

Harry Heilmann—Detroit Folk Hero

Anthony J. Papalas
East Carolina University

Harry Heilmann was one of the national pastimes, greatest right handed hitters achieving a lifetime batting average of .342, and winning four batting titles. Born in San Francisco in 1894, he attended Sacred Heart College where he was an average student and mediocre athlete. Maturing physically in his late teens he decided, despite his mother's opposition, on baseball as a career, and made it to the majors with the Tigers in 1914. In 1915 he played for San Francisco because they paid double what the Tigers offered. From 1916 to 1920 he was a solid player perhaps better known in Detroit as a good Samaritan for saving the life of a young lady.

In 1921 Cobb, who became manager of the Tigers, tutored Heilmann helping him win the batting championship, the first right handed hitter to do so in the American League since Lajoie in 1905. In 1923 he won with a .403 average. In 1925 he beat out Tris Speaker on the last day of the season, and in 1927 duplicated the feat against Al Simons.

While a friend of General Douglas McArthur, James Farley, Edger Guest, Ed Sullivan and Babe Ruth, to whom he sold a life insurance policy, Heilmann was always approachable and remained congenial to fans and helpful to rookies. Though a great favorite in Detroit he was sold, under unclear circumstance, to Cincinnati, where he had a banner year in 1930. He fell sick the following year and was out of baseball by 1932. He returned to Detroit broke despite his immense baseball

earnings. His 1930 salary of \$20,000 was a king's ransom in the depression. On June 5, 1933 he joined the Detroit City League drawing twenty thousand fans for his first game. Failing both in politics and selling insurance in 1934 he became the voice of the Tigers for WXYZ competing with Ty Tyson, the broadcasting pioneer, who did the Tiger games on WWJ. Though there were complaints about his grammar and diction he became one of the great announcers, and in 1942 joined the network of Edwin Anderson and the Goebel Brewing Co. which eventually made him the sole Tiger announcer. In 1948 Detroit fans honored him with a Harry Heilmann day. Though stricken with cancer in the spring of 1951 he tried to carry on his duties. Hospitalized in July he received visits from Ty Cobb, Sam Crawford, and other greats. He died the day before the All Star game, which was being played in Detroit, informed by Cobb that he was about to be elected to the hall of fame.

(Based on the *Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press* 1914–1951, letters of Owen Carroll, Edger Guest, James Farley, Robert Ryan, Edger Dewitt Jones in the possession of Harry Heilmann Jr.; interviews with Charles Gehringer, Ken Jones.)