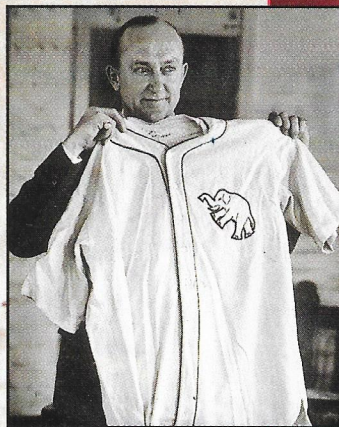


# COBB'S LAST STAND

Having all but written baseball's record books during 22 seasons with the Detroit Tigers, Ty Cobb returned to the game for one last hurrah.

*by William C. Kashatus*

NEW YORK TIMES CO./ARCHIVE PHOTOS



BASEBALL GREAT Ty Cobb once declared that "the only cure for Philadelphia is to blow it up." Now, on the evening of February 8, 1927, the Philadelphia chapter of the Baseball Writers' Association was welcoming Cobb to their city with a banquet at the Hotel Adelphia. Cobb had retired the previous year after 22 seasons with the Detroit Tigers, including six as player-manager. On this night, however, the nearly 800 guests expected him to announce that he would return to baseball with the hometown Athletics.

Seven weeks earlier, the Associated Press had confirmed rumors that shocked the baseball world—Cobb and Cleveland Indians player-manager Tris Speaker were under investigation for allegedly conspir-

CORBIS/BETTMAN/UPPI



ing to fix a game in 1919. Both men steadfastly maintained their innocence. While Cobb's violent temper and no-holds-barred style of play had earned him enemies throughout the American League, few thought him capable of such chicanery. Even New York Yankee Babe Ruth, one of Cobb's staunchest foes, dismissed the scandal as "a lot of bull." Ruth declared, "I've never known squarer men than Cobb and Speaker." On January 27, Commissioner of Baseball Kennesaw

Mountain Landis cleared both players of any wrongdoing.

Cobb wanted further vindication and he wanted it on his own terms. He was also eager for another shot at a World Series title. He had played in three Series early in his career, but none since 1909. The 40-year-old outfielder decided to play another season, and American League clubs began bidding for his services. Realizing that the Athletics were among Cobb's top choices, Philadelphia's sportswriters

flocked to their annual banquet, anticipating his decision to play for the A's.

BY 1927 BASEBALL HAD ENTERED a new era. Cobb, who had begun his career with the Detroit Tigers in 1905, represented the best of the "Dead Ball" era, the early years of the century when teams counted on the fundamentals—bunts, base hits, sacrifices, and stolen bases—to manufacture runs. It was a thinking man's game in which teams played for the lead and relied on their pitching and defense to keep it. Cobb had won 12 batting titles and would ultimately steal a record 892 bases—including 35 steals of home.

But the game was changing. After 1910, when the league's standard ball was given a livelier cork center, powerful sluggers such as Ruth began swinging for the fences. In 1927 the "Bambino" would hit a once unheard of total of 60 home runs. The best-known power hitter of Cobb's era, Frank "Home Run" Baker, never hit more than 12 home runs in a season. Cobb seemed out of step with the times. While he was undoubtedly slowing with age, however, the "Georgia Peach" continued to prove that his style of play was effective in any era. In 1926, his last season with the Tigers, Cobb batted .378 and drove in 102 runs.

AT THE BASEBALL WRITERS' BANQUET in Philadelphia, Cobb stepped before the eager gathering and declared himself "happy beyond words to tell you that I will play next season for the Athletics." The crowd rose to its feet and applauded wildly for nearly 10 minutes. When the cheering subsided, Cobb told the crowd that he wished he "had come to Philadelphia while I still had a little more spring left in my legs, when I could go out on the field knowing just what I could do. But I'll be out there, you can depend upon it, giving my best."

*Left: In 1909, Cobb earned the enmity of A's Manager Connie Mack and Athletics fans when he slashed third baseman Frank Baker's hand while hook-sliding into third base during a game at Bennett Park. Above, left: After nearly 20 years of mutual animosity, Cobb and Mack came to respect each other in the City of Brotherly Love. Opposite: Even as his career was winding down, the aging*



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It was a strange twist of fate. Widely regarded as the greatest hitter in the game, Cobb was a fierce competitor whose abusive personality endeared him to almost no one. He had feuded with the Athletics and their fans for most of his career, starting in 1909 when, in the heat of a pennant race, he spiked As third baseman Frank Baker. Connie Mack, the team's legendary manager, was so angered by the incident that he campaigned to have Cobb thrown out of the league. Calling Cobb a "back-alley-artist," Mack declared that he "wouldn't let him play for me if he did it for nothing." A few angry Philadelphia fans sent the hated Tiger anonymous death threats when he was in town, while others carried placards showing Cobb with a knife protruding from his chest. The passage of time and the prospect of having Cobb on their own team, however, had changed the minds of Mack and most Philadelphians.

Shortly after signing an Athletics contract worth more than \$70,000, Cobb admitted that he and Mack had long been bitter enemies. "But I believe that

Mr. Mack is also the symbol of everything decent in the game," he added. "He deserves to be on top again if any man ever did. And I'll break a leg or an arm, I'll do anything to win for him this summer." Mack was just as flattering in his praise of Cobb, whom he called "the greatest ballplayer who ever lived" and charitably described as "very much misunderstood by the fans."

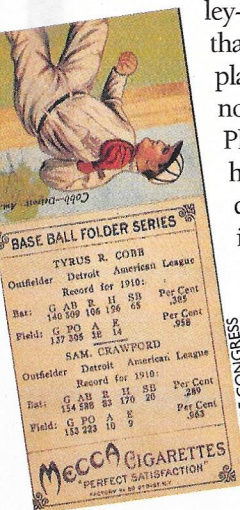
Mack was no idle flatterer. Known as "the Tall Tactician" for his knowledge of the game and exceptional ability to manage players, Mack's impeccable professional disposition made him the paragon of managers at a time when the game was riddled with scandal, intemperance, and rowdiness. He emphasized team commitment rather than individual statistics. Dressed in a three-piece business suit and sporting a straw skimmer, Mack cut a dashing figure at the edge of the dugout, waving his trademark scorecard to skillfully position his outfielders. He had built a baseball dynasty in Philadelphia that brought the city World Series championships in 1910, 1911, and 1913. By 1927 though, the 66-year-old Mack was struggling to build another winner.

The 1927 Philadelphia Athletics were one of the most cantankerous and colorful teams in baseball history, a combina-

The roster of the 1928 Philadelphia Athletics included seven future Hall of Famers: Cobb, Tris Speaker, Eddie Collins, Jimmie Foxx, Mickey Cochrane, Lefty Grove, and Al Simmons. Opposite: Cobb takes a practice swing in 1928—his last season in the big leagues. Inset: Connie Mack, who managed the Philadelphia franchise for more than 50 years, was one of a handful of managers who preferred a suit to a uniform.

tion of seasoned veterans and youngsters who shared an intense hatred of losing. Among the top prospects were Lefty Grove, a hot-tempered pitcher who tore through the clubhouse laying waste to lockers, water coolers and, on occasion, a teammate or two when he lost; outfielder Al Simmons, who worked himself into a homicidal rage against pitchers before going to bat; Mickey Cochrane, an irascible catcher who could be found weeping or butting his head against the dugout wall after a tough loss; and Jimmie Foxx, an up-and-coming power hitter whose towering blasts earned him the moniker "Beast." This crop of rising stars inspired an almost religious devotion among Philadelphia's demanding baseball fans.

Sensitive to Cobb's combative personality and his managing experience with the Tigers, Mack tried to make him feel



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more comfortable by signing some of the legendary Georgian's contemporaries. Mack brought second baseman Eddie Collins, the cornerstone of the city's first championship dynasty, back to Philadelphia. When Mack dismantled the Athletics in 1915, Collins had gone to the Chicago White Sox, where he starred in the 1917 World Series and was one of the Chicago players uninvolved in the 1919 "Black Sox" game-fixing scandal. Also joining Cobb on the A's was 38-year-old Zach Wheat, who had roamed the Brooklyn Dodger outfield for 18 years.

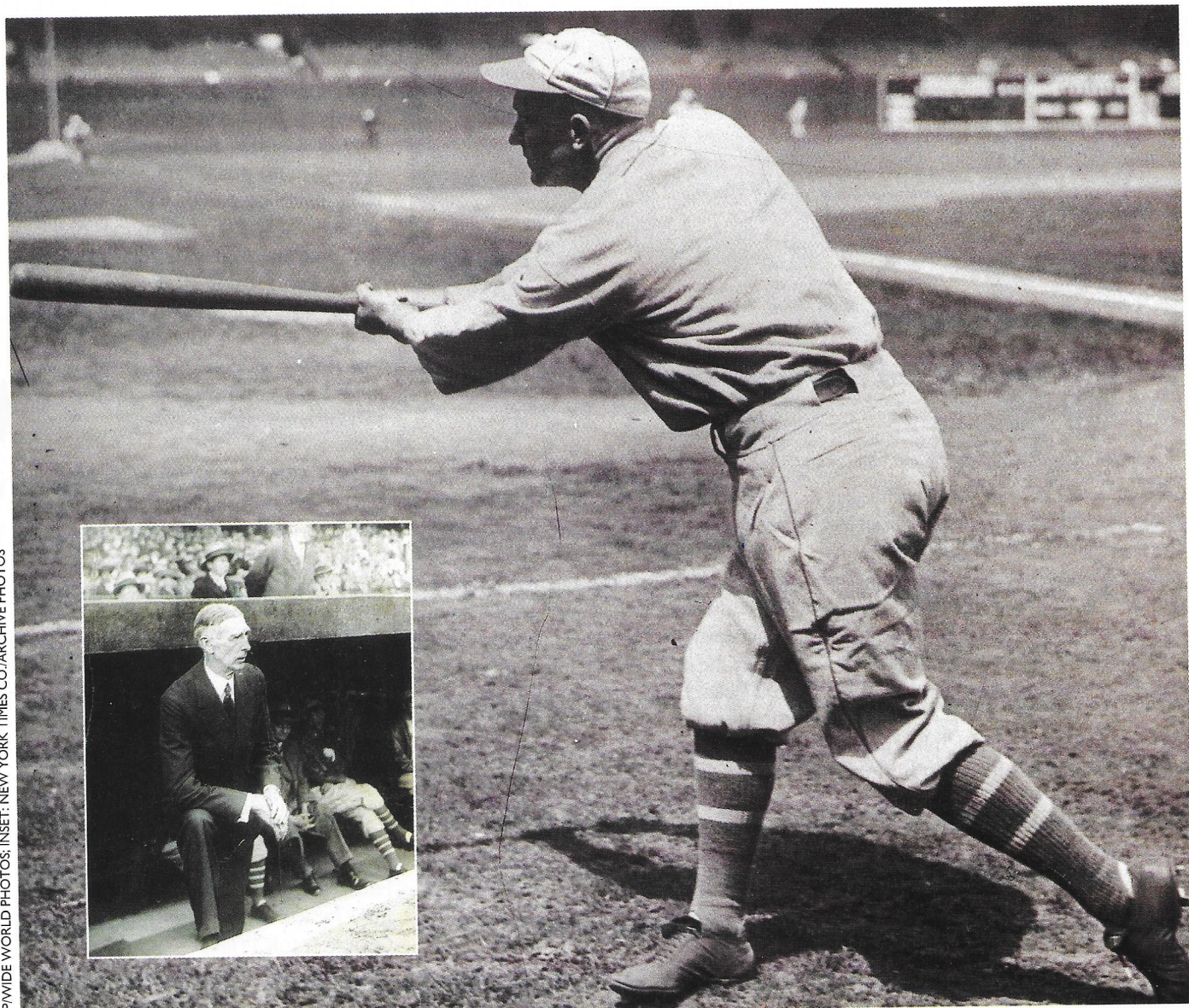
The A's opened spring training camp in Fort Myers, Florida, with great enthusiasm. Cobb assumed the role of mentor, offering young outfielder Al Simmons tips on playing the outfield and tutoring Jimmie Foxx on how to discipline himself at the plate rather than swinging for the fence every time.

Baseball pundits were curious to see if Cobb would second-guess Mack, especially in the positioning of players. Cobb soon learned, however, that his new manager knew the game inside-out, and he never hesitated to follow orders. By the time the A's broke camp, the graybeards and youngsters had performed with such an exceptional blend of power, speed, and intelligence that some sportswriters were predicting a pennant winner.

Cobb opened the season with as much passion as ever, hitting at a .400 clip and fielding his position flawlessly. Though he had slowed down, he was every bit as aggressive on the base paths. Trailing the Boston Red Sox 7-3 late in a game at Philadelphia's Shibe Park, the Georgia Peach stretched a single into a double. On the next pitch he stole third. Relief pitcher Tony Welzer was then

brought in. Welzer ignored Cobb as he edged off third base. As the Boston pitcher swung into his delivery, Cobb took off for home. His hook slide beat the catcher's tag, making the score 7-4. In the ninth inning, with the score tied at 8-8, Cobb knocked home the winning run with another double.

Facing Boston again a week later, Cobb came to bat in the eighth inning with the Red Sox leading 3-2. Cobb drove the first pitch over the right field fence for an apparent home run. As he began his trot around the bases, however, home-plate umpire Emmett Ormsby ruled the ball foul and called him back. On deck, an angry Al Simmons suggested loudly that Ormsby was blind. Cobb didn't appear to contest the decision, but once he stepped back into the batter's box he took a liberal practice swing that caught the umpire on the shoulder.





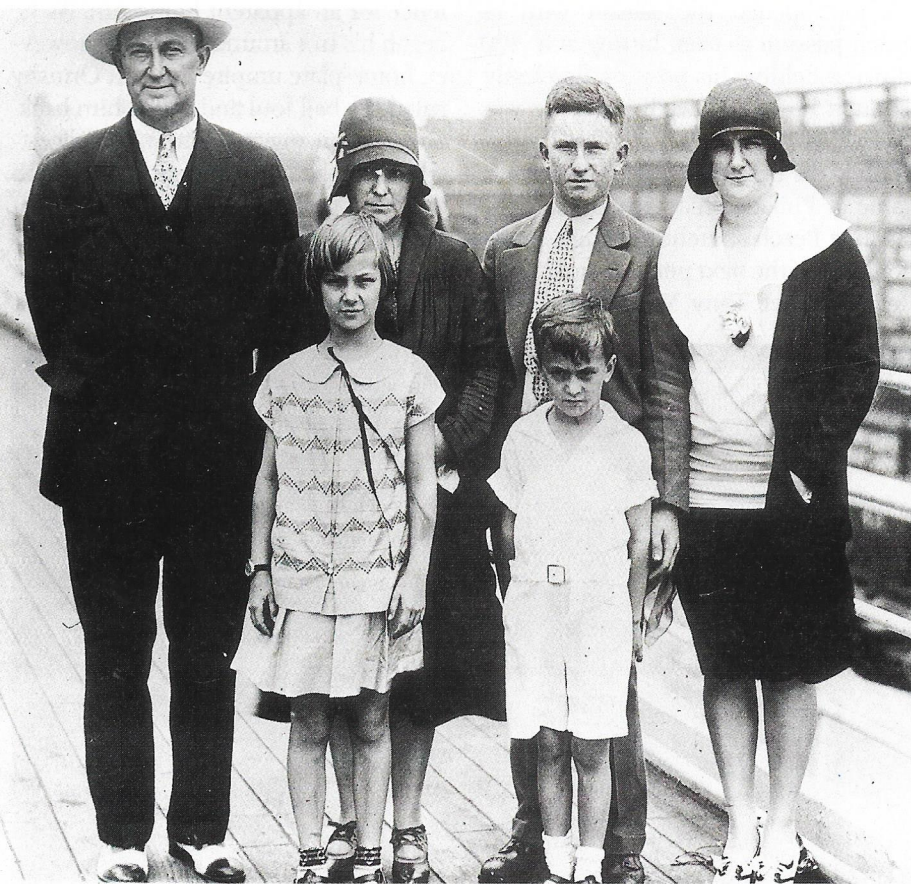
Ormsby and Cobb had clashed in the past, and the umpire believed Cobb hit him intentionally. He angrily ejected Cobb. The fuming A's star responded by shoving and striking the umpire, setting off a bottle-throwing riot in Shibe Park. American League President Ban Johnson, another of Cobb's long-time adversaries, subsequently suspended him and Simmons for their roles in the incident. When he returned to the lineup the following week, Cobb went on a 21-game

They eventually finished the season in second place, 19 games behind the Yankees, who set a new American League record with 110 wins and established themselves as the greatest team of all time. Still, the A's had gained respect.

Mack credited his aging outfielder for his team's second-place finish. Cobb drove in 93 runs, stole 22 bases, and batted .357, fifth best in the American League. Declaring that he "never handled a finer baseball man," Mack paid

sarcastic manner. Cobb cared for his wife, Charlie, and their five children, but his dedication to baseball and determination to be the best took its toll on his familial relations. At a time when many players cheated on their wives, Cobb remained faithful to his marriage vows, and pampered Charlie with the finest clothing and furniture money could buy. Yet when Charlie lay in a hospital bed shortly before the start of the 1928 season, her husband left her side to take his place in right field on opening day. Years later, Cobb's daughter Shirley recalled, "Mr. Cobb would line up us children like soldiers, review our school grades and piano playing—then he'd be gone for months. We never knew him except as a great man. We were afraid of him—afraid of his awful temper."

A demanding parent, Cobb was particularly disappointed in his oldest son Tyrus Jr., who passed up baseball in favor of tennis. Ty Jr. struggled with his studies in school, and his relationship with his father remained cold far into his adulthood. Jimmy, the youngest son, described his father as a "strict disciplinarian who was sparing in his praise" and who pressured all of his children to do well in school. Yet Jimmy also had fond memories of his father "playing catch with [him] in the backyard" and "tucking all the children in at night." The senior Cobb also reveled in his son Herschel's love for baseball and was deeply saddened when the boy injured his eye, preventing him from ever playing competitively.



CORBIS/BETTMAN-UP

Cobb, pictured here with family members after the close of his career, was as difficult to deal with off the field as on. Towards the end of his life he seemed to realize his own failings. "Joe," he told his longtime friend, comedian Joe E. Brown, "I do indeed think I would have done things different. And if I had, I would have had more friends."

hitting streak during which he smacked his 4,000th career hit against his former team in Detroit.

While the A's were shaping themselves into a contender, they still could not catch the New York Yankees. By July 4, the pennant race was over. The Yankees had been in first place from the first day of the season and by July the A's found themselves floundering in fifth

Cobb an additional \$15,000 and promised to retain his services for 1928.

Cobb's batting eye was still sharp, but as he approached the age of 42, his battered and scarred legs were shot. Having practically written the league's record books, he had nothing left to prove. The 1927 campaign had given him the vindication he sought, and his lucrative baseball contracts and success in the stock market assured that he would always live comfortably. Still, Cobb could not so easily let go of the game to which he had dedicated most of his life. He told Connie Mack that he would return for the 1928 season.

OFF THE FIELD, COBB'S FAMILY also had to deal with his turbulent disposition, and

ONCE AGAIN, IN AN EFFORT TO make Cobb feel more comfortable, Mack signed one of the outfielder's contemporaries, his friend Tris Speaker. The move paid off. With Cobb, Speaker, and Collins, Mack now had three former managers on his team to blend with his young talent. Lefty Grove anchored a capable pitching staff, while Mickey Cochrane and Jimmie Foxx led the way with their bats. Cobb continued to deliver in the pinch, but he was becoming a defensive liability. Beset by failing legs and an assortment of injuries, Cobb, like Speaker, found himself unable to catch up to fly balls, and Mack reluctantly replaced him in the line-up with 25-year-old George "Mule" Haas.

Though he admitted that playing was



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**COBB'S LAST STAND**

*continued from page 42*

increasingly painful for him, Cobb hated sitting on the bench. He was frustrated by younger players who seemed indifferent to his advice. Joe Hauser, one of the A's promising young power hitters, felt that Cobb was personally jealous of his success. "He came up to me in spring training and offered to help me with my hitting," the A's first baseman later recalled. Batting .400 early in the season, Hauser didn't think he needed Cobb's hitting tips. "By June," Hauser recounted, "my average had slipped to the .320 mark, so I began listening to him. Nothing I did was right for him. He told me to change my grip, my stance, my swing—everything! A month later my average dropped to .260 and I was riding the bench. I never spoke to that S.O.B. again!"

Cobb, now restricted to pinch hitting and an occasional starting role, still managed to add to his unprecedented career totals during his final season. He remained a fierce competitor whenever he got the chance to play, and continued doing anything to win. He intimidated opposing infielders and pitchers with threats, though he inspired less fear than he used to. In a game against New York, Cobb hit a long drive to right center. He rounded first base, roared past second, and headed for third. On the way, the Yankees' rookie shortstop, Leo Durocher—an intense competitor in his own right—gave him the hip, knocking Cobb to the ground. He was easily thrown out at third base. Getting to his feet, Cobb turned on Durocher, cursing him.

According to Babe Ruth, both Cobb and Durocher refused to back off. "If you ever do that to me again, I'll cut your legs off!" Cobb threatened. Durocher laughed at him. "Go home, Grandpa," he said, "you might get hurt playing with us young guys."

No one had ever dared to speak to Cobb that way, certainly not a rookie. Cobb started to say something, but Durocher interrupted. "Listen, Grandpa," he said, "you're not going to cut off anybody's legs. You've gotten away with murder for a lot of years, but you're through, see? I'll give you the hip every time you come around my way, and if you try to cut me, I'll ram the ball right down your throat." Dizzy with rage, Cobb started after the loudmouthed

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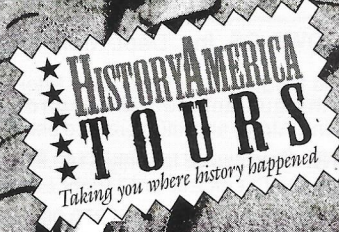
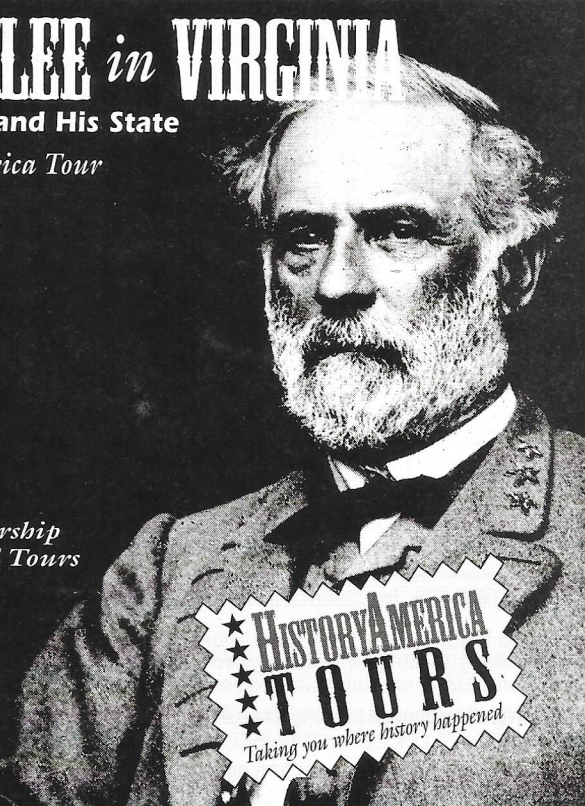
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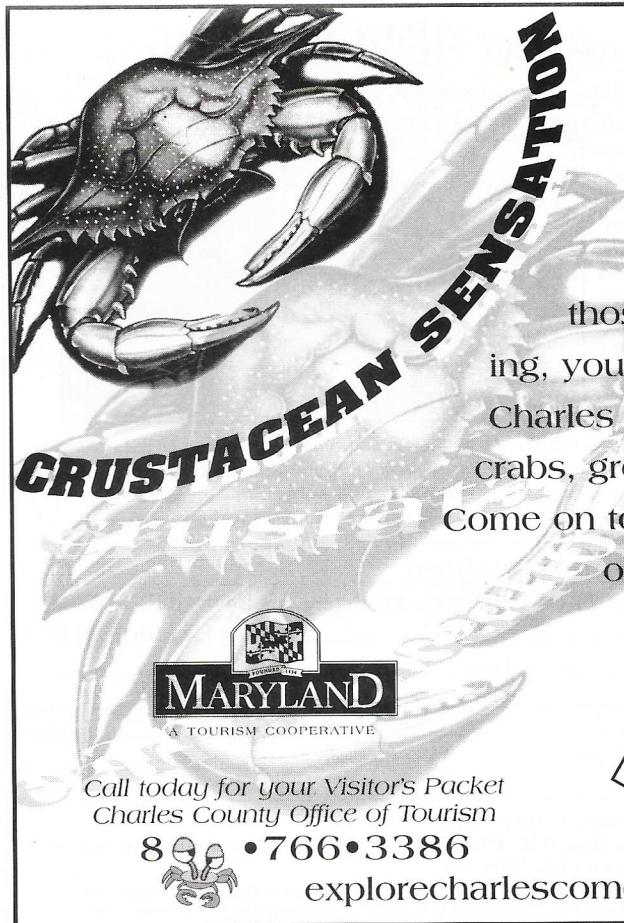
rookie, and the benches emptied. Cobb was eventually dragged from the bottom of the pile and ejected.

Off the field, Cobb remained a loner. Nursing countless aches and pains and trying to conserve his energy, he spent most of his time in his hotel room, reading and unwinding to classical music. "I'd stay in bed until almost noon the next day," he admitted. "I would breakfast in bed, entertain from my bed, and handle my outside business affairs from a bedside telephone. Only when it was time to leave for the park would I rise and dress."

Cobb's final major league appearance came against New York at Yankee Stadium on September 12, 1928. It was the last of a climactic four-game series that would determine the 1928 pennant. Cobb pinch hit in the ninth inning for third baseman Jimmy Dykes. After popping out to Yankee shortstop Mark Koenig, Cobb trotted toward the dugout and into the history books. He finished his career with a lifetime batting average of .367, still the highest in the history of the game. But after 24 years in baseball, Cobb realized that the time had come "to get out of the game and play with my kids before they grow up and leave me."


The A's finished the 1928 season in second place, but they would go on to capture the American League pennant for the next three years. Connie Mack had finally built himself a second championship dynasty. For Cobb, the A's success was bittersweet. While he had redeemed himself in the eyes of his critics, the World Series had eluded him.

Cobb's retirement triggered countless testimonials to his ability as well as his personality. The *New York Evening Post* probably expressed these sentiments best in bidding "farewell to the most admired, envied, and hated of ballplayers." In retirement Cobb lived the life of a country squire, playing golf, hunting, and traveling widely. He continued to reap a fortune through his investments in Coca-Cola, General Motors, and other companies, and was particularly gratified to be the first man elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1936. But the past weighed heavily on Cobb, and retirement was not easy for him. His efforts to purchase a major league team were repeatedly frustrated by grudge-bearing league officials and his own refusal to pay for the contracts of players he considered "stiffs." At home he



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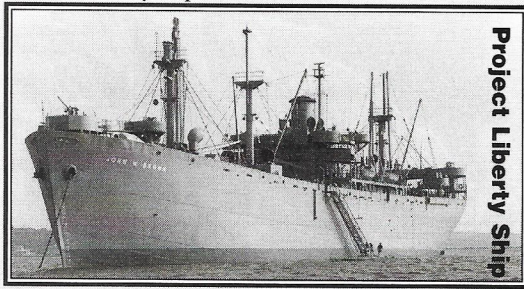
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became increasingly difficult to live with. Between 1931 and 1939, Charlie filed for divorce, and subsequently changed her mind, on three separate occasions. She finally followed through in 1947, charging "extreme cruelty from the date of marriage to the present time." Shortly after, Cobb was devastated by the sudden deaths of two of his sons, Ty Jr. of a brain tumor, and Herschel of heart failure. He began drinking more, which only worsened his disposition. Cobb remarried in 1949, but that relationship ended in divorce seven years later.

Cobb mourned missed opportunities. He tried to make up with his former enemies, corresponding regularly with old ballplayers and sportswriters. He became a generous philanthropist, donating \$100,000 to build a hospital in his hometown of Royston, Georgia, and another \$100,000 for a fund to provide college scholarships for needy students in the state. Subsequently, all the money he earned from writing and paid public appearances went to those two projects. Nonetheless, Cobb's reputation as the most ruthless and mean-spirited player in baseball history endured.

"I never saw anyone like Ty Cobb," famed New York Yankees and Mets manager Casey Stengel said in 1975. "No one even close to him as the greatest all-time ballplayer. That guy was superhuman, amazing." Off the field, however, Cobb was merely mortal. Near the end of his life, suffering from prostate cancer as well as diabetes and a weak heart, Cobb confided to a sportswriter. "When you get older," he said wistfully, "you just wish for companionship. I've always been a loner. I guess I'll die that way." It was a sad but prophetic statement from a remarkably talented but combative man. On July 17, 1961, the 74-year-old Cobb died alone in an Atlanta hospital. ★

William C. Kashatus is the author of *Connie Mack's '29 Triumph* (MacFarland and Company, 1999).



For more about the history of baseball, read "Henry Aaron Remembers," by Bryan Ethier.

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