

Glory Denied—The Case of Denny Lyons

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Although baseball chroniclers rightly regard Joe DiMaggio's 1941 feat of hitting in 56-consecutive games as an Olympian major league performance, and properly single out Willie Keeler, Pete Rose and others as stellar runners up, few historians are mindful of Denny Lyons's 19th century mark of hitting in 52 consecutive games. Indeed, DiMaggio pursued his mark in invincible ignorance of his great rival and enjoyed a relatively pressure-less path once having passed Keeler's mark (also little known at the time) of 44 consecutive games.

Playing for the Philadelphia Athletics of the American Association, infielder Lyons began his streak on June 24, 1887 by singling off pitcher Matt Kilroy of the Baltimore Orioles. Over the next 51 games Lyons managed at least a hit per game before being halted by pitcher Tony Mullane of the Cincinnati team.

That Lyons's feat went unnoticed in his time owed to a different conception of such a feat by contemporary record keepers. Moreover, the 1887 season operated under official rules that awarded basehits for bases on balls. And Lyons twice benefited by having his hitting streak extended by getting base on balls hits; on each occasion the benefit came after he had hit in 21 consecutive games without benefit of the base on balls hit ruling.

That the major league rules makers rescinded the base on balls as basehits ruling after 1887 contributed to denying Lyons his share of diamond glory. However, records compiled by players in 1887 were official in their time. And so they remain despite the attempt of the 1968 records committee ruling that retroactively attempted to revamp the 1887 records in the light of modern standards.

The denial of diamond glory to Denny Lyons and to other stars of the 1887 season (including Pop Anson who retroactively lost the NL batting title) poses a challenge to baseball historians to consider anew the fallacious reasoning of present day statisticians whose efforts to "set the record straight" distorts the official records of the game.