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Going, Going, Gone!: How the Home Run Has Changed Major League Baseball

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Abstract

What makes the home run so magical? Why is it the one play in baseball that has stood out above the rest for its ability to bring in fans? The answer lies in the drama and excitement that the home run brings to the game. The home run has constantly been baseball's grace when faced with falling attendance. In three specific time periods, the 1920s, 1960s, and 1990s, the home run provided a spark that reignited the dying flames of interest among baseball fans across saving America.

**Going, Going, Gone!: How the Home Run has Changed Major League
Baseball**

David Getz

“Home run. The two words, all by themselves, encompass the essence of the game of baseball. They are also the emotional keystone of the unique hold baseball has acquired on the American imagination more than a century ago.”¹

These words, written by Brian Silverman in his book Going, Gone, Gone..., perfectly capture the feelings that surround the pinnacle of baseball—the home run. From its conception in the early 1800s, baseball was primarily a game of “small ball” and pitcher domination. But over time, baseball fans have come to set the home run on a pedestal above all other events in the game. Because of its popularity, the home run has become a key factor in bringing fans through the turnstiles. In three specific time periods, the 1920s, 1960s, and 1990s, the home run provided a spark that reignited the dying flames of interest among baseball fans across America.

To understand the home run’s importance in the 1920s, one must first understand the game of baseball during that time period—the home run has not always been in the spotlight of the American public. In fact, throughout the 1800s, swinging for power was said to be “virtually stupid.”² Home runs were not even recorded in the newspapers box scores.³ The science of hitting the baseball rested not on how far a batter could hit the ball, but on whether or not the batter could hit it where the fielders were not. In that time period, known in baseball lore as the “Dead Ball Era,” the most common way to get on base was to hit a line drive. The great hitters of this era, Napoleon Lajoie, Ty Cobb, Tris Speaker, and Honus Wagner all specialized in hitting rocket line drives to the gaps in the outfield.⁴ By choking up on the bat, batters purposely sacrificed power for the bat control that would produce situational hits. Players that did slide their hands down the bat and try to drive the ball far were scorned for their unorthodox style.⁵ In one ill-fated case, a home run even physically hurt the

¹ Brian Silverman, ed., *Going, Gone, Gone...* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 1.

² Mark Ribowsky, *The Complete History of the Home Run* (New York: Kensington Publishing Co., 2003), 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵ Silverman, ed., *Going, Gone, Gone...*, 2-3.

batter. In 1862, Jim Creighton's mighty cut ruptured his bladder after hitting a home run for the Brooklyn Excelsiors; he died four days later.⁶

The game of baseball might have forever been mired in the Dead Ball era had not George Herman Ruth entered the scene in the 1910s. Known to America as Babe Ruth, the large pitcher amazed fans with his ability to clout the baseball. In 1919, in his fifth year as a major leaguer, Ruth hit 29 home runs for the Boston Red Sox to take the single-season record of 24 away from Gavvy Cravath of the Philadelphia Phillies.⁷ Yet, despite his showcase hitting, his manager tried all he could to get Ruth to focus on pitching.⁸ Ruth disagreed and was eventually traded to the New York Yankees where he furthered his legacy as baseball's first great slugger. The fans absolutely adored the "Sultan of Swat," Ruth's famous nickname, and packed Yankee stadium daily hoping to glimpse one of his mammoth shots. As baseball author Mark Ribowsky asserts, Babe Ruth made "the misbegotten and nearly forgotten home run into nearly a metaphysical life form."⁹

During this time period, major changes were made by the men in the batter's box. Throughout the 1920s, the average number of home runs per year was astonishingly higher than in any previous decade, mostly because of Babe Ruth.¹⁰ The Sultan of Swat hit twice as many home runs as any other team in the American League when he hit 54 homers in 1920. Trying to copy the Babe, hitters stopped choking up on the bat and began to switch to a slower, uppercut swing. As hitters swung for the fences, their number of home runs rose, but so did their strikeout totals. Batting averages also dipped lower than in years past.¹¹ While the strikeout previously had been an act of disgrace, now all was forgiven if the batter could redeem himself with a home run his next time up.¹²

With Ruth as the catalyst, the home run spread like wildfire through the Major Leagues in the following decades. Throughout the mid 1900s, every team had at least one player in the lineup capable of hitting the ball out of the park. The teams that were successful had several. Ruth's Yankees were led by the Murderer's Row of Lou Gehrig, Bob Meusel, Tony Lazzeri, and Babe himself. In 1927, those four men hit 133 home runs combined and the Yankees went on to beat the Pirates in the World Series. Of those 133 homers, 60 came from the "Bambino," Babe's other famous nickname, to set a record that many claimed would never be broken.¹³ In that same year, six different players hit over 20

⁶ Ribowsky, *History of the Home Run*, 10.

⁷ Kieran, John. "Sports of the Times." *New York Times (1857-Current File)*, Aug 23, 1942, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=85581214&Fmt=7&clientId=65345&RQT=309&VName=HNP>, 1.

⁸ Ribowsky, *History of the Home Run*, 62.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁰ Kieran, "Sports of the Times." 1.

¹¹ Silverman, ed., *Going, Going, Gone...*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ TIMES., Special to THE NEW YORK. "Ruth's Record of 700 Home Runs Likely to Stand for all Time in Major Leagues." *New York Times (1857-Current File)*, Jul 14, 1934, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=94550647&Fmt=7&clientId=65345&RQT=309&VName=HN>

home runs.¹⁴ By 1961, the number for that same achievement was 41, and eight players hit over 40 homers.¹⁵

Recognizing the fans' excitement for the long ball, the owners of major league baseball decided that the game needed to change to accommodate the rising popularity of the home run. As more and more sluggers attempted to follow in the Babe's footsteps, home runs and attendance began to rise.¹⁶ To help with both of these statistics, owners remolded their stadiums by putting bleachers in the outfield. This change allowed for more seating, and the shortened outfield now made home runs easier to hit and thus more frequent. Ruth's home runs and the overall increase in power hitting caused the New York Times to report that baseball "has come back with a boom that has been beyond all expectations from an attendance standpoint...."¹⁷ The fans loved the home run, and, thanks to Babe Ruth, it was now a vital part of the game.

As good as Ruth left things in the 1920s, it would not take long before the home run would be needed again to come to baseball's rescue. At the dawn of the 1960s, aided by several new rules in their favor, an enlarged strike zone, and the addition of several large baseball parks, the pitchers finally began to adjust to the new style of hitting and enjoy the upper hand over batters.¹⁸ Although several pitchers during the 1960s put up numbers that seemed unimaginable (Bob Gibson's single-season ERA of 1.12 for example), the majority of fans soon got bored with the low scoring games and lack of offense.¹⁹

Because owners recognized the lack of offense resulted in falling attendance, new rules were added, beginning in the 1969 season, this time in favor of the batter. The strike zone was lessened by a considerable measure, the pitcher's mound was shortened by five inches, and baseballs were made livelier and were switched out more often.²⁰ With the new rules in effect, a hitting explosion took place during that season that brought fans back to the ballpark.²¹ As an author of the New York Times pointed out, "350-foot outs are becoming 380-foot home runs."²² In 1969, the number of batters hitting 30 or more home runs nearly doubled from the meager 11 that accomplished the feat just seven years

¹⁴ "Is the Baseball Livelier? Homers Add Up to Yes." *New York Times (1857-Current File)*, Jul 27, 1969, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=89356127&Fmt=7&clientId=65345&RQT=309&VName=HNP> 1

¹⁵ "MLB Stats," in ESPN MLB Statistics, <http://sports.espn.go.com/mlb/statistics> (accessed November 19, 2008).

¹⁶ Baseball Season is Record Maker." *New York Times (1857-Current File)*, Jul 27, 1919, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=97107246&Fmt=7&clientId=65345&RQT=309&VName=HN> P.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Benjamin G. Rader, *Baseball: A History of America's Game*, 3rd ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ "Is the Baseball Livelier? Homers Add Up to Yes," 1.

²² *Ibid.*

earlier.²³ In a further attempt to increase the role of power hitting in the game, the American League added a rule in 1973 that allowed a designated hitter to bat instead of the pitcher.²⁴ The home run exhibitions of the late 1960s brought rejuvenated followers through the turnstiles and erased the apathy that had begun to infiltrate baseball.

A similar scenario took place in the early 1990s. After fans were treated to a 1987 season that was the greatest offensive year baseball had ever seen, the next three seasons proved to be inadequate for recapturing its grandeur.²⁵ Similar to the hitting outburst in 1969, during the 1993 season, players attempted to turn spectators' heads by use of the long-ball. The 1993 season surpassed the numbers of 1987 in terms of home run output and was capped by a dramatic season ending home run by Joe Carter in the World Series.²⁶ However, any new attention that baseball gained as a result of the 1993 season was immediately crushed the following year due to the Great Strike. With all the players holding out for more money, the World Series was cancelled for the first time since 1904.²⁷ Following one of baseball's worst crises in history, America's opinion of baseball was at an all-time low, and it seemed like only a miracle could save baseball's future.²⁸

Luckily, the miracle home run season of 1998 caused baseball fans to rediscover their love for the game. That year, two of baseball's biggest sluggers, Mark McGwire of the St. Louis Cardinals and Sammy Sosa of the Chicago Cubs, single handedly brought baseball back to the forefront of American sports through the Great Chase of 1998.²⁹ Roger Maris' single season home run mark of 61 homers had stood for thirty-eight seasons without anyone threatening to surpass it. However, in 1998, people were not wondering whether McGwire and Sosa would break the record—they were wondering by how much. McGwire belted home runs at a pace that seemed unforeseen by mortals until Sosa, after a record-setting 20 home runs in the month of June, caught up to McGwire mid-season.³⁰ On September 8, McGwire made history first when he hit home run number 62 against, coincidentally, Sosa's Chicago Cubs. Just five days later, Sosa joined McGwire in baseball immortality when he caught and surpassed Maris on the same day. By the end of the season, McGwire had launched 70 homers, and Sosa was only four behind at 66.³¹ Fueled by this historical season, baseball attendance had finally risen for the first time since the strike.³² At a

²³ "MLB Stats."

²⁴ Benjamin G. Rader and Kenneth J. Winkly, "Baseball's Great Hitting Barrage of the 1990s," *NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture* (January 2002), under "Section Title," <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nine/v010/10.2rader.html> (accessed November 22, 2008), 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁶ Ribowsky, *History of the Home Run*, 282.

²⁷ Benjamin G. Rader and Kenneth J. Winkly, "Hitting Barrage," 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Silverman, ed., *Going, Going, Gone...*, 120.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

³¹ "MLB Stats."

³² Fred Mitchell, "MARCH ON MARIS RESULTS IN MARCH ON HALL TURNSTILES,"

time when baseball's future seemed to be in doubt, McGwire and Sosa helped baseball fans rediscover why the game was labeled America's "National Pastime" a century and a half earlier. Famous sports writer Frank Deford summed up the 1998 season in the following quote: "Now, suddenly it's different. Baseball...has returned to its roots and it's the epitome of sweetness and light in the United States of America."³³

So what makes the home run so magical? Why is it the one play in baseball that has stood out above the rest for its ability to bring in fans? The answer lies in the drama and excitement that the home run brings to the game. In no other sport can one action so dramatically change the outcome of the game as the home run can in baseball. Take, for instance, the 1951 National League championship game between the Giant and the Dodgers. Down by two runs in the bottom of ninth, the Giants' unlikely hero, second basemen Bobby Thompson, hit a three run home run off the Dodgers' Ralph Branca to give the Giants the pennant. The famous hit has gone down in history as "The Shot Heard 'Round the World."³⁴ Another classic moment came in Game Six of the 1976 World Series between the Boston Red Sox and the Cincinnati Reds. With the game tied in the 11th inning, Boston catcher Carlton Fisk came to the plate and corked a high fly ball down the left field line. The crowd rose as one to see if the ball would stay fair as Fisk waved his arms, trying to will the ball to stay out of foul territory. Fisk succeeded and rounded the bases amidst a wild celebration at Boston's Fenway Park. It is dramatic moments like these that fans pay to see season after season. Although managers today are beginning to put newfound emphasis on the small-ball style of play, the home run is not in danger. As the past has revealed, baseball needs the home run to survive. Without it, the game would simply strike out.

[NORTH SPORTS FINAL Edition]. Chicago Tribune, September 16, 1998.
<http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 21, 2008).

³³ Rader, *Baseball: A History*, 248.

³⁴ Silverman, ed., *Going, Going, Gone...*, 75.

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