

John J. McGraw and Hugh Jennings: Bonaventure's Boys of Summer

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Two baseball luminaries of the early decades of this century were John J. McGraw (1873- 1934) and Hugh Jennings (1869- 1929). These two Baseball Hall of Fame members devoted nearly fifty years to the national game. McGraw, the more famous of the duo, was an outstanding third baseman for the Baltimore Orioles before becoming the manager of the New York Giants. During his unprecedented thirty years at this managerial post, his teams won ten pennants and three world series. After six. successful years as shortstop for the Orioles, Jennings became the manager of the Detroit Tigers leading them to three pennants from 1907 through 1909. When released by the Tigers after seventeen years at the helm, Jennings joined his friend and former teammate, McGraw, as third base coach for the Giants during which time the team won three straight pennants.

Although the accomplishments of McGraw and Jennings remain noted as part of baseball's halcyon history. little is known, however, about a short period in their lives in which not only their careers as players and managers were fashioned but also through their efforts the game play and strategy would eventually be changed. Between 1892 and 1897, these two young major leaguers were students at St. Bonaventure College and became coaches of the college's first varsity sport. baseball. By going to St. Bonaventure College to obtain a college education instead of pursuing the usual off-season hedonistic lifestyle of their professional baseball colleagues, the two displayed a mental and moral courage: a special, personal heroism. The two opted for the more demanding path of study and intellectual growth.

As Bonaventure baseball coaches. the two experimented with newly designed plays and strategies which transformed game play not only at the college level but also in the professional ranks. Their conceived drag bunt, squeeze play, double steal and cut-off defense were tried out with the varsity, used at Baltimore. and eventually copied throughout the leagues. In terms of baseball management, the two were a coalescence of orderliness, strategic inventiveness and analytical skill. The training sessions during the winter were held in the evenings in the basement of Alumni Hall and were conducted in organizational style and worked out in minute detail. Everything from individualized calisthenics to instruction of fundamentals was carried out with the strengths and weaknesses of the players being considered. The ball players were directed with authority, firmness. and professional expertise.

Not only did McGraw and Jennings handle their coaching role efficiently and effectively, they also worked at perfecting their own playing techniques. Their batting skills were so improved that they batted over .300 after their winter workouts during their student tenure.

Those years spent as students and coaches at St. Bonaventure College benefited both McGraw and Jennings as well as the game of baseball. Not only did they receive the education they so earnestly desired but they also were provided the opportunity to test, refine and implement their theories and strategies of game play. to forge their managerial skills and to prepare them for their future roles on the major league playing fields. John J. McGraw and Hugh Jennings can aptly be called Bonaventure's Boys of Summer.