

BASEBALL DIGEST



ALL-STAR EDITION



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[Note: Normally, I write this column but, and as a special treat, the renowned George Vecsey agreed to compose this wonderful column. - Abe]

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By George Vecsey
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Babe Ruth is not only the greatest baseball player who ever lived but he is also the quintessential American athlete of all time.

I have no problem naming him the greatest player because he was a superb pitcher as a man-child and he became the first slugger the sport ever had. He revolutionized baseball by sheer ability. First he struck batters out. Then he hammered home runs at an unimagined pace.

But he was more than that. He was a character, one of a kind, a great athlete yet homely, human with flaws, a big slob with an inner adult trying to get out but not knowing exactly how. He was the perfect American athlete for the Roaring Twenties, an adolescent thrilling an adolescent country.

He was also the perfect representative of a nation of many roots. His features seemed to remind some bench jockeys of an African-American, so they called him the crudest of names. (None of it was true, but that was irrelevant.) The Babe laughed at being called “Ape” but warned opponents not to “get personal” – racial, that is. In the American way of things, he was the outsider, the other, while in the meritocracy of baseball, he stood out.

Just about everybody who met him (except, perhaps, managers and team officials who had to keep tabs on him) loved the big lug, and marveled at what he could do with his thickening body – run, throw, almost always make the right play in the field. He was legend. He was real. Never been anybody like him before or since.

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George Vecsey, Contributing Sports Columnist of The New York Times is also an aging Brooklyn Dodgers fan who is proud that Babe Ruth coached first base for the Dodgers in 1938. George writes a blog which can be enjoyed at georgevecsey.com

Brent Stevens “About Babe Ruth”

Schear: I’m here with Brent Stevens. Brent, where did you grow up?

Brent Stevens: Sure. That’s actually not an easy question. I’m originally from New England. Grew up a large part of my life over in Saudi Arabia and I spent high school and college in upstate New York.

What are your first memories of baseball?

My first memories of baseball are, probably, actually going to a Red Sox game. So, growing up in New England – most of my family was from that area – and my uncle in particular took me to my first baseball game which was a Red Sox game. I remember probably it was Frank Viola who was pitching at the time.

They played the Twins.

Yes. Absolutely. And then I would say very quickly thereafter made that tie to baseball specifically and I started asking some questions. It then became clear to me that I was related to Babe Ruth. At that time, when I was starting to get into it, maybe say 8 years old, the name Babe Ruth didn’t necessarily resonate with me until I started to do a little bit of research, started reading some children’s books at that time. It started to click with me that he wasn’t just “any” baseball player.

And he is your great-grandfather?

That’s correct.

Your grandmother’s father?

Right. My grandmother is the daughter of Babe Ruth, and there’s my father and then me.

Your grandmother is still alive?

Yes. She’s going to be 98 this year. And she’s still very with it and kicking.

She lives where?

She lives with my parents in Las Vegas.

And who taught you to play baseball?

It was definitely my dad. I can remember playing catch in the backyard – just throwing the ball around. I remember even being afraid of the ball falling. You know, cringing as I’m trying to catch it. And I played T-ball and didn’t get too far into it because the more I learned about my great-grandfather the more scared I was of the pressure of playing baseball.

When you were a little boy, I guess little kids wouldn’t have talked about Babe Ruth. So being a relative of Babe Ruth really wasn’t something that you talked about with your friends.

Not too much. A combination of maybe not being as familiar and just being humble about it. But with that said, I would say that it started to come out a bit here and there in middle school. Ever since then, when I did decide to talk about it, there was recognition and some appreciation.

When you were a little boy, you first realized that your great grandfather was more than a little famous, he was really famous, did you go find books in the library at school or the public library to read about your great-grandfather?

Absolutely, I did. And it’s interesting – I feel like there’s kind of 2 turning points as far as my impression of the Babe. There’s one when I was younger where I described Babe more from a baseball player perspective, I would say, just

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how impressive he was as a baseball player. I think the next phase of really appreciating Babe was when I created my site as a tribute to the Babe and doing more research on a personal level. I'm really then understanding his whole entire life and the portfolio of Babe that I really truly became impressed. Everyone tends to know the statistics about the Babe and they may not know just how impressive even those statistics are. But then when you take into consideration all the things he did on a personal level – whether it's for a child or a person in the hospital or just the positive influence he had on so many people. It's just really impressive.

When you see the pictures, it appears he was just really a favorite of children. He seemed to have a soft heart for children.

He did. And it's really cool – not only hearing the stuff from my grandmother because, obviously to my grandmother there's no one that's more special than Daddy, and she refers to him as “Daddy” to this day. But to hear it from other individuals that I've heard from over the years, telling their own personal anecdotes of just how special Babe was and just how caring he was. The stories about him just being swarmed by kids, and just signing autograph after autograph after autograph – those are all very true. It's not just legend.

So going back to when you were little, Babe Ruth was part of two pretty great teams, the Red Sox and the Yankees. What teams were your favorite teams when you grew up?

Those two teams. You know, coming from New England, and I'm a little conflicted given they're big rivals. Growing up in New England, it was all about the Red Sox. Growing up in upstate New York, it was a little bit divided, to be honest. I remember the years in the mid- to late-90s where the Yankees and the Braves battling it out and I rooted for the Yankees to pull it out. At the same time the Red Sox have been very embracing of Babe and the family. Very warm and bringing us back for multiple events. So there's a lot of love between those teams, which is kind of ironic given they're enemies on the field.

So your grandmother has gone back to the Red Sox and participated with them?

Yes.

He was a pretty good pitcher for the Red Sox.

Excellent pitcher, yes.

And a slugger, both before they traded him to the Yankees.

Correct.

In 1920. When you grew up, did you listen to the games on the radio or watch them on TV?

Given that part of my childhood was over in Saudi Arabia, the whole concept of baseball didn't exist over there.

When we came back to the States, I was introduced to it a little bit more. Definitely I watched it on TV. And there's something to be said for listening to a game on the radio. It's almost like you can get more of an experience sometimes if you listen to the radio than seeing it on TV.

When I grew up, I rooted for the Cincinnati Reds, and they were terrible. But the announcer was Babe Ruth's teammate, Waite Hoyt. Everybody loved when it rained because they didn't cut away during the rain delays. He would just go on and on and on and tell stories. The only stories that he had were about the late 1920's Yankees when Waite Hoyt was a Hall of Fame pitcher for that team and Babe Ruth was Babe Ruth. I can remember sitting on my bed just listening to story after story. I don't remember the games. I actually have a record at home – I think it's called “In the Rain with Waite”. I don't remember that very often. How old were you when you really first realized who your great-grandfather was?

I would say I was between 8 or 10 when I suddenly realized he was something special. I'd say I was probably closer to

And from Babe Ruth's Daughter - Julia Ruth Stevens

Schear: What are your memories of watching your father play?

Julia Ruth Stevens: It was always a thrill to see him come up to bat.

He was always trying to swing for the fences. He could have always hit a single but he knew the fans were there to see him hit a home run so that is what he tried to do. Whenever he was at bat, I would chant, “Come on, Daddy, come on.” I got to see many home runs!

What are your memories of throwing out the first pitch at the last game of the original Yankee Stadium?

I treasure that moment. I'll treasure that moment for as long as I live. It was wonderful. I was so pleased and grateful that the Yankees asked me to do it.

How would you describe your dad?

During the years he was playing baseball, unless he was in a slump which happened occasionally, he was always in good humor. He never talked much about the game when he came home unless they lost. Then, he would say it could have been won if it had been managed better. He would have been a great manager.

He was like any good father. He'd come home and I'd give him a kiss. He was such good company. If I had some friends over he would join them in a game of bridge or whatever we were doing. He learned to play easily just by watching. He was a great card player. No matter what he did, he was good at it. Good father, good company, good bowler. Anything he attempted, he did well. He was so funny and generous not only with family, but friends and with fans who were in need. He was just a great person to be with; you just enjoyed him.

I remember he made me breakfast in the off season and we always had dinner as a family. He was always interested in what I was doing.

13 when I knew just how impressive he was as a baseball player.

Is that something that your grandmother talked about?

Yes. So I would say it was more 8-10 when I really became interested in learning more about him. And then, over the years, asking more questions of my grandmother, to the point that I was really starting to grasp it.

Did you go to Yankee Stadium or to Fenway Park with your grandmother?

Yes. I got to go with her once to Fenway Park.

Fenway Park.

Yep. And she threw out the first pitch. Actually, I was also with her for the last home game at the old Yankee Stadium [Editor's Note: "The House that Ruth Built"]. She actually threw out the first pitch there as well.

Would she walk around the park with you at the stadium, if you will, and say this is where we were and these are the memories that she had of the park?

Yes. You know, she has a lot of memories and she could go on and on talking about Babe and the memories she's had. I would say she had a couple about the stadiums, specifically at Yankee Stadium. New York, in general, she just could go on and on about all the experiences she had there. It's funny that just a few years ago, she was most recently there for an event, and just commenting that it must be amazing to a person like her who lived there in the '30s and to see it today, it's just a tremendous difference. For her, it's not for the better, the amount of things that have changed.

Does she have memories also of Fenway Park? Or more of the older Yankee Stadium?

It is more Yankee Stadium. When she came into Babe's life, he had been a Yankee at that point, so she didn't necessarily have the association with the Red Sox directly as it came to Babe. She lived in New York for a lot of her life.

Did she collect memorabilia from her father?

When my great-grandmother passed away, Babe's wife, everything pretty much went to the Hall of Fame. There wasn't much left. When my great-grandmother passed away, there were certain things that my grandmother

wanted to retain just for memory's sake more than anything else. So a lot of those items, she's kept. More than anything, it's just photos. But, for her, it's just a blast through her memory, more than anything from a memorabilia perspective. She has some cool pieces that she had over the years.

I'm sure there are pictures of her and her father.

Yes. Most of it is actually are from her trip to Japan. When my grandmother graduated from high school, she had the choice of getting a college education or being taken along on this baseball trip around the world. My grandmother chose to take the trip around the world, which she said was more than any education she could ever have, just seeing the things that she did. When you think about it, 1934, places like the Philippines, France and Japan in that time period, it was kind of surreal, I imagine.

Over time, did she stay in touch with many of the players that were from that era?

I would say she stayed in touch with some. I would say for the longest time that my great-grandmother, she was around until probably the late 70's, she was really a matriarch of baseball. So she was the one that sort of represented the family when it came to baseball for the longest time. Like I said, my grandmother was actually up in New Hampshire, so she didn't necessarily maintain as many of those contacts. She kind of left that to my great-grandmother more than anything.

As to your grandmother, did she have favorite players that played in that era that she liked, that she just thought were special?

I know she really appreciated Lefty Gomez who was with the Yankees. He was a big personality. The Ruth family and the Gomez family were certainly close. They were close at times with the Gehrig family. I know she really liked Jimmie Foxx. You know, she really had the opportunity to get up close and personal with a lot of the players that were part of the barnstorming on the trip to Japan and just because they spent so much time together on the ship in close quarters. Charlie Gehringer was on that trip. I actually remember meeting

Charlie once. My grandmother and Charlie traded some rich stories from the past.

And tell me what's it like as a descendant of Babe Ruth to go to Cooperstown?

It's amazing. It's one of the best experiences. Just going into town and going to the Hall of Fame. It gives me butterflies. There's just so much history there. Being someone who appreciates both baseball and history, it's just perfect. It's a mecca. Just feeling so much pride being there. Just seeing now a whole new area – just this past year, the Babe Ruth section of the Hall of Fame was renovated, and it looks great. Just feeling so much pride.

Cooperstown's a pretty neat place and it is certainly about Babe Ruth, from one end of the street to the other, I would say. Have you talked with many of the sports writers, people from that genre that knew your great-grandfather?

When I first started in my projects for the website as a tribute to Babe, there were a couple, but not many. This was probably around 2005/2006 when I started to really get into it. I've talked to a couple of players. Again, with all of these conversations, the feedback he elicits, it was all very positive and just further reinforced the image of Babe in my mind.

What are your favorite stories of your great-grandfather?

It can be a little bit about his intensity, what people know most often about him. But to hear it first hand from someone that actually saw it, someone that wasn't biased, was really exciting to me. Because of course, I heard this stuff from my grandmother. But literally to see Babe just being surrounded by kids and he was just signing ball after ball after ball. Actually I did have the opportunity to meet Ernie Harwell once. And he had a very consistent story about when he was a boy – actually, it ended up being one of his books – "The Babe Signed My Shoe". So and that was a true story.

Ernie Harwell was a pretty neat guy. Very neat.

How do you think Babe Ruth changed the game of baseball?

In a lot of ways. I do think he was a factor in helping sustain baseball during

the Black Sox scandal. He came at the perfect time to, I think, help change the game, and the fans reacted to that. That's why he became the big drawing card in baseball. He made the game even more exciting than it already was. He helped revolutionize it, not only from the perspective of helping to change the course of the game on the field, but again he had one of those personalities and people just gravitated towards him. He was very charismatic. He was a good representative for the game. Not only because he was very likeable, but also he was extremely passionate and extremely knowledgeable when it came to the game.

And he was exceedingly interesting. He enjoyed being bigger-than-life. Most everything he did was bigger than life. His life was bigger than life and his baseball career was bigger than life and I think that people really like those stories.

I think so. It makes it more relatable to the common person. The fact that he grew up in a school for boys and the fact that years later he became one of the biggest celebrities in the country is just tremendous.

It seems to me that he had a common element to him. He never became, and it is probably not nice to say, but just

never acted like DiMaggio. He signed autographs, he was nice to people. He was not perfect but he probably never thought that he was perfect. He probably didn't try to be perfect. He tried to be somebody that had a really good time and most people really related to that.

Absolutely.

What can you do, what can your family do to keep your great-grandfather's memory alive?

Well, part of what I'm doing to help with that, like I said, is to create this tribute site, Babe Ruth Central. My goal with that site is to tell the whole story, to not only share the stats and just how impressive his stats are, not only from a hitting but a pitching perspective, but to share the whole story as far as Babe, the person. It's interesting just through supporting that site and just kind of staying on top of Babe's news, he is still out there all the time. I personally feel like it's part of my obligation as one of his descendants to share all the stories that have been shared with me, particularly from my grandmother, to show what a special person he was both on and off the field.

I would think that it should be perhaps a bit easier to do that today with social media and the internet, than it

might have been if it was in books and magazines and stuff like that.

Yes. With that said, it can kind of go both ways because there are certainly a lot of stories out there that choose to focus on maybe some of the negative aspects. It's interesting because there are certain general stereotypes of the Babe over time. And I would say that to some degree, maybe, there is an aspect of truth to them, but they're certainly not as true as how some portray. And I think some get passed along the way there's some unfair liberties that are taken regarding his faults and flaws. But in reality, they're not necessarily all accurate. And so seeing that can be tough. All the more reason that I feel it is necessary to make sure that the full perspective is shown.

When one mentions Babe Ruth, we remember him trotting around the bases. We remember the children around him. It doesn't seem like there's any particular fade to that, and those are happy memories. He is just very important to the Yankees and baseball. It was clearly his era. Thanks very much for your time.

For more insights, personal stories and photos, please visit Brent's website: baberuthcentral.com.

Brent Stevens
"About Babe
Ruth"

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