



CALLING GOOD PEOPLE “RACIST” ISN’T NEW: THE CASE OF TY COBB

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He was Major League Baseball’s first superstar. The first man ever inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. And he still has the game’s highest career batting average – .366 – almost 90 years after he retired. His name is Ty Cobb.

Yet, despite his historic achievements, he is often remembered for being the worst racist and the dirtiest player ever to take the field.

If you know baseball, you’ve heard the stories: Ty Cobb would pistol-whip black men he passed on the street. He once stabbed to death a black waiter in Cleveland just because the young man was acting “uppity.”

On the field, he was said to sharpen his spikes to cut-up rival infielders. He supposedly had no friends. In the movie *Field of Dreams*, Shoeless Joe Jackson says that Cobb wasn’t invited to the ghostly cornfield reunion because, “No one liked the son of a bitch.”

A lifelong baseball fan, I believed these stories when I set out to write the first authoritative biography of Cobb in 20 years. I’d been hearing them all my life and, like a lot of people, I took the repetition as evidence. But, to my astonishment, as I delved into the source material – newspapers, census reports and personal letters – I couldn’t find any proof that they were true.

On the contrary, Cobb’s teammates on the whole seemed to respect him, defending him on the field and off. His opponents said he played the game hard, but clean! Wally Schang, a veteran catcher was typical. He once said, “Cobb never cut me up. He was too pretty a slider to hurt anyone who put the ball on him right.”

One famous photograph from 1912 shows Cobb flying foot-first into the crotch of St. Louis Browns catcher Paul Krichell. It looks bad. But pictures can be deceiving. In reality, Cobb is kicking the ball out of Krichell’s glove. He didn’t spike the catcher. Krichell later said, “In a way, it was really my fault. I was standing in front of the plate instead of on the side, where I could tag Ty as he slid in.” Indeed, in 1910, Cobb actually asked the league to require that players dull their spikes!

And what about the bigotry – how could a man born in Georgia in 1886 not be a racist? Well, as it turns out, Ty Cobb descended from a long line of abolitionists. His great-grandfather was a minister who preached against slavery and was run out of town for his troubles. His grandfather refused to fight in the Confederate army because of the slavery issue. And his father, an educator, once broke up a lynch mob.

On the subject of blacks playing with whites, Cobb said, “The Negro should be accepted wholeheartedly and not grudgingly... The Negro has the right to play professional baseball, and who’s to say he has not?”

Cobb attended many Negro league games, sometimes throwing out the first pitch and sitting in the dugout with the players. He said Willie Mays was the only modern-day player he’d pay to see.

As for that black waiter he supposedly killed? Well, in reality he was a hotel night watchman. And Cobb didn’t kill him, he just scuffled with him. And – oh, yeah – the guy was white!

Now, Ty Cobb was, like the rest of us, a highly imperfect being – too quick to take offense, too intolerant of those who did not strive for excellence with the same almost crazy zeal that he did. But a racist? A dirty player? Not true.

What is true is that almost every accusation against Ty Cobb’s character finds its roots in the same source – un-fact-checked articles and books published after his death by a bitter, opportunistic journalist named Al Stump whom Cobb had once threatened to sue for making up stories about him.

It didn’t matter that Stump had spent little time with Cobb, or that all of Stump’s sources were anonymous; that sportswriters who knew Cobb rushed to his defense; or that Stump himself had been banned from publications for writing lies. The scandal was titillating, and it stuck.

When the legend beats the facts, print the legend. Meanwhile, a good man’s reputation lies in ruins.

There are lessons to be learned here:

First, it’s all too easy to believe lies about people, especially successful ones. Lies take achievers down a few notches, and we like to hear that. And second, if a lie is repeated often enough, it becomes accepted as fact.

This has consequences, because lies are the source of much of the world’s evil – like the evil of destroying a man’s legacy; in this case, a legacy that should be celebrated.

Ty Cobb was the most exciting baseball player of all time. He once stole second, third, and home on three consecutive pitches. He once turned a tap back to the pitcher into an inside-the-park home run. He was not a racist or a cheat.

It’s time to tell the truth about Ty Cobb.

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