

# Ty Cobb - An Incompetent Manager?

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When Tyrus Cobb became manager of the Detroit Tigers in 1921 it was generally believed that he would be the charismatic leader who would take the team to the promised land. Since 1906 he had been the star of the Detroit team, the key figure in the pennants of 1907, 1908, 1909 the greatest player of the era and a flamboyant, aggressive personality who drew crowds to the stadiums throughout the American League. He managed the Tigers from 1921 to 1928 winning 479 games while losing 444. The 519 percentage, respectable enough, did not include a pennant, and as a statistic was far less impressive than Cobb's playing record. Cobb had strong points. He could lead by example and do things as a player which would inspire the team. He was an excellent hitting teacher, and occasionally a strategic maneuver would win a game.

Cobb had given considerable thought to managing as early as 1914 when he discussed his ideas in detail in *Basting 'Em and Other Stories*, his first autobiography. He was, however, unable to carry out his plans nor did he succeed in fulfilling the high expectation Detroit fans had. Cobb had many problems as a manager. Charlie Gehringer felt that he did not know how to get along with people and tended to alienate his players. He had numerous quarrels with his own players, and often criticized them before the fans. Before Washington fans he nearly had a fight with his first baseman, Lu Blue, and stopped talking to his best pitcher, Earl Whitehill who did not know until hours before the game about his pitching assignment. When questioned about his inability to deal with his men he retorted, "I can get along with the devil if he hits 350 and fields his position.\*" Despite his deep knowledge of baseball he made many personnel mistakes. Carl Hubbell was in the Detroit organization from 1923 to 1927, and though Hubbell was sold after Cobb was fired, The Meal Ticket claimed that Cobb never gave him a chance. Under Cobb, King Carl was allowed to pitch several innings in an exhibition game during spring training against a college team. Hubbell maintained that he would have quit baseball if Cobb had returned as manager in 1927. Cobb disliked one of his best pitchers, Howard Ehmke. In 1923 he traded him to Boston for Rip Collins. Ehmke won 20 games for the last place Sox while Collins won 3 for the second place Tigers, which was Cobb's best team. Cobb cut Babe Herman from the squad and got little in return for Sam Hale and Ira Flagstead, who went on to have fine major league careers.

Cobb's mercurial moods hurt his teams. He would begin the season confident that the team would do well, and usually by June would throw in the towel condemning his players for lacking a fighting spirit and not having talent. He was continually in a process of rebuilding. His strategic moves were geared for the low run games of the first decade of the century. He liked to steal, bunt and sacrifice at a time when the successful teams were going for the big inning and the cluster of runs. Cobb's failure as a manager, however, stemmed not so much from mistakes in strategy or personnel decisions but rather from a character flaw. He was a troubled man, often violent, who looked down upon people with less talent and money than he had.

A by product of Cobb's tenure as manager was a controversy among Detroit sports journalists. In 1921 Randolph Hearts inaugurated the *Detroit Times* sending Arthur Brisbane, the old sport writer, to be general editor. Brisbane developed an extensive and

often sensational sport page in an effort to gain readers from the *Detroit News*. *The Detroit Free Press*, which had popular feature writers like Eddie Guest, the poet, was not vulnerable. Bert Walker, a veteran Hearts sports writer, and sports editor of *The Detroit Times* clashed with H.G. Salsinger, sports editor of the News. Cobb was often at the center of the controversy. When Salsinger criticized Cobb's tactics Walker came to his defense. Inasmuch as Cobb was extremely popular in Detroit the *Times* benefitted from its pro-Cobb stance.