

# It Doesn't Get Any Worse Than This: The Life and Times of the 1916 Philadelphia Athletics

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In the first decade of the American Baseball League the most dominant team was the Philadelphia Athletics, winning over nine hundred games while playing at a .585 pace. However, as the second decade began, a combination of factors worked against the continued success of the Athletics, and culminated in the loss of the World Series to the Boston National League team in 1914.

Following this debacle manager Connie Mack broke up his team by selling Eddie Collins and waiving his three premier pitchers, Eddie Plank, Chief Bender and Jack Coombs. Mack, at the time, said he was making the changes because of the players salary demands. Later, there would be unconfirmed suspicions that the pitchers may have been involved in throwing that 1914 series against Boston.

1915 was to prove a dismal season. The Athletics lost 109 games while winning only 43; the second poorest season in the brief history of the American League. Trying to rebuild, Connie Mack used 49 players, including 26 pitchers, but to little or no avail.

Between the end of the 1915 season and the start of the 1916 season, Mack continued his search for ball-players, concentrating much of his attention—at least from the sportswriters points-of-view, on collegiate talent.

Spring training began in mid-March 1916 in St. Petersburg, Florida and almost immediately the Athletics were in trouble. Virtually the entire staff of pitchers came up with sore arms, and as a result the team lost all of its games against major league competition although they managed to win all of their games against minor league opposition. The team was described as “dispirited” as they began the 1916 season.

The Athletics promptly lost six games in a row to Boston and New York. While bad weather postponed some games, the Athletics could finish the month of April with only a 3-10 record and a comment by manager Mack that the team would finish last. In those thirteen games, the team had committed 31 errors and the pitchers had walked or hit 53 batters.

May would prove to be most successful. The Athletics began the month by winning 2 out of 3 games from the Yankees which including the team's first homerun of the season, by aging Nap Lajoie. The Athletics managed to complete May with a relatively respectable 11 wins and 14 losses.

But in the next two months they won only 5 out of 52 games which included an 11-game losing streak in June; the last four games in June and the first 8 in July for a 12-game losing streak; a 9 game losing streak in mid-July and then an 11-game losing streak at the end of July.

August continued July's losing streak ending only when it reached 20 straight defeats, tying the American League record. Joe Bush stopped the streak on August 9th, beating Detroit 7-1. An interesting foot-note to this event was that Boston, who had held the previous record of 20 straight losses had also ended their streak by beating the Tigers. The Athletics would finish August with a

record of 8-23, but one of those 8 victories was a 5-0 no-hitter hurled by Joe Bush against Cleveland on August 25th. Connie Mack would describe the game as the finest piece of pitching he had ever seen.

September continued the misery, although the Athletics did have enough victories to enjoy one of their shorter losing streaks, 7 games. On September 27th they broke the Washington Senators 1904 record for futility by losing their 114th game. The Athletics finished September with a 7-22 record.

October, brief though it was, proved to be the team's best month. They played only three games—all against the AL champion Red Sox—and swept the seasonending double-header 5-3 and 7-3 to complete a miserable season on a somewhat triumphant note. Their final record 36-117 stands as the poorest winning season by any major league team in the modern era of baseball.

Three conclusions can be reached about that 1916 team. One, Connie Mack was a poor handler of pitchers. It was not unusual during that season for any pitcher to start twice and relief twice within a 7-day period. This overwork contributed very strongly to the destruction of the pitching career of Elmer Myers in 1916 and his colleague in 1915, John Wyckof. To all observers, both pitchers had great promise, but both were out of baseball in a matter of months, not years. A second conclusion is that there were two performers on that team who deserve a place in the Hall of Fame: 1st baseman Snuffy McGinnis and catcher-outfielder Wally Schang. Both players had distinguished careers and were rated by observers of the time as the top one or two players at their positions.

Finally, there is Connie Mack himself. Throughout the season, he demonstrated a very patient, unprovoked attitude toward the team and the game. It is that attitude that sets him head-and-shoulders above the rest of the managers from the period, and is what allowed him to return, in less than a decade, to the top of the standings.