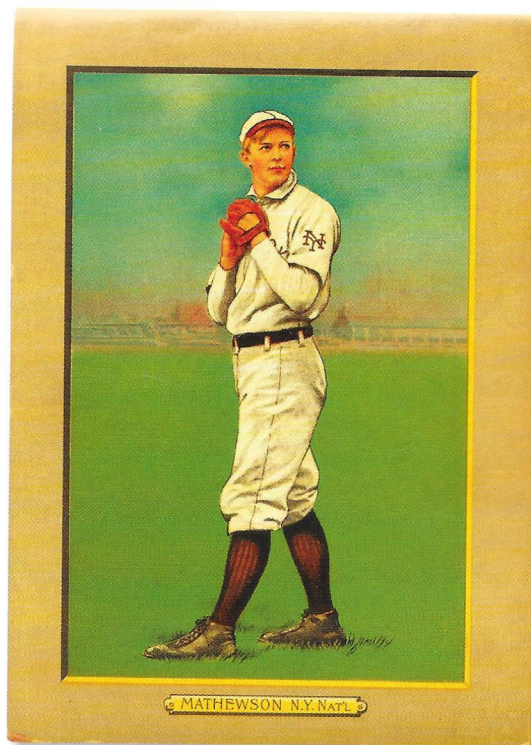


Christy Mathewson

Baseball's Gentleman and Tragic Hero

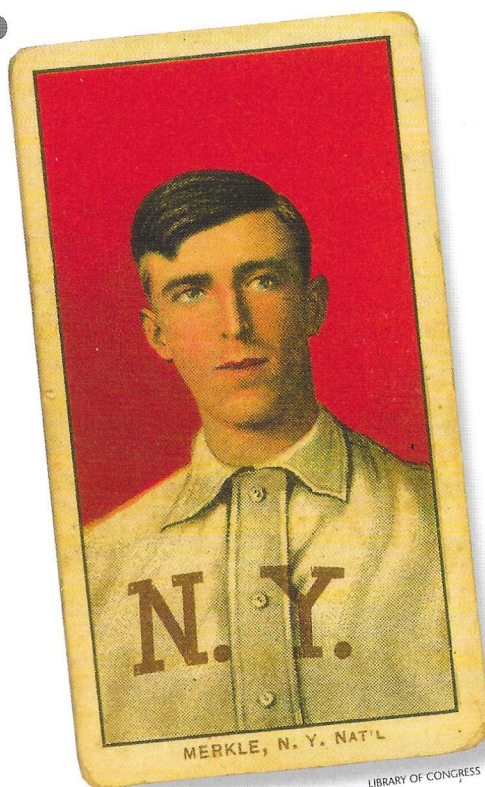
William C. Kashatus



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On Wednesday, September 23, 1908, twenty thousand baseball fans packed New York City's Polo Grounds to watch the hometown New York Giants host the reigning World Series champion and archrival, the Chicago Cubs. The contest would determine first place in the race for the coveted National League pennant.

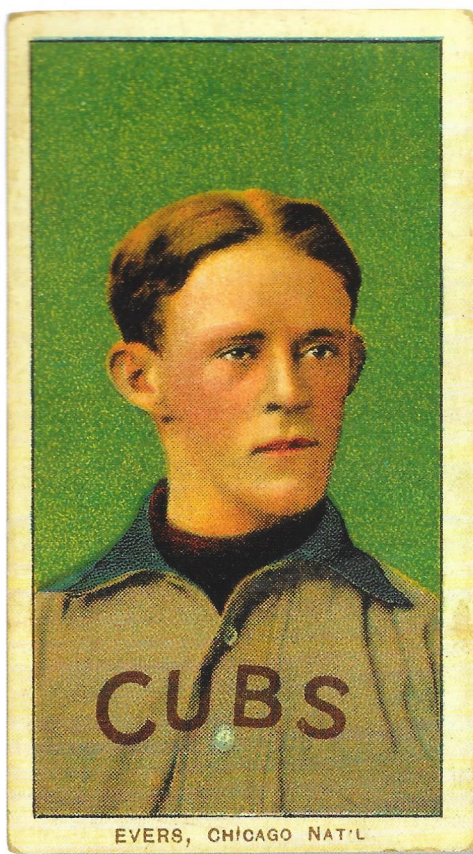
Right-handed pitcher Christy "Matty" Mathewson (1880–1925), a thirty-seven-game winner, took the mound against the Cubs' Jack Pfiester (1878–1953), the so-called "Giant Killer" because of his remarkable success against the New York club's hitters. With the game deadlocked 1–1 in the bottom of the ninth inning, the Giants had runners on first and third bases with two outs. When the next batter hit a single to right field, the third base runner appeared to have scored. Thousands of cheering New York fans swarmed the field believing that their beloved Giants had won. Convinced of victory, Fred Merkle (1888–1956), the nineteen-year-old Giants runner on first base, headed toward the clubhouse without ever touching second base.

Christy Mathewson (top, left) out-pitched "Giant Killer" Jack Pfiester (top, right), but Fred Merkle (above) and his "boner," plus Mathewson's honesty, proved costly for the New York club.

At Bucknell University, in Lewisburg, Mathewson was successful in several sports, active on campus, and an academic honor society member.



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Johnny Evers, second baseman for the Chicago Cubs, spotted the mistake that cost the New York Giants the 1908 pennant.

Johnny Evers (1881–1947), Chicago’s second baseman, saw the mistake and instructed his teammate, shortstop Joe Tinker (1880–1945), to retrieve the ball from a Giants’ fan who had expropriated it as a game-day souvenir. Tinker heaved the ball to Evers who began jumping up and down on the second base bag, insisting that Merkle was out. The game ended and two days of deliberations began.

National League officials were about to decide in favor of the Giants until they read a statement written by Mathewson that had been overlooked. His honesty was beyond question; even umpires occasionally asked for his help in calling a play if their view was obstructed. Mathewson confirmed that Merkle “had not touched second base.” Officials declared the game a draw and scheduled a one-game playoff at the Polo Grounds, a contest the Giants lost, 4-2. Mathewson’s honesty cost his team a pennant, but it reinforced the public’s perception of his integrity and strength of character.

Christy Mathewson was baseball’s outstanding pitcher during the first two decades of the twentieth century. He compiled 373 victories during a seventeen-year career. At a time when baseball teams were composed of cranks, rogues, drifters, and ne’er-do-wells, Mathewson rarely drank, smoked, or swore. Raised in a comfortable middle-class family, he was one of the few college-educated professional athletes at the turn of the century. A devout Baptist, in 1903 he married Lewisburg native Jane Stoughton (1880–1967), a Sunday school teacher, and promised his mother he would not play baseball on Sundays, a pledge he honored. New York sportswriters anointed him “The Christian Gentleman.”

Born on August 12, 1880, in Factoryville, Wyoming County, Christopher Mathewson was the son of Gilbert Bailey Mathewson (1847–1927), a gentleman farmer, and Minerva Isabella Capwell Mathewson (1855–1936). Journeying into the hills about ten miles above Scranton, in northeastern Pennsylvania, the family intended to establish a textile business, but Factoryville, in a region in which anthracite ruled as king, proved too isolated for it to live up to its name and remained

a small hamlet. Minerva Mathewson descended from an affluent pioneer family that placed a high priority on education. Her mother, Christiana Capwell, was a founder of the Keystone Academy, a private preparatory school chartered in 1868 by the Commonwealth to educate Factoryville’s children. Students first attended classes in the Factoryville Baptist Church, but two years later, the institution broke ground for a campus at La Plume, for which the Capwells donated twenty acres. In addition to Christy, his brothers Henry and Nicholas also attended the Keystone Academy, which has since emerged as the 270-acre Keystone College.

The Mathewsons lived in a spacious house with a shallow brook winding along one side and an apple orchard on the other. They wanted their son to become a preacher and continue his education, but Christy’s passion for sports threatened to sidetrack those parental aspirations. His experience at Keystone Academy only increased his

On July 18, 1898, eighteen-year-old Christy Mathewson (second row, second from left) pitched his first game for the Honesdale Eagles, an amateur team, winning 16-7.



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love for baseball. "I was still at that age where a country boy is expected to do chores at home, right after school," Mathewson recalled. "The Academy building was about half a mile from where I lived, so that when I reached home and finished my chores, there was no time left to play baseball." Mathewson began skipping lunch to stay at school to play ball. He'd persuade other boys to play a game or at least coax one to don a catcher's mitt and "spend the whole noon hour pitching to him." Sometimes Mathewson would stand alone in the football field and throw the baseball from one end to the other to build arm strength.

Ray Snyder, a boyhood friend, broke two fingers and fractured a thumb that never healed properly as a reminder of catching those baseballs. "When we played together on local teams, Christy had none of those fancy pitches they now use in the big leagues," recalled Snyder. "He didn't need them. He had a fastball that could go through you, a wicked curve that hooked sharply either way, and unbelievable control." Snyder remembered when he and Mathewson were fifteen years old, they once walked six miles from Factoryville to Mill City to play a game. Mathewson pitched for two hours against coal miners as old as twenty-one, striking out everyone at least once and winning the game, 19-17. "After the game, we limped home on blistered feet, having earned just a dollar apiece for our efforts," Snyder added.

Although he pitched for semi-professional baseball teams during the summer, Mathewson did not take the mound for Keystone Academy until his senior year when he was elected captain. He initially preferred football, excelling at fullback and drop-kicking. Even though his family was financially secure, his parents encouraged him to pursue the extra money baseball offered.

In 1898, he pitched for a small town team at Honesdale, Wayne County, for twenty-five dollars a month, plus room and board. Posting eight wins and three losses, he led Honesdale to an anthracite league championship. "Honesdale was important to my career," Mathewson admitted years later. "There I learned the rudiments of the



ELLEN CLARKE BERTRAND LIBRARY/BUCKNELL UNIVERSITY

By the time Mathewson (second row, second from right) took the mound for Bucknell University, both minor and major league teams had noticed his pitching talent.

fadeaway, a slow curve ball, pitched with the same motion as a fast ball. I learned it by watching a left-handed pitcher named Dave Williams." Known today as a "screwball" and mixed with his fastball and roundhouse curve, the fadeaway pitch became Mathewson's most effective weapon against right-handed batters.

Mathewson had been offered several athletic scholarships before deciding, in 1898, on Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Union County. He was a strapping, six-foot, one-inch, 190-pound, affable young man, successful also in basketball and football. In his favorite sport of football, he led Bucknell to victory in one game against Army with a drop-kicked field goal. Mathewson also played the bass horn in the school's band, sang in the glee club, and served as freshman class president. Upper classmen elected him to both the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity and Theta Delta Tau, an honorary society for male students.

In the spring of 1899, he jumped at an offer made by Dr. Harvey F. Smith, a Bucknell alumnus, to pitch for his minor league team, the Taunton Herrings, in the New England League at ninety dollars a month. "The colleges were not so strict about playing summer baseball

then," Mathewson explained, "and I needed the money. Unfortunately, my experiences with Taunton were anything but pleasant." Located thirty miles south of Boston, Taunton was well known for its large silver manufacturing plants; the Herrings was a team well known as a perennial loser in the league. Although Mathewson pitched well, he lacked offensive support. Even worse, the players were never paid. On Labor Day 1899, the team played a doubleheader at Fall River, Massachusetts, to raise money for transportation home.

The following summer, Mathewson pitched twenty wins, two losses, and 128 strikeouts for Norfolk in the Virginia League, attracting the attention of both the Philadelphia Athletics and New York Giants. "At first I wanted to go to Philadelphia because it was nearer to my home," he said, "but after studying the pitching staffs of both clubs, I decided the opportunity in New York was better." He left Bucknell after his junior year, in 1901, to embark on his remarkable pitching career with the Giants.

Not only did baseball attract rowdy players, gamblers, and incorrigible fans, the sport's poor reputation was reinforced by the constant wrangling



By 1910, Mathewson, pitching for the New York Giants, was worshipped by children and adults alike and enjoyed a reputation as a gentleman-athlete.



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of team owners, who controlled everything from ticket prices to players' salaries. The cornerstone of their authority was the "reserve clause," which required the five best players of each team to reserve their services in perpetuity to the club for which they played. Baseball mirrored the economic structure and labor relations of the nation's industrial sector. Baseball team owners were entrepreneurs seeking upward mobility at the expense of the athletes deprived of control over their wages, working conditions, and terms of employment. Jealousy and greed threatened to destroy the game, but the colorful, seemingly invincible, play of a few teams assured its popularity and place in the history of American recreation.

During this so-called "Dead Ball Era," baseballs, made with a heavy, rubber-centered core, remained largely inside the ballpark. Teams focused on manufacturing runs inning-by-inning, executing the hit-and-run, stolen base, squeeze play, and bunt. John McGraw, the pugnacious manager of the New York Giants, perfected the strategy so well that he built a championship dynasty. The team's fortunes rested largely on Mathewson's right arm.

Mathewson won twenty games as a twenty-one-year-old rookie in 1901. In

his first appearance, he defeated the defending National League champion, the Brooklyn Dodgers, while giving up four hits. He began with seven straight wins, including four shutouts, before being defeated by the St. Louis Cardinals. Mathewson pitched a no-hits-victory against the Cardinals in mid-July, but by then the Giants had nose-dived into a slump and the star pitcher lost four straight games. His arm was throbbing so painfully from overuse that he could hardly sleep at night. In a pattern that haunted him throughout his career—some days he was simply unhittable and other days, usually after overuse, he would be hit hard.

After slumping to fourteen wins and seventeen losses the following season, he won thirty games in 1903 and led the National League with 267 strikeouts. His finest season came in 1908, when he led the league with an astounding thirty-seven wins, 259 strikeouts, twelve shutouts, and an earned run average of 1.43. Sports-writers dubbed him "Big Six," after Manhattan's Americus Engine Company Number 6, known as the "Big Six Fire Company," reputed to be the fastest in the city.

Mathewson partly owed his pitching success to his knowledge of each

hitter's idiosyncrasies and weaknesses, as well as his pinpoint control. Seldom did he rely on his blazing fastball to strike out a batter. Instead, he mixed in his vicious curve or tricky fadeaway to force ground balls and pop-ups. Only when there were runners in scoring position did he go for the strikeout. To manager John McGraw, Mathewson was a companion and intellectual equal. "Matty was not only the greatest pitcher the game ever produced," McGraw said, "but the finest character. He never caused me a moment's trouble. His heart was always in the game and with the players."

In the 1905 World Series, he shut out the Philadelphia Athletics in the first, third, and fifth games, allowing just fourteen hits as the Giants captured the championship. Although New York returned to the World Series in 1911, 1912, and 1913, Mathewson won only three out of eight games. The losses can be attributed to the Giants' inability to score enough runs since Mathewson's earned run average in the fall classic was a remarkably low 1.15.

"What a pitcher he was!" recalled his longtime catcher John T. "Chief" Meyers (1880–1971), a full-blooded Cahuilla Indian who caught almost ev-

ery game Mathewson pitched for seven years. "The greatest that ever lived. He had almost perfect control. . . . You could sit in a rocking chair and catch Matty. In 1913, he pitched sixty-eight consecutive innings without walking a single batter. That season he pitched over 300 innings and I doubt if he walked twenty-five men the whole year."

During a five-game losing streak in August 1911, sportswriters began penning Mathewson's career obituary. Syndicated columnist Ring Lardner (1885–1933), who elevated baseball writing to a literary art, stood by the pitching legend with a folksy essay. "The boys been writin' subscriptions on his tombstone as far back as 1906, and they been layin' him to rest every year since," Lardner wrote. "You've heard the old sayin' that a cat's got nine lives? Well, boys, Matty makes a cat look like a sucker." Lardner insisted that Mathewson was an intelligent pitcher who'd "rather have 'em hit the first ball and pop it up in the air . . . So it's the old bean that makes Matty tick." Just as Lardner predicted, Mathewson proved his critics wrong and completed the season with a 26–13 record and 141 strikeouts.

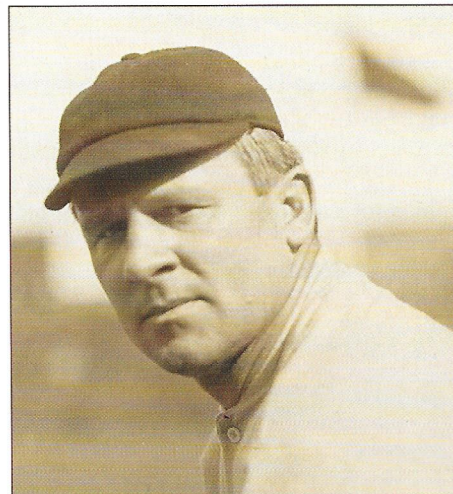
Idolized by fans and respected by both teammates and opponents, Mathewson became the game's first professional athlete to serve as a role model for youngsters who worshipped him. Although he possessed a sense of humor, he was shy by nature and, according to one teammate, "a little hard to get close to, but once you got to know him, he was truly a good friend." Chief Meyers insisted that the Giants "loved to play for him. . . . If you made an error behind him, he'd never get mad or sulk. He'd come over and pat you on the back."

The blond-haired, blue-eyed Mathewson was uncommonly handsome and projected an image of good sportsmanship. He was greatly devoted to his wife Jane and their only child, John Christopher (1906–1950), known as Christy Jr., a 1927 graduate of Bucknell University, who died at the age of forty-three following an explosion at his home in Helotes, Texas. Mathewson drank sparingly, considering it "an insult to assume that a good Christian

New York Giants manager John McGraw (right) said his friend Mathewson was the greatest pitcher he had ever seen.

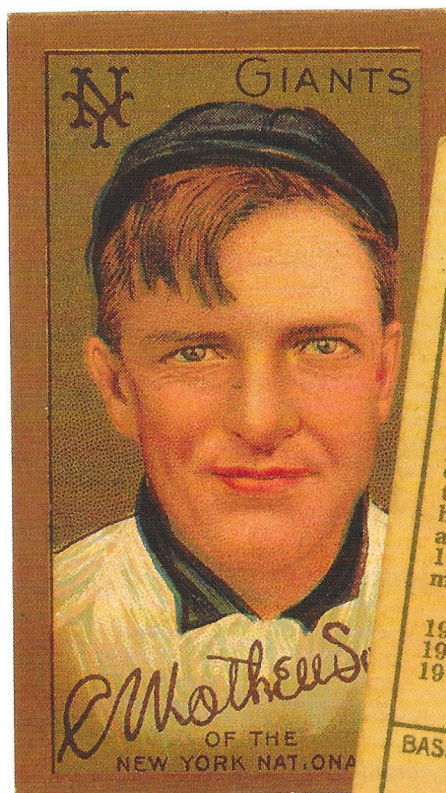
gentleman could not refrain from drinking on his own." He also had a reputation for being in bed before curfew. He was thoughtful and kind, never forgetting his boyhood friend, Ray Snyder, to whom he always gave a pair of tickets to a World Series game. "Never let it be said that there was a finer man than Christy Mathewson," remarked Snyder, "He never drank. He never smoked. He loved children and was always proper."

Like many sports idols, Mathewson's clean-living reputation was exaggerated. He was known to argue with umpires, throw pitches to hit batters, break contracts, and occasionally indulge in profanity. He smoked cigars and pipes and enjoyed being the

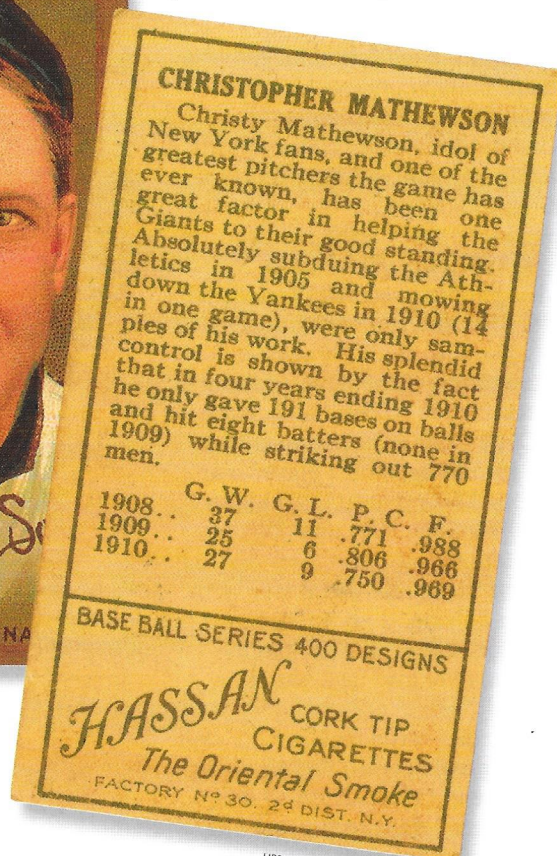


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highest paid player at \$15,000 a year in 1911—the equivalent of \$330,000 today. Teammate Fred Snodgrass described Mathewson as a "terrific poker player," who "made a good part of his expenses every year at it." His moral pronouncements grated on baseball's more worldly players. "Hardly anyone on the team speaks to Mathewson," one of his early teammates told a sportswriter, "and he deserves it. He is



A 1911 baseball card notes Mathewson's 89 wins in three seasons and 770 strike-outs in four seasons.



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Mathewson with his only child, John Christopher Mathewson, known as Christy Jr.

a pinhead and a conceited fellow who has made himself unpopular." At a time when the press largely ignored the personal follies and indiscretions of ballplayers, Mathewson fit the image of a public hero.

He enjoyed three good seasons between 1912 and 1914, but in 1915, his pitching record deteriorated to eight wins and fourteen losses. Midway through the 1916 season, with a mediocre three wins and four losses, the Giants traded Mathewson to the Cincinnati Reds in a deal that allowed him to become a player-manager. "I don't like to part with Matty," lamented McGraw. "He was not only the greatest pitcher I ever saw—but he is my good friend. He could stay with the Giants as long as he wanted to, but I am convinced that his pitching days are over and he'd like to be a manager."

Being traded was a melancholy experience for Mathewson. While packing up his gear, he admitted, "I don't know whether I want to become the manager of another club or not. This

locker is the only one I've ever had in my life." With tears in his eyes, Mathewson bade each of his teammates farewell and boarded a train for Cincinnati. Sports-writer Lardner memorialized the event with six satirical but bittersweet lines.

*My eyes are very misty
As I pen these lines to Christy;
O, my heart is full of heaviness today,
May the flowers ne'er wither, Matty,
On your grave at Cincinnati,
Which you've chosen for your final
fade-away.*



Mathewson as player-manager for the Cincinnati Reds.

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U.S. Army Captain Mathewson proudly served his country during World War I, a stint that ended his life by the age of forty-five.

by Germany. Given accelerated training and a wartime commission, he was assigned to Chaumont, France, near the Belgian border, headquarters of the American Expeditionary Force. During his voyage overseas, he contracted the flu. Weakened by the illness, within his first three months in France, he was exposed to mustard gas—once during a training exercise and again while examining ammunition dumps left behind by the Germans. He was hospitalized until he could be transported home after the armistice ending the war was signed on November 11, 1918. He again contracted what appeared to be a lingering respiratory condition. His ailment was, in fact, an advanced case of tuberculosis, the same illness that had claimed the life of his younger brother Henry Mathewson (1886–1917) at the age of

Mathewson pitched only one game for Cincinnati, a 10–8 victory, but the score against him finally persuaded him that his playing days were over. Instead, he focused on managing. During his two and a half seasons at the helm, however, the Reds won 164 games, but dropped 176 and failed to finish in the first division. At the end of the season in 1918, with his country engaged in World War I, Mathewson enlisted in the U.S. Army, at the age of thirty-seven. He exceeded the maximum draft age of thirty established by the Selective Service Act of 1917.

Too old for infantry service, he entered the Chemical Warfare Service and was placed in the Gas and Flame Division to train inexperienced doughboys how to defend themselves against poisonous mustard gas used


thirty, who had pitched for the Giants from 1906 to 1907. Their brother, nineteen-year-old Nicholas (1889–1909), a student at Lafayette College in Easton, suffering from an unknown physical malady, died after a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

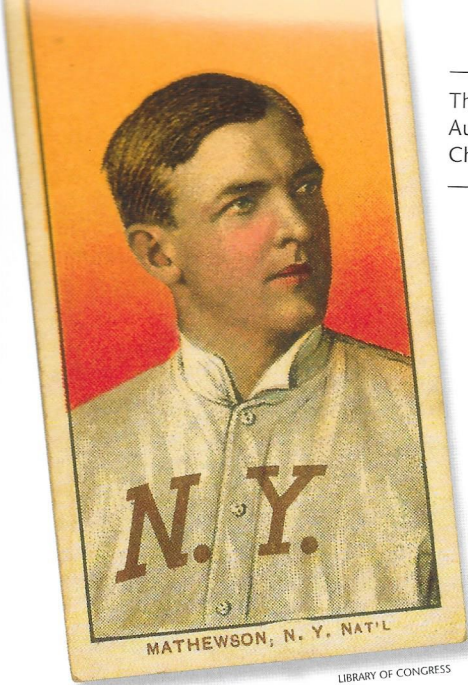
Returning home, Christy Mathewson rejoined the New York Giants in 1919 as a coach, but suffered from fatigue, constant bouts of coughing, recurring fever, and considerable weight loss. His once-handsome face became pasty, the deep blue color of his eyes lost their glow, and the dominating frame that once intimidated batters appeared shrunken. He retired to his handsome five-bedroom cottage in the Highland Park section of Saranac Lake in upstate New York's Adirondack Mountains, but spent most of his time

in a nearby sanatorium. He returned to baseball as president of the Boston Braves on February 20, 1923, but his illness doomed him. Work and travel fatigued him, forcing long periods of rest. On the morning of October 7, 1925, consumed by fever and barely able to talk, the forty-five-year-old Mathewson called his wife Jane to his bedside. "It's nearly over," he whispered. "I know it and we must face it. Go out and have a good cry. Don't make it a long one. This is something we can't help." He died later that day.

Mathewson's death caused tremendous sadness across the nation. The Washington Senators and Pittsburgh Pirates wore black armbands in his memory during the 1925 World Series. He was given a funeral befitting a hero. Sportswriters eulogized him in prose and poetry making him larger than life itself. "Matty's spirit and inspiration was greater than his game," wrote Grantland Rice, New York's legendary baseball writer. "He was one of those rare characters who appealed to the millions through a magnetic personality, attached to a clean, honest and undying loyalty to a cause."

In 1936, Mathewson became a charter inductee in the National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown, New York, along with Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Honus Wagner, and Walter Johnson. His thirty-seven victories in 1908 still stand as a modern National League record. (Pennsylvania native Ed Walsh pitched forty wins in 1908 for the American League's Chicago White Sox.) Mathewson's three-shutout pitching performance against the Philadelphia Athletics in the 1905 World Series has never been duplicated.

Mathewson's legend continues to capture the imagination of the sporting world a century later. His example as a gentleman-athlete helped elevate the game of baseball to spin off into the larger culture and his likeness appeared on advertisements and baseball cards. Because of his popularity, his character, and the courageous battle he waged against tuberculosis, he set a standard for all athletes. In the process, Christy Mathewson became America's first sports hero. 



The third Saturday of every August, Factoryville celebrates Christy Mathewson Day.

Travel tips

Christy Mathewson holds a special status as a native son of Pennsylvania. Born and raised at Factoryville, Wyoming County, in the scenic Endless Mountains, he is honored by his hometown each year on the third Saturday of August. Festivities of **Christy Mathewson Day** include a parade, a six-kilometer foot race (in honor of Mathewson's nickname, "The Big 6"), a chicken barbecue, games, and numerous family activities. A bronze statue honoring the Hall of Fame pitcher has been erected in the community's **Christy Mathewson Park**, located on Seamans Road. For more information, telephone the Factoryville Borough Office at (570) 945-7484, or e-mail admin@factoryville.org.

In nearby LaPlume, Lackawanna County, is the present-day **Keystone College**, where Mathewson attended preparatory school and played ball. The college's Miller Library contains an archives of personal items chronicling Mathewson's baseball career, including major league contracts, a black flannel uniform he wore in 1912, his World War I military uniform, scrapbooks detailing his career, and an especially poignant photograph of him and his only child, Christy Jr., who was later killed in a gas explosion at the age of forty-four. To make an appointment to visit the collection, telephone Kate Dempsey Jones, director of advancement programs, at (570) 945-8169 or e-mail kate.jones@keystone.edu.

A collection of Mathewson artifacts is also held by the Ellen Clarke Bertrand Library of **Bucknell University** in Lewisburg, Union County, where he attended college from 1898 through 1901, leaving after his junior year to play professionally. The university's **Christy Mathewson-Memorial Stadium** seats thirteen thousand spectators and includes an eight-lane, all-weather track and grass-like artificial playing field for football and lacrosse. At the main entrance to the stadium is the **Christy Mathewson Memorial Gateway**, erected in 1928 and presented to the university by organized baseball in memory of the beloved Hall of Famer. The university has also named him to its Athletics Hall of Fame. Mathewson is buried in the small college town at **Lewisburg Cemetery** overlooking the green fields of the Bucknell campus, where he spent the happiest years of his life. To learn more, telephone Bucknell University at (570) 577-2000 or visit www.bucknell.edu on the web.

In 1998, the **Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission** (PHMC) installed a state historical marker honoring Christy Mathewson near Keystone College as "one of the first five players in the Hall of Fame (1936)" and "as a gentleman in a rough-and-tumble baseball era." To learn more about the marker program, as well as numerous public history initiatives sponsored by PHMC, visit www.phmc.state.pa.us.

William C. Kashatus, Paoli, is a regular contributor to Pennsylvania Heritage.

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