

Robinson, Ray. *Iron Horse: Lou Gehrig in His Time*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1990. Pp. 300. \$22.50.

Ray Robinson is the author of a number of popular sports biographies and an unabashed Lou Gehrig fan. As a New York City teenager when Gehrig was in his prime, young Robinson preferred Lou to the Babe. The Iron Horse “played and lived constantly in the bulging shadow of Ruth.” No matter. Robinson wanted his heroes to be “less flamboyant than Ruth, less outrageous, less self-centered.” As a sports hero, the Babe was, to Robinson, simply “implausible.” But not the “dimpled” Gehrig with his “unmistakable Boy Scout aura.” To Ray Robinson, hero worshipper of the 1930s or the 1990s, Lou Gehrig epitomized craftsmanship and citizenship, physical power and stoic greatness.

This biography, need it be said, is not a muckraking study of the underside of athletic achievement. Gehrig may have been a player who soiled his uniform, but the dirt that he gathered on the field of play could never be transformed into muck itching to be raked. Lou Gehrig was always solid, never soiled. A greater hitter than fielder, he made himself into a creditable first baseman. A lesser figure than Ruth, he accepted his role with quiet dignity. A certifiable star, he never forgot that he was a member of a team. Solid on-and off-the field. But stolid as well.

Lou Gehrig deserves a careful, even praiseful, biography, but this is not a baseball biography in a league with Charles Alexander’s portraits of Ty Cobb and John McGraw or Robert Creamer on Ruth or Casey Stengel. Robinson is a

popular biographer, not a scholarly historian. And Gehrig was never possessed of the demons that wrestled within Cobb or McGraw. Nor was he a character on the scale of Ruth or Stengel.

Not that Gehrig's life was without its share of tension and tragedy. A Mamma's boy and an Ivy Leaguer, he had difficulties with his Yankee teammates. When not being crowded out of the batting cage by surly veterans, he might find his favorite bat sawed in as many pieces as Cobb's had been. "That kind of meanness," he recalled much later, "was hard to understand." And that is Lou Gehrig at his most bitter. Solid-and stolid-and very unlike a Ty Cobb.

But one Yankee veteran was less hostile than the rest. A regular then in his eleventh season with the team, he took it upon himself to teach Gehrig the tricks of the first baseman's trade. His name? Wally Pipp.

On June 2, 1925, Pipp took a batting practice pitch squarely on the right temple. The rest, of course, is history. And what a marvelous piece of history was Lou Gehrig's playing career. Robinson recounts that history capably, but with few flashes of wit or insight. Still, the book is as solid as its subject.

After discussing the Ruth-Gehrig relationship, Robinson concludes that there was "too much difference in temperament and character for a firm bond of friendship to have formed." True enough, even if the statement is an implicit attack on Ruth, a character lacking in same. Robinson wonders how a Gehrig could "relish constantly being eclipsed by a mighty oak" (which is an improvement over a "bulging shadow"). But he offers no answers. Gehrig himself was too reserved to provide any answers either, and Robinson often does little more than defer to his subject's words-or silence.

Most often, Gehrig's numbers-and accolades-did his speaking for him. It was Gehrig, after all, who won the 1927 American League MVP, not Ruth of the sixty home runs. In fact, as late as September 6 the two men stood at forty-four homers apiece. After that, Ruth assumed command, but Gehrig ended the season with forty-seven round trippers. More to the point, he batted .373 and led the league in doubles (57), triples (18), runs scored (149), and runs-batted-in (175). The last number was the most impressive of all, because Gehrig came to the plate sixty times after Ruth had cleared the bases.

But in more than one respect 1927 was just a prelude of greater days ahead. Between 1929 and 1931 Ruth and Gehrig combined to hit 263 hoime runs. (Lou's share of that total was 122.) Over that span Gehrig led Ruth in RBIs, 484 to 470. In fact, Gehrig's 184 RBIs in 1931 is still the American League record. Robinson notes that Gehrig's RBI total exceeded the number of games he appeared in five times during his career. Guess who is the only player to have achieved that feat six times?

Gehrig never topped Ruth in their annual home run derby. In 1931 they ended the season deadlocked at forty-six. But for the infamous "home run that didn't count" Gehrig would have had forty-seven. On first with Gehrig at the plate, Yankee shortstop Lyn Lary mistook a ricochet catch of a Gehrig blast to the bleachers for the third out. Despite the pleadings of his teammates, Lary headed

for the dugout only to have an unsuspecting Gehrig pass him on the base paths to record the official out number three. Never, Robinson concludes, did “Lou . . . utter a word of complaint.”

But the stoic Gehrig did have an emotional side. Wrenching losses left him “sobbing and disconsolate.” Gehrig was the Yankee who reacted with the “most sorrow” upon learning of the death of his “support, his mentor,” Miller Huggins. “Next to my mother and father, he was the best friend a boy could have.”

Joe McCarthy succeeded Huggins as Yankee manager in 1931. Childless, as Huggins had been, McCarthy looked upon Gehrig as the son he had never had. Gehrig responded accordingly, even to the point of hiding his pipe from the view of his disapproving (but hard drinking) manager.

In the case of Lou Gehrig, the myth is the truth. At least to read Ray Robinson’s telling of his story it is. Any manager’s ideal player, Gehrig was always reliable and often brilliant, never conceited and never defiant. This Mamma’s boy’s single act of rebellion was to marry a woman of whom his mother disapproved. Of course, the marriage, as with everything else about Gehrig, proved to be very solid indeed.

In the end, of course, it was Lou Gehrig’s body that did not remain solid. Robinson painfully recreates the opening weeks of the 1939 season when no one (Gehrig included) knew that he was in the grip of ALS, but everyone (Gehrig included) could see that he was not the player that he had been. The tragic end to the Gehrig streak—and career—came on May 2, 1939, in Detroit. Stoic to the end, it was Lou Gehrig who finally benched himself.

Robinson goes on to tell the rest of the story: the Gehrig farewell, the making of “The Pride of the Yankees,” Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia’s appointment of Gehrig to the New York City Parole Commission, and Lou Gehrig’s death at thirty-eight on June 2, 1941. In telling the Gehrig story Robinson has performed a valuable service. This is a solid effort. Occasionally it even makes for great reading. No one, however, should expect to find the Lou Gehrig nobody knew, for Ray Robinson has discovered the only Lou Gehrig who ever graced a Yankee uniform.

Normandale Community College

John C. (“Chuck”) Chalberg