

Tyrus Cobb - Path to Stardom (1904-1905)

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Tyrus Cobb became an established major league player in 1906 and from then to the end of his playing days in 1928 his career is well documented. There are, however, many lacunae in the evidence for his first two years in professional baseball, 1904-1905, and it is the aim of this study to focus on that period.

Con Strouthers, manager and part owner of the Augusta Tourists, allowed Cobb to come to spring training in 1904 at his own expense. Strouthers, a brute of a man with a waspish temper, had throughout his career as a player and manager, been unable to get along with people. Though he did not use Cobb in one exhibition game, Cobb starred in several intra-squad matches and became popular with Augusta fans. He was the only Georgia boy on the team, and he felt confident of making the roster. Strouthers, who was having contractual problems with several players, was obliged to use Cobb, who did well, in two games at the start of the season. Cobb, however, was released. Over the years Cobb gave many versions of this incident. The truth of the matter was, as Strouthers stated several times, that he did not want inexperienced players. Furthermore, Cobb was, even at this point, too hard to handle and not willing to follow instructions.

Finding a position in Anniston, Alabama, on the fringes of organized baseball, he planted several stories in the Augusta press extolling his allegedly legendary feats. He wrote scores of letters to Grantland Rice, using a variety of pseudonyms, praising his baseball feats and thus earned a notice in Rice's prestigious column. He returned to Augusta at the end of the season (Strouthers had sold out his interest and left) and performed rather unimpressively.

Returning to Augusta in 1905 he faced the hostility of a new manager, Andy Roth, and struggled with what his teammate Nap Rucker called, inadequate baseball skills. During March he amused several members of the Detroit Tigers, who were using Augusta as their training base, with untutored antics, and during the season was ignored by Ted Sullivan, a super scout, who was looking for major league talent in Augusta. George Leidy, a veteran minor league player and new manager of Augusta, worked hours with Cobb developing his skills. The enormous progress Cobb made under Leidy's tutelage was only temporarily set back by the death of Cobb's father, apparently accidentally shot by his mother.

At the end of August 1905 the Detroit Tigers purchased his contract. Though he played poorly, with some flashes of brilliance, he received considerable publicity in both the Detroit and Augusta press as well as in the Sporting News. One of the entries in the Sporting News, signed "Augusta Correspondent," may have been written by Cobb himself. Cobb's teammates began to turn against him not only because of his unabashed desire to stay in the limelight, but for various character defects. From the very beginning Cobb was arrogant and pugnacious, generally, unable to get along with his teammates and managers, but he was able to gain the support of the press as well as the fans.