

Pride of the Yankees

by **Bill Kashatus**

On July 4, 1939, more than sixty thousand fans packed New York's Yankee Stadium to honor one of the greatest baseball players of all time. A corps of newspaper reporters and photographers crowded in to capture the historic moment, and the first baseman's past and current teammates gathered to pay him tribute. The guest list read like the starting line-up of an All-Star game—Babe Ruth, Bill Dickey, Tony Lazzeri, and Joe DiMaggio—men who had captured the hearts and imaginations of every youth who ever dreamed of becoming a major leaguer.

Showered with gifts and praise from manager to bat boy, Lou Gehrig reached for a handkerchief and, fighting back tears, made his way to the microphone. Cap in hand, Lou scanned the crowd of well-wishers and then began to speak: "Fans, for the past two weeks you've been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth." A hushed silence engulfed the stadium. Cameras flashed. Memories flooded minds, and grown men wept unabashedly for a childhood hero.

"I've been in ballparks for seventeen years and I never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans." The Yankee slugger spoke surprisingly clearly, without notes—straight from the heart. After recalling the close friendships he had made during his professional career, Lou attempted to place his remarkable life in perspective: "When you have a father and mother who work all their lives so that you can have an education and build your body, it's a blessing. When you have a wife who has been a tower of strength and shown more courage than you dreamed existed, that's the finest I know. . . . I might have had a bad break but I have an awful lot to live for."

Later that year the Yankees retired Lou's uniform number 4—making him the first player in history to receive that honor—and the Baseball Writers Association waived an eligibility rule so that they could elect Gehrig to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Two years later, at the age of thirty-seven, Lou Gehrig died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), the disease that today bears his name.

Little did the world realize that during his long and stellar career the adored Yankee hero, whose courageous farewell speech has been called "baseball's Gettysburg Address," had openly wept when he lost games and had lived in constant fear that his talent would desert him.

Henry Louis Gehrig was born on the upper East Side of



New York City on June 19, 1903, the son of a handyman and a domestic. Gehrig's German immigrant parents hoped that he would go to college to become an architect. But Lou had different ideas. After starring on the baseball diamond for the High School of Commerce, he earned an athletic scholarship to Columbia University, where he caught the eye of Yankee scout Paul Krichell. Years later Krichell recalled that the young slugger was "a tremendous youth, with powerful arms and terrific legs." Comparing him to Babe Ruth, Krichell swore that Gehrig was "a kid who can't miss making the big leagues." Krichell was indeed correct.

Lou signed with the club in 1923 and went on to become "the Pride of the Yankees" for the next seventeen years. At six feet and two hundred pounds, he possessed a muscular physique that enabled him to become the premier clean-up hitter in the American League. Year in and year out Gehrig hit the ball with power, batting more than .300 and almost always driving in more than one hundred runs. Gehrig's performance made the Yankees perennial winners; during his career his team won the pennant seven times and captured six world championship titles. Gehrig's ten home runs, thirty-five runs batted in, and .361 batting average in World Series competition still rank among the very best performance records in the history of the Fall Classic.

Together with Babe Ruth, who hit third in the Yankee line-up, Gehrig laid the foundations for the Yankee Dynasty of the late 1920s and 1930s. This pair of sluggers formed the most devastating one-two punch in professional baseball at the time, making the 1927 Yankees arguably the best team ever to play the game. But while the two stars' statistics were comparable, their personal dispositions could not have been more opposite.

Ruth was outgoing, boisterous, even vulgar at times. He was a big spender known for his womanizing; a man who loved to be the center of attention. Gehrig, by contrast, was modest and reserved to the point of shyness. A loyal husband and devoted family man, he was frugal with his money. Although his salary peaked at \$39,000 in 1938, it didn't come close to the \$80,000 Ruth commanded one year during his prime. Despite being the highest-paid player of his day, Ruth often threatened to hold out for more money, whereas Gehrig's devotion to the game and his loyalty to the Yankees prevented him from asking for a cent more than management offered to pay him.

Ruth overshadowed Gehrig both on and off the field.

And yet the younger ball player apparently accepted his subordinate position without envy or resentment. "I'm not a headline guy," he once said. "I'm just the guy on the Yankees who's in there every day. I'm the fellow who follows the Babe in the batting order. If I stood on my head, nobody would pay any attention."

Despite Ruth's flamboyance and the many home runs he earned, Gehrig claimed one record that Ruth couldn't touch—the most consecutive games played. From June 2, 1925 until May 2, 1939, Lou Gehrig appeared in every game the New York Yankees played—2,130 games in all—a record that may never be broken. His ability to shake off injuries, illness, and even, in the last season of his career, the crippling disease that ultimately claimed his life, earned Gehrig the nickname "Iron Horse."

But when he began the 1939 season with a .143 batting average, it became clear to Gehrig that he had to bench himself "for the good of the team." Never had there been a player more dedicated than was Lou to the Yankees. Few understood the rarity of such a player; fewer still understood the tragedy that was about to unfold.

That June, at his wife Eleanor's insistence, Gehrig underwent a week-long series of tests at the famed Mayo Clinic. The verdict, doctors informed her on Gehrig's thirty-sixth birthday, was that Lou suffered from ALS, and that he had only two years to live. Eleanor refused to tell her husband the dire news, though he eventually realized he was dying. Tragically, though the disease was painless, it attacked the central nervous system, slowly rendering Gehrig physically incapacitated; he remained fully aware of his plight to the bitter end.

During the last years of his life Lou lost nearly complete control of his reflexes. Still, he agreed to serve as a New York City parole officer in the hope of "giving something back to society." The Iron Horse lost his battle with ALS on June 2, 1941, dying at home in Riverdale, New York.

Perhaps the most fitting tribute to Gehrig came from a Yankee teammate who said that "Lou was always a gentleman, the kind of person you'd like your son to be." Fifty years after his death, Gehrig's personal integrity, dedication, and humility continue to serve as an inspiration to American youth. ★

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