

Alexander the Great

The Brilliant Young Twirler of the Phillies and How He Startled the Baseball World Into Instant Recognition of His Great Abilities

By C. P. STACK

Grover Cleveland Alexander, sometime called "Alexander the Great," is one of those fortunate individuals who seem to have been born with a divine right to achieve baseball success easily. Where others have toiled through years of failure and disappointment Alexander began on the high road to the tip top pitching rank and moved placidly on his way with as little apparent concern as though he had been entitled to that rank from the first. In consequence, the conclusion of his very first year in big league service found him firmly entrenched in a reputation second to none, the acknowledged star pitcher of his exceedingly strong club. It is rare indeed that the beginner accomplishes so much in so short a time, but in Alexander's case that success was well deserved.

IN no city supporting two major league baseball clubs, with the possible exception of Chicago, is there anywhere near an even division of public interest on the part of the fans. There Comiskey's wonderful magnetism still maintains for the White Sox an even break in popular support with the intrinsically much stronger Cub aggregation.

But in Boston there is but one team, the Red Sox; in New York, the Giants own the city; in St. Louis, while neither club has proved to be a marvel the Nationals are easily first; while in Philadelphia the Athletics are the name to conjure with. At least this was the case early in the spring of 1911 when the memory of Connie Mack's spectacular victory over the Cubs yet lingered, and the laurels of the World's Championship were still fresh and green. The Phillies had long been a second number and few people expected more from them than an easy jog in fourth or fifth place where they seemed most at home. But in the spring of this season they woke all at once from the peaceful lethargy which had long been their prevailing characteristic and before they relapsed into the the same unbroken slumber they gave the

baseball world a start from which it is not soon likely to recover. The vision of the frightened Phillies out in front of the procession, leading those tried old veterans the Giants, Cubs and Pirates and that too at an advanced date in the season, was a picture too unusual to be speedily effaced from the memory. And while the club was destined to be completely thrown out of the running by the misfortune which assailed it, misfortunes which still cloud its prospects, there is dominant, somewhere, within that aggregation a latent strength, the frame work of a powerful team.

It is not the purpose of this article to go into detail into the causes which transformed the Phillies all at once from a club of plodders into a group of frenzied winners. But there is one of the several factors which led to that remarkable transformation, which will easily bear a brief investigation. And that factor is no other than Grover Cleveland Alexander, the remarkable young pitcher, whose dazzling work was the most sensational feature of that sensational episode.

Great pitchers are commonly plants of slow growth. Outfielders may shoot up like mushrooms and become, all at once, full fledged wonders. Infielders while

commonly not so easily raised, are yet rapid growing plants compared with pitchers. For the art of the twirler is one to be mastered only by years of patient effort and strict application to hard gruelling work. Walsh took years of practice in the big leagues before he made good; Marquard needed several seasons of bitter defeat before he blossomed into a sensation; Wild Bill Donovan earned his name by the long years of practice he underwent before he gradually acquired the ability to locate the plate; Jean Dubuc, of more recent fame, was a failure long before he proved a success. In fact, go through the list as you will, you will find that list much more plentifully sprinkled with the names of pitchers who had to fight and fight hard for what they gained in the way of ability, than those who proved to be stars from the very first.

But the season of 1911 was peculiar from the fact that not only one, but two pitchers entered the majors and made good from the start, two recruits who became the stars of their respective pitching staffs almost from the day they signed their big league contracts. These pitchers were evenly divided between the rival aggregations, Cleveland getting Vean Gregg and Philadelphia Alexander.

The youthful marvel of Red Dooins' team was born at St. Paul, Neb., twenty-five years ago. This thriving farming metropolis, whose name is completely immersed in the much greater celebrity of its namesake of Minnesota, is a respectable little hamlet of about twenty-five hundred inhabitants. Like many another western town, however, it is much more important than its size would indicate, for it is the centre of an extensive district of rich farming and grazing land.

The senior Alexander was a man of pronounced political preferences and he didn't care who knew it. So proud of these preferences was he that he did not scruple to fasten them on his helpless offspring. Hence the euphonious cognomen of Grover Cleveland. With such a name it is a safe bet that the unfortunate recipient will be forever debarred from voting the Republican or Progressive ticket. Surely a man could sign no such name to a voting ballot of this brand

without raising the question of bribery and corruption.

The early years of G. Cleveland were uneventful. Born on a farm and living there most of his life, it could not be otherwise. His six brothers and one sister furnished the bulk of the society with which he was familiar. He was next to the youngest of the brothers and early showed a fondness for baseball as good as, but no more conspicuous than, that of the average product of the Nebraska farm lands. He played on the scrub teams of the neighborhood, was as adept as the rest and no more so. In fact, nowhere in the youthful brain of this coming star, did there exist a single inkling of his future greatness.

Like most other scrub ball players he tried about every position that the diamond afforded and had little partiality among them all. But having a naturally strong throwing arm he was finally elected to pitch and did so thereafter with great enthusiasm. It was not until he was some eighteen years old, however, that he pitched at all regularly on the local team. About this time he played for a while on the amateur baseball club at Central City, Nebraska. But even then no thought that he would ever become a genuine professional baseball player, least of all a major leaguer and a star at that, ever crossed his mind.

Casting about for an occupation he turned to that of linesman. No people in the world, even city dwellers, are so devoted to the telephone as the prosperous farmers of the middle West. Every house is commonly fitted up with this latest and most useful invention. Finding that, while there might be more room at the top than elsewhere, it was nevertheless easier to gain admittance at the bottom, young Alexander began as a linesman for the Bell Telephone Company. He toiled faithfully at his new employment as at everything else, and was soon accounted a most competent workman. Three years passed and brought with them greater efficiency as a linesman but little more opportunity for advancement. At this time he began playing a few stray games of Sunday baseball in a semi-pro way and the money he gained from this enterprise looked so good he began to cast about for an opening to play more ball for money. Finally,

as great things rise from small beginnings, an incident occurred trivial enough in itself, but destined to work great changes in his future career. This incident was an exhibition game with an obscure club whose name does not matter now. But it happened that one of the members of this club was a player in regular standing with the Galesburg team at Illinois, and he was so much impressed with Alexander's work that he recommended the young Nebraskan most highly.

His chance did not come right away,—chances seldom do, but the following year, 1909, he secured an appointment with Galesburg. Things progressed merrily till July when Alexander, in attempting to slide into second base, was hit on the temple by a ball, thrown with great force by the shortstop. The blow came near killing him. He remained unconscious for a period of thirty hours and was disabled all the rest of the season. In his inactive condition he was transferred to Indianapolis but did not play again that season as his health was completely shattered. In 1910 he went to Syracuse and here he did so well that he attracted the attention of the Phillie scouts and was signed as a good prospect.

"I owe most of my ability whatever it is," says Alexander, "to Pat Moran. He coached me and showed all kinds of patience with my greenness and awkwardness, and it is not too much to say that he made me what I am."

A foretaste of this dawning ability showed strongly in an exhibition game staged between the Phillies and the Athletics. Alexander pitched for five innings and allowed Mack's heavy sluggers never a hit.

This showing did not prove to be a flash in the pan like so many temporarily good records made by young players, for his subsequent work throughout the season where he remained the leading Phillie twirler, placed Alexander's name among the first half-dozen of the very leading pitchers in the National League.

With the amazing form shown by Philadelphia at the beginning of the season, many people thought that Alexander was carried along on the sweeping tide of victories which the club was winning, solely by the work of his team



GROVER CLEVELAND ALEXANDER

mates and the infectious spirit of victory irrespective of his own individual merit. But with the advance of the season as things began to go badly for Dooin and the pennant hopes of the club to crumble, Alexander showed once and for all that his great start was not an erratic flare up, that he was not dependent upon his team mates solely for his victories, and that he was entitled to rank among the real finds of the season. Game after game he won by as grand an assortment of natural

talents as one could care to find in a star. The attempts of the veterans to rattle the youngster came to naught and they speedily learned that here was a hustler, new to the game, who was too well acquainted with his own ability to be much influenced one way or the other by the gibes of his opponents. His work grew steadily better, until in Boston, in one of the most masterly games ever pitched, he missed, by only a hair's breadth, the supreme goal of the twirler's ambition, a no-hit game. Not a semblance of a safe hit was made by the opposition, not a base on balls nor an error marred the perfect record, till on a short, feeble fly which the third baseman could have fielded in ample time to get the runner at first, fate interposed. Alexander himself tried to corral the fly, and as it was a bit out of his reach, and he started after it a trifle slowly, the runner managed to beat it out by a hair, and there was nothing to do but call the try a safe hit. One single it counted in the records, but it was a far better pitched game and deserved to be flawless to a greater degree than many a no-hit contest. For Luck plays a sovereign part in these perfect games, and luck broke very badly for Alexander on that occasion.

Mathewson registered a no-hit game against St. Louis some few years ago, and the batters who faced him claimed they never saw so many hard-hit balls. But, unfortunately for them, and fortunately for Mathewson, they drove straight for fielders' gloves, and the final inning of a not uncommonly well pitched game registered a no-hit victory for the great Giant pitcher. Mullin last season pitched a game wherein almost the same situation obtained, though perhaps more so. Mullin was overweight, the day was hot, and the big pitcher weakened under the strain. After the seventh inning it hardly seemed that he would be able to get them over the plate; but he did, the batters continued to misjudge them, and he also won his way into the honor column. Alexander, who far exceeded both these efforts from the standpoint of genuine pitching merit, failed to be similarly blessed by fortune, and his fine record was marred by an undeserved defect.

"I consider my curve ball my main strong point," says Alexander. "I have

pretty good speed and a good change of pace, which is important; but the main thing with me is curves. I have spent a great deal of time in trying to master the curve. I believe I have it down pretty fine now, and can handle it even better than a straight fast one. In fact, when I am in a tight place and the batter has me in a hole, I generally feed him a good curve, for I am surer of being able to get it over the plate about where I want it than I am of a fast one. And in such a pinch as that you have to be pretty sure of yourself, for many games are lost in this way by mere lack of control.

"In addition to curves and speed I have tried to develop a special knack of delivery which is very helpful. I believe that the side arm motion is much more baffling to the batter than the overhand delivery. For that reason I have developed the side arm delivery and have cultivated it so that I have it down pretty well. It has been very effective.

"I have never had a star batting average, which is not odd for a pitcher. We can't seem to hit, and I imagine one reason for this is, we don't have to. Personally I like to make a hit when I can, and I do my best. My theory is very simple. I always take my three swings, knowing that some time, sooner or later, I am liable to hit a ball, and perhaps it will go safe. That is about as far as my batting talent extends.

"My main ambition just at present is to improve on my last season's record. Things broke badly for us just when we figured they were coming our way, but the Phillies are still strong, and in my opinion they will be there in the home-stretch, and will bear watching all the way. When I am through with baseball, and I hope that will be some years hence, my only desire is to get back to the land. I have some farm land now in my native State of Nebraska, and before I am through I hope to have much more.

"In normal condition I weigh about 175, and am six feet one inch tall. A pitcher needs to be a fairly large man, and so far as size is concerned I believe I get by all right. So far as other things are concerned, they are more of a proposition, but if I have the average man's luck in the coming season I hope to get by there as well."