

Savannah Deuer

Professor Jason Payne

American Icons

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The iconicity of Babe Ruth

Babe Ruth was one of the greatest and most well - rounded baseball players not only of his day but in baseball history. He played for a total of twenty- two seasons,for different teams including the minor - league Baltimore Orioles, the Boston Red Sox, and the New York Yankees. Most of Ruth's career was spent with the Yankees where he broke multiple Major League Baseball records as well as often breaking his personal records season after season. Babe Ruth is considered an American icon because of his talent and effect on baseball, his lasting impact on American culture, and the multiple curiosities surrounding him.

In the years Ruth played, American baseball was nothing like it is today. When Ruth began his career, only sixteen Major League Baseball teams existed as opposed to the thirty that exist today. Ruth struggled in his first four years in the league from 1914 - 1918, but his talent was obvious during the 1919 season when he led the MLB in home runs hit, hitting a staggering twenty - nine ("MLB Season History - 1919"). Some of the greatest baseball players played during Ruth's time on the field, such as Ty Cobb and Joe Jackson, but Ruth prevailed over his struggles and climbed the rankings in the 1920 season. Ruth was also highly praised for his ability to consistently help his team win repeatedly. "In his 15 seasons with the Yankees, Ruth

and his team won seven pennants and four World Series” (“Babe Ruth”). Much of the credit for those World Series pennants can be given to Ruth, for although he was not the entire team, he was a great motivator and a morale booster (“Babe Ruth”), continually encouraging his teammates.

After two mediocre seasons by his standards, Ruth led the MLB in home runs and runs batted in, in addition to the second- highest batting average in the league in the 1923 season (“MLB Season History - 1923”). These statistics are particularly impressive due to the fact that performance-enhancing drugs did not exist at the time.

Baseball at the time was not political like it is today. There were no debates over who deserved to be in the Baseball Hall of Fame, which players had committed illegal actions, or if players who had taken performance- enhancing drugs should be banned from baseball. In his twenty - two year career, Ruth had an overall batting average of .342, an average that is difficult to attain for one season, let alone for an entire career. Batting average is calculated by dividing the amount of times a player has reached base without being walked by the total amount of at - bats. Ruth obtained such a high batting average from his ability to drive the ball a very far distance, even if the pitch thrown was not ideal. Ruth also had staggering amounts of hits and home runs, which also included the record for most home runs hit in a season, standing for thirty- four years (“Babe Ruth hits 60th homer of 1927 season”). Ruth’s records and statistics prove that he was and is still an American icon. Ruth’s number is still retired by the New York Yankees, and he was part of the inaugural class to be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

Babe Ruth has had impacts outside of baseball, specifically on pop culture. Ruth is loved and even worshipped in pop culture and greatly changed the way the New York Yankees are perceived. Ruth attracted so much attention because of his likeable personality and ability to launch a baseball into the back stands of Yankee Stadium. The Yankees were a dying franchise, had been sub - par in previous seasons, and were lackluster compared to other powerhouses of the day, finishing at the bottom of their division often. However, when Ruth came along and began demonstrating his power by breaking and setting records, the Yankees became an “American team” and won four World Series in Ruth’s time with them. The Yankees became so popular in New York that they drove away the baseball team New York Giants in 1957, who now are located in San Francisco, and the ever - significant Brooklyn Dodgers, who are now the successful Los Angeles Dodgers. In an article published by the Smithsonian, Eric Jentsch, curator at the American History Museum, details the aftermath of Ruth’s success. ““After Ruth came and made such a dramatic change in the game with all his home runs, Yankees attendance doubled and totally surpassed the Giants, so the Giants kicked them out.””(How Babe Ruth Changed Baseball). Jentsch then discusses the “house that Ruth built”, the iconic Yankee Stadium. The original Yankee Stadium was replaced in 2009, but the old stadium is truly iconic because of its shape, age, and record number of games played there. Old Yankee Stadium hosted all the Yankee legends, from Babe Ruth to Lou Gehrig to Derek Jeter. Ruth helped turn the Yankees into an iconic franchise in every way, from his persona to the ever - famous picture of him leaning up against a bat in a Yankees uniform while smoking a cigar. Babe Ruth gave the Yankees the persona that has turned them into the “All - American baseball team.” The Yankees in themselves are iconic, from their stadium to the pinstriped uniforms that are dreaded by every

other team in the league because of their reputation. When anyone thinks of baseball, whether a fan or not, the first team that always comes to mind is the New York Yankees, and that label of iconicity can be attributed to Babe Ruth and his success while wearing the pinstripes.

Even though Ruth is an American Icon, there are aspects of his personal life that could be viewed as objectionable, and a curiosity of his professional life that was questionable. Ruth was reported to often party while out on road trips, and there is some questionable behavior regarding his first marriage. "After baseball, Ruth lived a quiet life with his second wife Claire. He had married his first wife, Helen, in 1914 when she was a 17-year-old waitress. The couple had separated by 1926 and the marriage ended tragically when Helen died in an apartment fire in January 1929. Ruth married Claire within three months; they remained together until his death."("Babe Ruth"). Many questioned Ruth's unethical decision in this matter, and speculation surrounded his decision for the rest of his life. While some of Ruth's decisions may have been questionable, he endured tragedy throughout his life. Ruth's first wife died in an apartment fire as mentioned above, and he passed away from cancer in 1948. When Ruth died, over 100,000 people attended his funeral, a staggering number of followers for a professional athlete for the time.

In his professional life, Ruth played for the Boston Red Sox from 1914 - 1919, during which his numbers were quite impressive, but not quite to the level he would reach in the peak of his career while playing with the Yankees. Ruth's time with Boston was cut short because he was traded. "He [Red Sox owner Harry Frazee] found help in the New York Yankees, which agreed in December of 1919 to buy the rights to Ruth for the then-impressive sum of \$100,000"("Babe Ruth"). When Ruth was traded, the Curse of the Bambino legend emerged.

The Red Sox could not win a World Series for eighty - four years, one of the longest droughts in baseball. Many fans believed the curse was simply a joke, or a natural drought for the Red Sox, but as time passed, many believed the curse of the Red Sox not achieving a title was real until 2004 when the Red Sox defeated the St. Louis Cardinals.

Ruth changed the baseball landscape due to his talent and his persona. Ruth was able to break and set multiple records in baseball that stood for more than thirty years. No baseball player in the modern day will ever be able to measure up to Ruth, and that contributes to his iconicity. Babe Ruth is an American Icon because of his talent and effect on baseball, his lasting impact on the New York Yankees and American culture, and the multiple curiosities surrounding him.

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