

Ty Cobb and the Agonistic Spirit

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Contemporary players and sports writers considered Tyrus Raymond Cobb (1887-1961) as the ultimate competitor. Cobb's competitive nature, his all-out approach, comes close to the ancient Greek concept of the *agon*, athletic event. The ancient athlete's involvement in his sport brought him into the realm of pain, and hence our word agony is derived from *agon*. Cobb's father, William Hershell, who had studied Greek and Latin at North Georgia College, named his son after the Phoenician city of Tyre, which had given Alexander the Great his best fight and had resisted at all costs. The famous 1909 photo of Cobb sliding into third base at Hilltop Grounds illustrates the *agonistic* spirit and the way Cobb played major league baseball (1905-1928).

Cobb took immense pride in his competitive nature and baseball records and maintained that his success was chiefly based on strategy and intelligence. In 1912 he beat out Joe Jackson for the batting title in the American League. Cobb claimed that he had forced Jackson into a slump by employing certain psychological tricks, when, in effect, he simply got more hits.

Cobb was at his best when he was angry. In 1912, goaded by unjust accusations that he had intentionally spiked Frank "Home-Run" Baker, he broke a record for a six game series by getting eighteen hits out of twenty-eight at-bats. After that Connie Mack, the Philadelphia manager, instructed his players not to "make Mr. Cobb mad." When angry, Cobb went for the jugular. In 1912 Claude Lueker, a man without hands, mercilessly heckled Cobb at Hilltop Grounds. The Georgia Peach hit, kicked, and spiked Lueker. Cobb admitted that he had only a vague recollection of what he had done, and in reading the newspaper report was pleased that he had not overlooked "any punitive measures." An analysis of some of the highlights of Cobb's career suggests that by instinct he was able to annihilate his opponents, and that it was after the fact that he developed a strategy to explain his success.

In *Homo Ludens* Huzinga wrote that the "sporting world is illusionary and consciously stands outside of ordinary life." Cobb was unable to make a distinction between the two. Life was an *agon* which he dealt with by competing so completely that ugly scenes and hard feelings followed, leaving him an isolated man. Cobb claimed that he entered the major leagues as a shy, genteel boy who was made into a hellion by the vicious hazing of the Detroit veterans. While there was some of that, he grossly exaggerated the situation. When Cobb arrived in the majors, he was paranoid. Part of this stemmed from his small town southern origin—a boy imbued with Civil War and Reconstruction Period stories reacting to a strange northern environment. Cobb's paranoia was mainly based on the tragic death of his father, shot by his mother, an apparent accident, a few weeks before Cobb played his first major league game. This left a permanent mark. Cobb felt left alone in an alien world, the hostility of which was not diminished by success, family, or friends. In 1961 Cobb, a millionaire, a legend in his own time, which he assiduously cultivated, died embittered and alone.

This study is based on Cobb's autobiography, the published reminiscences of J. McCallum, G. Rice, A. Daley, M. Bingay, H.G. Salsinger, S. McLinn, and reports in Royston-The News Leader, Detroit News, New York Times. In addition there are the published accounts of baseball players—G. Cochrance, S. Crawford, L. Durocher, D. Jones, and J. Austin.