exhibition schedule for his team. Following spring training in Dawson Springs, Kentucky and the rained out games against the Reds, he scheduled the Iron Men to host the Boston Red Sox, Detroit and Cleveland at Swayne Field before embarking on their American Association schedule.

The Boston Red Sox were kings of the baseball world when they came to Toledo in the spring of 1917 for Saturday and Sunday games. They had won the previous two World Series. Those two seasons were also Babe Ruth's first two complete major league seasons. The lefty posted records of 18-8 and 23-12 and had topped Brooklyn in game 2 of the 1916 World Series, 2-1 in fourteen innings.

In Ty Cobb, the Iron Men had the game's preeminent player. Entering his 13th American League season, Cobb already had eight batting titles and six stolen base titles under his belt.

The match up of stars also showcased what promised to be a contending Toledo team. Portions of the Toledo Daily Blade account of the two games describe the surprising results.

It will be days before the Red Sox will forget their visit to Toledo, in the spring of 1917. Saturday they were blanked by Bedient and Keating while Toledo scored six runs. Sunday, Toledo scored six runs and presented one to Boston.

Vance and Brady duplicated the work of their mates, by holding Barney's crew to four hits. Not a champion walked Sunday. About 3,500 saw the game each day. The turnout was remarkable, considering the weather. And the crowds saw a new brand of baseball by the Iron Men.

In both games the Sox were out hit, outplayed and outguessed. The Iron Men looked at great pitchers "Babe" Ruth, Pennock, "Dutch" Leonard, Mays and Wyckoff.



*Babe Ruth*

Tyrus Raymond Cobb, the highest-priced peach Georgia has produced played against the champions. He gave the fans a run, Saturday, by an exhibition on the bases and afield. Sunday, he made two pretty catches and a hit, but had no chances on the bases.

Although the Toledo lineup pleasing to southpaws, the Iron Men found no trouble in hitting two of the greatest lefthanders in the world -- Leonard and Ruth.

Toledo accumulated 16 hits, 12 runs, and two errors as against eight hits, one run and seven errors, in two games.

On the bases they outplayed the Sox. They stole six, while Boston failed to pilfer, and laid down five sacrifice hits, whereas the Sox failed to register.

...Bedient fanned "Babe" Ruth one of the best hitters in the game... [Note that Ruth is already recognized as a premier hitter though he had been used exclusively as a pitcher to this point in his career.]

In both games the Red Sox looked bad, as compared to the Iron Men.

Perhaps the crowds turned out to see Boston and Ty Cobb. If so, they remained to admire the rejuvenated outfit Bresnahan has placed in the field.

Following the weekend series with Boston, Bresnahan's crew welcomed the Detroit Tigers to Swayne Field for a Monday game. Cobb reverted to his own team for the contest. The Blade kiddingly suggested that "after a brief trial the player has been turned over to the Detroit Tigers." Joining Cobb in the Tiger outfield were Hall of Fame-bound Harry Heilmann and also Bobby Veach, who was destined to become a Mud Hen great following his major league career. Thanks to a six-run fifth inning, the Tigers prevailed over the Iron Men by a score of 8-5.

Finally, on Tuesday, April 10, 1917, Toledo hosted the strong Cleveland Indians in their final tune-up game. Cleveland's lineup featured the great Tris Speaker, bound for the Hall of Fame; catcher Steve O'Neill, who would later manage Toledo and former Mud Hen Ray Chapman at shortstop. Chapman would later become the only man killed on a major league baseball field when he was struck in the head by a ball pitched by Carl Mays who would later also be a Mud Hen. The club from the neighboring city showed no mercy in racking three Toledo pitchers in a 13-0 rout. Chapman was the hitting hero for the visitors as he pounded out four hits including a double and a homerun with the bases full. His circuit clout would later come to be known as a grand slam.

The Boston preseason games in early April of 1917 at Swayne Field featured a flash of brilliance by Toledo. The two wins were due in part to strong pitching starts provided by Vance and Bedient, both of whom departed the team after brief stays. Bedient was among ten Toledo Iron Men who enlisted in the armed services of the United States to serve in World War I. The decimated roster and lack of pitching depth were among the reasons that the Toledo team of 1917 did not live up to the early promise and finished the season in the American Association cellar.

For those two games against Boston, Toledo was on top of the baseball world. The Iron Men roundly defeated the two-time defending World Champions and provided the city with a glimpse of the two players most often mentioned as the best ballplayers ever -- Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb.



*Roger Bresnahan*