

The Season's Sensation

How Slugging "Babe" Ruth Was Transformed from a Pitcher Into One of the Greatest All Round Stars of the Diamond

By F. C. LANE

THE sensation of the closing baseball season is George (Babe) Ruth. Ty Cobb, no doubt, will again annex all the highest honors in the records as is his custom. George Sisler and Tris Speaker will again play the stellar game for which they are noted. Both will probably bat at a higher clip than Ruth, as will also a number of other men in the National and American Leagues. But the fact remains that the Boston slugger bulks large as the dominating baseball figure of 1918.

Ruth began his professional league experience at twenty-one and almost immediately was acclaimed one of the greatest pitchers the International League had ever known. Speedily transferred to Boston, he won instant recognition as a pitcher of almost limitless possibilities. And his advance since that date has been steady and rapid. But it remained for the present season, with its depleted rosters and shattered schedules, to give Ruth his full measure of opportunity. And the way he has seized that opportunity and improved it to its utmost limits, is already baseball history.

Ruth is a man of huge bulk, tremendous strength, iron endurance, and quenchless enthusiasm. He loves baseball, revels in it, finds on the diamond ample expression for his youth and energy and ambition. He began his major league career as a pitcher of rare promise and most abundantly has that promise been fulfilled. Ruth was and is one of the greatest pitchers in the American League. But it is not as a pitcher that he has gained his laurels as the true prodigy of the present season.

For Ruth has shattered, demolished, pulverized the age old fable that a pitcher can't hit. He has not only hit better than any pitcher is supposed to hit, he has not only equalled the work of noted sluggers in infield and outfield, he has excelled all his contemporaries at whatever position, in the terrific power and deadly effectiveness of his stick work. If Ruth could not hurl a ball across the rubber, if he could not field in Class D. style, he would still be a powerful asset to any club for his batting alone. But when we consider that Ruth is a good (allowing for his limited experience), an unusually good fielder; when we consider that he is a pitcher

second to none; and that he is, at the same time, the most direful slugger of the horsehide in captivity, we begin to have some just conception of what a truly phenomenal player the Red Sox champion really is.

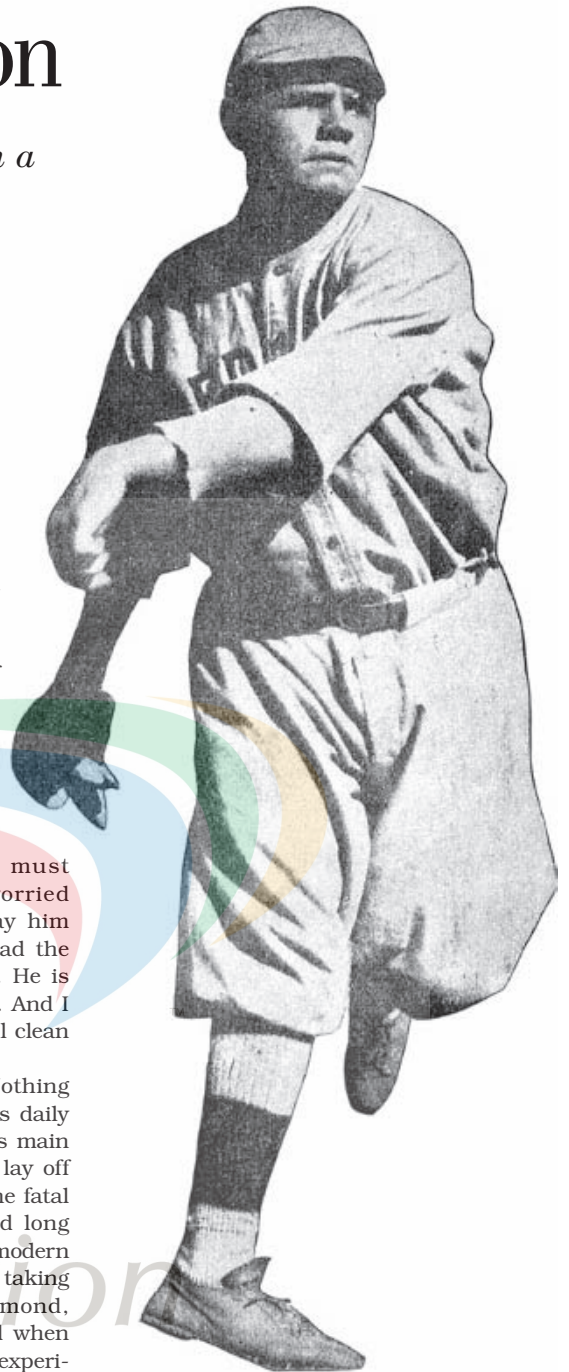
Early in the season Manager Barrow found himself confronted with the problem of fusing a winning club from an abundance of good, but ill-assorted material. This material, furthermore, was undergoing a continual transformation through the loss of players by draft and enlistment. At that time Ruth was the first string pitcher of the club. "I must have his pitching," said the worried Barrow, "but I would like to play him oftener for his hitting. I wish I had the nerve to play him in every game. He is big and strong enough to stand it. And I believe he would make a wonderful clean up hitter."

Ruth was perfectly willing. Nothing pleased him more than to take his daily position in the line up. In fact, his main criticism of pitching was the long lay off between games. So Barrow took the fatal plunge, did what the experts had long deemed impossible in our complex modern game, allowed a pitcher, who was taking his regular position on the diamond, to play first base and the outfield when not otherwise occupied. And the experiment more than justified his highest hopes.

It would have been odd enough had Barrow merely played Ruth in every game. But he did more than that. He placed his great pitcher in the clean-up position on the club, openly announcing that he expected a pitcher, of all men, to drive in the runs; to smash the opposing defense.

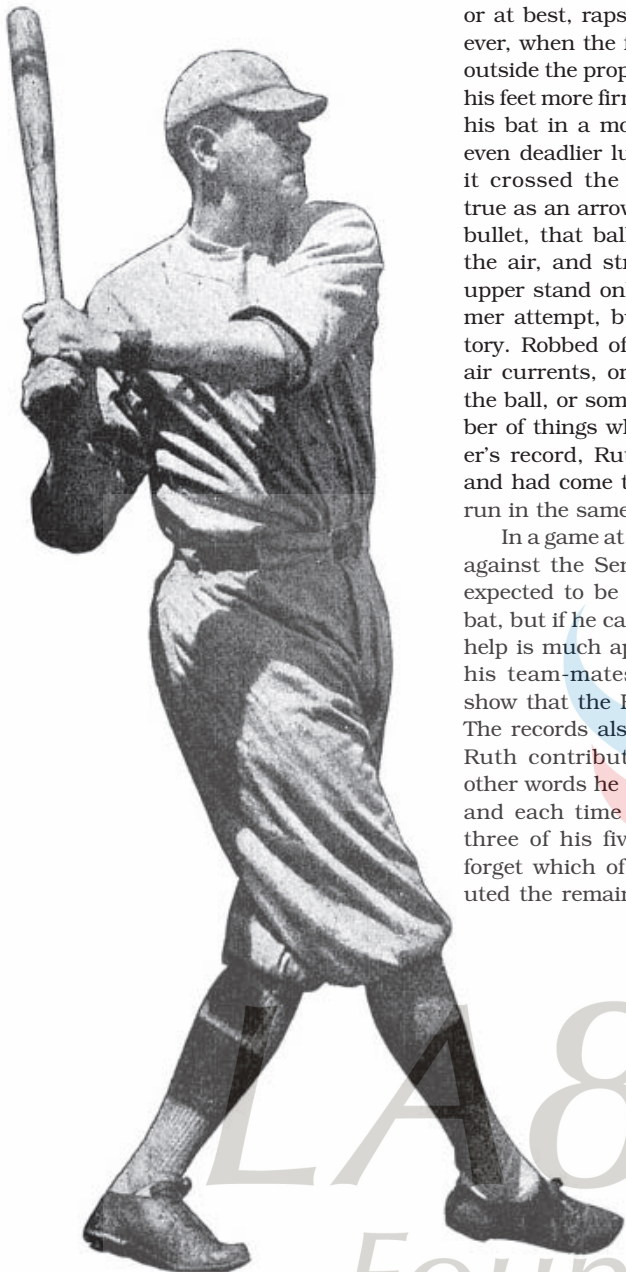
We do not know the number of runs that Ruth has scored by his Titanic slugging. We do not know how many games he has torn from the opposition by the sheer strength of his formidable bat. But we do know that if the Red Sox win the pennant, as seems likely, they should thank, above all others, the greatest pitcher-batter the game has ever known.

Ruth's position at the plate is in direct contradiction of the prescribed rules of hitting. He stands at a considerable



"Babe Ruth" is one of the greatest pitchers on the circuit

distance from the plate. He wields an enormously long and heavy bat from the extreme end of the handle. He swings from the ground up and puts every ounce of his huge weight and gorilla strength behind the blow. This system, for Ruth at least, has one great advantage. If he connects squarely with the ball, it means curtains for the defense. For nearly half of Ruth's hits are for extra bases while he leads the league in home runs. Its obvious disadvantage lies in the fact that he is apt to miss the ball entirely and strikes out a considerable percentage of his times at bat. But this seeming disadvantage lies more in appearances than anything else. As Barrow put it, "If a



It is his terrific slugging which has made Ruth the season's sensation

or at best, raps out a single. Ruth, however, when the fates curved that ball just outside the proper bounds, merely ground his feet more firmly into the dust, clenched his bat in a more vise like grip, took an even deadlier lunge at the next strike as it crossed the plate. And straight and true as an arrow, with the speed of a rifle bullet, that ball winged its way through the air, and struck with a crash in the upper stand only a few feet from his former attempt, but this time on fair territory. Robbed of a home run by invisible air currents, or the freakish behavior of the ball, or some one of the infinite number of things which make or mar a player's record, Ruth had defied these fates and had come through with a true home run in the same inning.

In a game at Washington, Ruth pitched against the Senators. The twirler is not expected to be of much service with his bat, but if he can help his team-mate that help is much appreciated. Did Ruth help his team-mates that day? The records show that the Red Sox made seven hits. The records also show that of these hits Ruth contributed no less than five. In other words he appeared at bat five times and each time hit safely. Furthermore, three of his five hits were doubles. We forget which of his team-mates contributed the remaining two bingles amassed by the Boston Club. But we believe that when Ruth furnished five-sevenths of the total hits made by his team in addition to his important services on the slab, he did his full share of the work. Ray Caldwell loves to hit and when he does, usually comes through with a solid smash. Nevertheless Ray is not ordinarily a home run clouter. But some years ago, he was fated to

batter doesn't hit safely it usually makes no difference whether he strikes out or pops up a fly. At least when he strikes out he doesn't hit into a double play."

Ruth's unusual batting feats this season, if recounted in detail, would themselves, comprise a complete article. We have space for but three, but each is unusual, each characteristic of the man.

Boston was playing New York at the Polo Grounds. Ruth was pitching. When the great slugger took his place at bat he drove a terrific liner into the upper tier of the grand stand, but unfortunately for him, a few feet foul. The crowd invariably feels a passing sympathy for a batter in such a case. The difference between a called strike and a home run, is so very, very slight. But usually the luckless batter ultimately strikes out, pops up a fly,

take part mainly as pinch hitter, in three consecutive games. And he was also fated to hit a home run in each of them.

This feat had cumbered the record books for some little time. Ruth, on learning the situation, decided that he would better Caldwell's mark. So he strode forth and drove out a four ply wallop in four consecutive games. Our opinion is that the new mark will stand for many years.

The sad part of this latter record, however, is the fact that the Red Sox lost every one of those four games. In other words, his four homers were wasted, so far as immediate results are concerned. But that was not Ruth's fault. His teammates insisted on losing in spite of his valiant efforts in their behalf.

Ruth, though his deeds are eloquent enough, is a man of few words. His com-

ment on his own remarkable career this season might well be compressed into a single paragraph. In a recent interview he said:

"I like to pitch but my main objection has always been that pitching keeps you out of so many games. I like to be in there every day. But I don't think a man can pitch in his regular turn, and play every other game at some other position, and keep that pace year after year. I can do it this season all right, and not feel it, for I am young and strong and don't mind the work. But I wouldn't guarantee to do it for many seasons. If I had my choice I should play first base. But of course, on this club, Stuffie McInnis has a toe hold on that position. I used to play first base a good deal when I was a kid and liked the position. There is something going on all the time at first base. In the outfield there isn't so much to do. I can field all right and like to, but I do not claim to be so fast as some other outfielders and don't think it is my proper position. My arm bothered me a little earlier in the season, but I think that playing in every game brought it around again and kept it in shape better than a lay off would have done. When I was pitching every few days, I always felt that my batting average was suffering. No one can get into the game one or two days a week and do as well in batting as he could do taking his place out there every day. I think my batting record this year has showed it. I haven't hit under three hundred all season. My style at the bat has bothered some people, but I don't see why it should. It is true that I take a good long wallop at the ball. But that is my way of hitting. I like to hit that way and am used to it. I wouldn't recommend my style to anyone else. I think every batter has his own style. But so long as my style gets the results why try to improve on it?"

Some time ago THE BASEBALL MAGAZINE started an agitation to reform the batting records. This agitation was based on the contention that the present records did not give proper credit to the slugger, the man who came through with long hits and broke up the game. Everyone recognizes in an indefinite sort of way, that a triple is more valuable to the side that makes it, than a scratch single. But the records make no distinction in the two hits. Ruth's experience is an eloquent arraignment of the present unfair system. He has hit all season above .300 but not very far above. Several other players in both leagues, have a higher average than he. But will anyone rise to remark that Ruth hasn't done as much actual batting so far as results are concerned, as any other player in captivity? Does anyone wish to champion the claim that the present records have given Ruth his just deserts?