

# A race around the bases: McGwire and Sosa chase title

By William C. Kashatus

If, as Hall-of-Famer Ted Williams claims, hitting a baseball is the single hardest feat in sports, imagine how difficult it is to hit a home run.

Consider what happens as a batter steps up to the plate against a pitcher like Curt Schilling, glaring down from a small hill 60 feet 6 inches away. Schilling releases his fast ball — 5 ounces of cowhide clocked at 90 miles per hour. It reaches home plate. The sweet spot of the bat — an area about four inches long — must meet the ball an eighth of an inch below the center to give it height and backspin. A quarter-inch too high or too low, .03 seconds too early or too late, and he has to settle for a foul ball, a pop-up, a ground out, or even a complete miss.

Hitting a home run, the true measure of a ballplayer's brilliance, is a science that depends upon much more than brute strength. It takes exceptional hand-eye coordination, quick wrists, and timing — abilities that have been bestowed upon an individual at birth. You either have them or you don't. That is why the home-run hitter evokes such awe and excitement. With one swing of his bat, he can decide a game or a season.

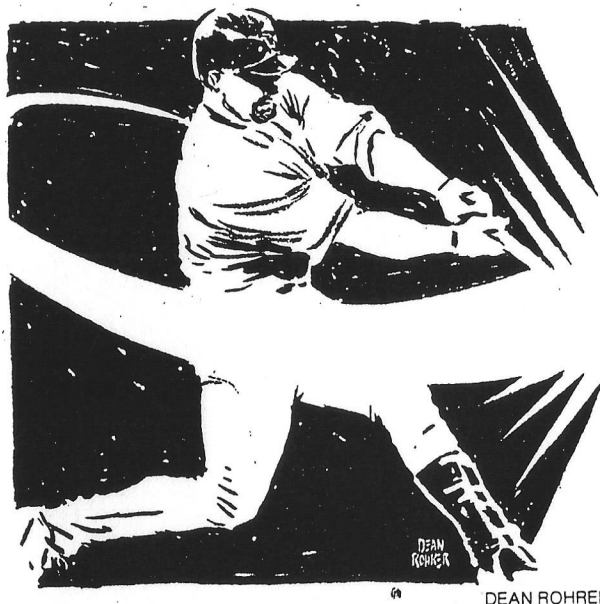
Since the beginning of the lively ball era in 1920, Babe Ruth of the New York Yankees set the standard for home-run hitters. He hit 60 in 1927 — a record that stood for 34 years until Roger Maris, another Yankee, broke it with 61 in 1961.

This season, Maris' record is being chased by Mark McGwire of the St. Louis Cardinals and Sammy Sosa of the Chicago Cubs. They

are as different in personality as their home-run swings, and each enjoys certain advantages in his pursuit of the record.

McGwire is the favorite at this point with 51 home runs as of Friday afternoon. At 6'5" and 250 pounds, "Big Mac's" muscular but compact stroke generates towering, prodigious shots that travel well over 500 feet. Afterward, he jogs around the bases with his head down, almost apologetic for showing up the pitcher. It's no affectation, either.

McGwire is an extremely modest man who has to be forced out of the dugout to take a curtain call and avoids the media glare, mostly because it



detracts from his commitment to the team. A gentle giant with a bright red goatee, McGwire wept last year while announcing at a news conference that he'd be donating \$1 million a year to child abuse charities.

At 34, he enjoys the distinction of being the only player in history to compile 400 home runs in fewer at-bats than Ruth. His 58 homers last year were the most in a single season since Maris set the record in '61. If he can stay healthy over the grueling 162-game season — which means taking care of a chronic back problem — then he will be the first to break a record.

Most of this season, Sosa has been the less favored in the race. At age 29, he is still maturing as a hitter. His 36 home runs ranked him among the National League's top 10 last year, but his 174 strikeouts set a Cubs record and ranked first in the league. Like McGwire, he plays hard, and he plays every day. Sosa's quick wrists and sweeping swing allowed him to break the major league record for most homers in a month with 20 in June. The fact that he plays his home games in hitter-friendly Wrigley Field should help him add many more round-trippers to his current total of 49.

These two hitters represent as great a reflection of contemporary baseball as you will find. For a game blessed with diversity, it is appropriate in this magical season that a white and a Hispanic enjoy the opportunity to break one of the most cherished records of all. Who will it be? Stay tuned.

William C. Kashatus' latest book is *Connie Mack's '29 Triumph: The Rise and Fall of the Philadelphia Athletics' Dynasty*.

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