

When I Sat on the Bleachers

Recollections of a Big League Fan

By John J. Evers



There is one man who has less chance to become an interested spectator of a ball game from the bleachers than any other person, and that man is, strange to say, the player himself. The big league star is confined to his own schedule, he sees few or no contests outside of his own league, and even those contests he views from the bench or as an active participant. Johnnie Evers is an exception to the rule and he has given us, in the following article, some delightful reminiscences of a typical STAR in the ROLE of SPECTATOR.

IF the average American youth were to be asked what he desired to be in baseball it is a safe bet to say that a big majority of them would answer, "I would like to be a big leaguer." Such is the ambition of nearly every boy or young man who has ever handled a baseball and, in these days when baseball has reached its present high standard, it is an ambition not to be sneered at. When the many hundreds of ambitious young players who make up the minor leagues of this country are considered, it is indeed a thing to be proud of when a young man is found worthy of playing in either one of the big leagues. But the young man who really likes baseball for what it is and what there is in it usually finds his greatest enjoyment in the national game when he is a free and independent member of that great army called fandom.

After playing professional baseball for nearly a decade, and all but a few months with the same club, the Chi-

cago Cubs of the National League, I find there are many interesting incidents that I could recall; little things that have occurred on the ball field that are interesting to me as I recount them and which I know would be of interest to the fans. But there is one period of my connection with baseball, which to me seems the most interesting, and that period dates back to the time before I entered professional baseball as a means of livelihood, "When I Sat on the Bleachers."

To many this may sound strange, but when I say it I do not forget the many notable contests that I have participated in, nor do I forget the fact that the team I have always been associated with has been a top-notch, a four time pennant winner in the National League and the winner of two world's championships. With all the success that has come to me in my baseball career I have never lost sight of the fact that I once was only one of the thousands of fans, who have made baseball the game it is.

My life as a ball player covers the game in practically all its stages; first, as a vacant lot amateur in my home town at Troy, N. Y.; next as an amateur leaguer, semi-pro, minor leaguer and, finally what every player aspires to become, a performer in the big show. In all these departments of baseball and especially during the years of my career as a minor and major leaguer, I have enjoyed my work, perhaps more so than most players. But as I recall the great pleasure I took out of baseball as an ordinary fan on the bleachers, it will always linger in my memory. The privileges and advantages enjoyed by the bleacherites are not realized by half those who daily occupy uncovered seats in the ball parks and cannot be fully realized until one has first been a bleacherite, then a player and then witnessed a few games from his old stand.

Baseball got a firm hold of me very early in life, and when the facts are made known it will not be considered much of a wonder. The section of Troy where I was born and raised was a veritable hotbed for the national game. In fact, South Troy, as the section is known, has the honor of sending at least three-fourths of Troy's professional players into league baseball. During the summer evenings after working hours, baseball came before supper, and every available spot was the scene of some sort of a game. During the day time, when the older boys and men were at work the kids had full swing on the roughly laid out diamonds. When it came to Sunday or a holiday, baseball games, and good ones, too, were as numerous on the fields and vacant lots of South Troy as bathers at a seaside resort on a hot day. It was not an unusual sight in some of the fields to see the outfielders of one game within a few feet of the home plate and catcher in another. You will readily see then that a boy brought up amidst such surroundings could not help but take to baseball at a very early age.

These vacant lot games were often attended with much excitement, and by them hundreds of boys learned the

rudiments of the game. But much as we enjoyed them we never missed an opportunity of witnessing a league game when the Troy team was playing on the home grounds. Invariably, when Young America has his mind set on going to the game, he gets there somehow or other, whether he has the price of admission or not. We usually had our minds set and we usually got to the game.

Once inside the ball park my only thought was of a good seat on the bleachers, one from which I could see every play that was made. I rarely thought of a seat in the grandstand, and it would not require an adding machine to total up the times I sat there before becoming a player. I may have differed from the majority of bleacherites, for I not only wanted to see every play that was made, but, unconsciously, I wanted to study them. I say unconsciously, for without thinking of what I was doing I would pick apart every play that was made and then ponder with myself whether the play was made right or whether it should have been played according to my ideas. It never occurred to me then that I would ever have a chance even in a minor league, although I hoped and yearned for it. The idea of ever reaching the big league was as far from me as my idea of becoming President of the United States. But when I was finally called to the Chicago Cubs and made good, I attributed it to the unconscious study I gave to baseball "When I Sat on the Bleachers."

Inside baseball by that name was something I had never heard of at the time. All the baseball I knew was played under two general rules: When at bat, try to make as many runs as possible, no matter how; when in the field, try to get the other fellows out, no matter how. But as a young bleacherite I could see more plays in a game than I ever dreamed of when playing. It was "When I Sat on the Bleachers" that I learned my first lesson in what was afterwards called inside baseball, or, as I may more properly say, the first points of improved baseball.

In those days when a batter reached

first it occurred to me that on the next play, no matter how slight the chance, an attempt should be made to get that man going to second. When the second batter hit a ground ball it got on my nerves if the play was made to retire the batter at first without an attempt to get that man going to second. The point I learned was this: Cut off the man nearest the home plate, the base runner who had the best chance of scoring. If after a man had reached first and an attempt to get him going to second was unsuccessful, then, if possible on the next play, an attempt should be made to get him going to third.

There were many simple plays like this that never occurred to me when playing in amateur games, but no doubt many such plays came before me and were overlooked. But as I watched them from the bleachers I could not help but study them, and very soon learned the advantage there was to be gained by figuring out possible plays before they were made. Many times when watching league games I would figure out what I should do under the existing conditions were I playing any one of the infield positions and the ball was hit to me. When one of those plays was made successfully just as I had figured I was as happy as though I had actually executed the play myself. From the bleachers I not only studied plays that were made, but plays that were not attempted, when, in my opinion, the opportunity for them was ripe. The knowledge of plays that I gained from study on the bleachers I soon put into practice when playing. Sometimes I failed and other times I succeeded, but in the end that study stood by me.

There is a great deal more in viewing a ball game from the bleachers than from the grandstand or the choicest box seat of a great stadium. In the boxes or the grandstand you will usually find the fans who take in the ball games as a diversion from business or other cares or those who may be interested in a certain player or team. But when you sit on the bleachers you cannot help touching elbows with that rabid bunch

of fans, who pick apart every play that is made, who condemn the home or visiting players for not doing this or that, who, from baseball instinct, can tell almost what every player of either team has done at the bat without the aid of a score card, and who invariably know the batting average of any player you chance to mention. If all the baseball sense of the bleachers at any big league game could be centered in the brains of a baseball team I think that club would be the best thinking aggregation ever put together. In my opinion, if half the people who have never had the pleasure of occupying a seat on the bleachers knew what they were missing, they would abandon their grandstand or box seats occasionally and mingle with the bleacherites. On the bleachers every play that is made in a game is replayed and replayed many different ways, not only as it was executed, but as it should have been according to the way of thinking of the bleacherites. And don't think for a minute that these bleacherites do not have the right dope many a time.

Since becoming a big league player I have sat on the bleachers, although not a great many times, but I have been there, and only a few weeks ago, upon the occasion of a visit to my home in Troy, I found just as much pleasure and felt just as much at home on the bleachers as formerly. Lately I have also viewed a great many games from the grandstand, and, after playing in so many championship contests, I have learned new lessons from my experiences as a spectator both in the grandstand and bleachers. From these points of vantage the games look much easier. From the side lines many more openings can be seen than when actually playing a game. This arises from the fact that when engaged in a game a player has but one chance on a single play, an opportunity, so to speak. He must grasp that opportunity in an instant, he must have thought beforehand, for if he waits to think, when the opportunity presents itself his chance is gone before he gets through thinking. Did you ever stop to consider the time it takes to make one

play in a game? Try it and you will not only be surprised, but the game will become more interesting. It will show you that a player has not much time to think once a play is started and what thinking must be done must be done beforehand and quickly, because the wrong think may change the entire complexion of the game.

From the sidelines the spectators are not subjected to this nerve-wrecking experience. They may figure out what play is going to be made, but if it does not turn out that way what difference does it make to the fan? On the other hand, if a player makes a mistake in his play it is at once apparent to the player as well as to every spectator, but the latter without considering what might have happened to him or anyone else had he been in the player's place, starts condemning the player, and I have seen many games where a player would make one mistake and because it proved fatal a chorus of "Take him out" would immediately burst forth.

Thus, from my experiences, both as a player and a spectator, I can now readily see why so much criticism is handed out by the press and the public. Playing baseball and looking at it are two vastly different things. If the player succeeds, all well and good. He is a hero. If he miscues or fails to take advantage of the chances that come his way, why then it is a different thing and all sorts of names are applied to him. And in a majority of these cases the player is not deserving of all the things said to him and about him, for there is nothing that hurts a player more than to make an error, either of execution or judgment, at a critical time. That is one reason why the bleacherites should not be hasty to get after a player when he takes chances and fails. Instead of ridiculing him words of encouragement ought to be given him. When a player feels that the fans have confidence in him, the confidence in himself will be increased.

I was especially interested in the last world's series between the Athletics and the Cubs, not merely because the Cubs were playing, but because I had an opportunity for the first time in my life of seeing the two best teams in the country battle for honors. It was the first world's series the Cubs played in that I was unable to get into the games, due to the accident which befell me near the close of the National League season. However, I watched those games with more than ordinary interest for it gave me a chance of studying the plays of two great baseball machines, just as I had studied the minor league players "When I Sat on the Bleachers." In those world's series games I saw numerous plays and openings that, perhaps, would not have been apparent to me had I been playing. This only went to strengthen my belief that more can be seen in a baseball game from the side lines than when one is actually engaged in the game. These lessons I have learned from being a spectator have been valuable, and hardly a day has gone by that I have not used some play or other that I had learned or figured out from the side lines. The more I studied the game the more I liked it, and when I had an opportunity of using a play I had planned I felt as though I was well repaid.

Another incident that has been of intense interest to me while watching the games from the side lines has been to see other fellows in action. I have carefully watched Ty Cobb, Eddie Collins and all the other great players of the present day and, in my opinion, Cobb is so far ahead of them all that it would be useless for me to try and make comparisons. I know it will cause some surprise, and to many it may sound like a friendly boost, but candidly, in my estimation, Frank Chance was the only real rival Cobb ever had, all things considered, for being the greatest player of them all.

