

FOREWORD

This is a baseball book. It is for the common fan and aficionados. It has a central figure, a unique player and record-setting slugger named Fred “Cy” Williams. From Notre Dame University and with a professional degree in Architecture, we follow Cy’s path to the “Big Leagues.” This book explains how Major League Baseball (MLB) is different today compared to the 1910s and 1920s, two of the most exciting and “gold-gilded” decades of baseball.

It is about the biggest change ever created in The Game...not a rule change...when in 1920 MLB went from using a dead ball to a live ball in games. It was a manufacturing change. The new ball traveled faster and farther. Early on it was called the “rabbit ball.”

Visually, you will see the impact of the change through the use of graphs, from the Dead Ball Era to the Live Ball Era. Cy’s long career from 1912 to 1930 owned a unique balance of years in each era, with only one other position player nearing his years and balance. You will see how MLB changed through Cy’s statistics as well as through other players of the day.

To suggest that Cy Williams is the most unique slugger in MLB history may seem like a strange claim. After reading the book, you will have a better understanding of why the claim has validity. It is based on the combination of how many years he played in both eras, on what he accomplished in setting MLB and National League (NL) home run records and other unique records, on his speed in the outfield, on how he got into the game, on the handicap he faced, and on what he gave to the game regarding ethics and dedication. Some things centerfielder Cy accomplished back then are remarkable even today.

Compared to his peers at the time, and given the sorry ownership circumstances he played under in Philadelphia, Cy’s baseball career accomplishments could be considered both unique *and* astounding. He claimed four NL home run crowns, one with the Cubs and three with the Phillies. Even more staggering is that **for 11 seasons he placed either**

first, second or third in home runs versus his peers in his league. Only Babe Ruth (American League) and Mel Ott (NL) exceeded this record, and Mike Schmidt (NL) tied it. Remarkable! These records still stand.

Perhaps more than any other player of the decades, Cy's career is most uniquely positioned to relate the impact of the re-manufactured ball to the modern day game. Only Max Carey had similar years. However, Cy was a genuine slugger, and herein lies the story.

There is a dark side as well to this uniqueness theme, and it is about how horribly Cy was treated by the Phillies owner, William Frazier Baker of New York City. It is unlikely that there ever has been any other player in MLB history who has experienced such egregious, personal unsportsmanlike treatment from an owner.

The University Of Notre Dame invited Cy to attend starting in 1909. There he surprisingly became a track star at the elite national level, especially excelling in the high and low hurdles, long jump, and somewhat in speed events such as the 100 and 220 yard dashes. Baseball became his trump suit. Knute Rockne, of football fame, and Cy were friends. Gus Dorais, the famous and inventive "forward pass" quarterback, was once his roommate. You will find Fighting Irish stories in these pages, one or two maybe never known before. With talent in design and art, Cy graduated with a professional degree in Architecture. Not bad for a guy who slipped in from Wadena, IN, a farm community of 60 residents and a two-room school house.

Cy's eulogy of Rockne, his friend and teammate, is precious.

When he went into MLB directly from college, up to that point Cy was one of very few college graduates to play in the big leagues. He may have been the first as a true graduate, however the records are unclear. There is some certainty that, *uniquely*, he was the first to play MLB and hold a professional degree. (George Sisler, with a mechanical engineering degree from the University of Michigan, came in later).

After a clever recruiting story, Cy first played with the Chicago Cubs for six years and then with the Philadelphia Phillies for 13 years. He actually played for the Cubs between his junior and senior years at Notre Dame

in 1912, forgoing a chance to compete in the Stockholm Olympics. He then rejoined the club after his graduation in 1913. In his 19-year career, always in the National League, eight were in the dead-ball era and 11 were in the live-ball era.

His trade to the Phillies, unwanted by Cy, may be the worst trade ever made by the Cubs, even worse than the Lou Brock trade.

Whether it is about the original and most severe “Williams Shift,” or how he played under 14 managers (still a record), or why he never argued a call by an umpire, or how it was that he was a star that never played on a winning team for 16 straight years--just really bad teams all during the 1920s--so many aspects underscore his *uniqueness*.

Outside of The Game, in his private life, Cy showed tremendous creativity and effort. He faced huge challenges, near-death experiences, family tragedies, and he faced personal and business bankruptcy three separate times. Yet Cy persevered and was truly respected by all, not just in his baseball years, but through his whole life. The tall, thin, “Long Cy” as he was called, “the reserved, purposeful gentleman” seemed always to give more than he took.

In 1916, while with the Cubs, Cy and his remarkable wife, Vada, bought land in Three Lakes, Wisconsin, an idyllic and rugged place in the far north reaches of the state. There he created a dairy farm which provided milk to the locals; he added sheep and potatoes. The famous sports writer Grantland Rice had a role in advising the purchase. While with the Phillies, he was called upon to help save the local Three Lakes Bank. He did save it, but at the cost of the death of a five-day-old son.

Herein are stories, observations, opinions, and some statistics. Baseball chatter thrives on statistics. However, my goal here is to present something very readable and understandable for the common fan. I am not an “aficionado” of baseball statistics. The ones I present I will explain. I am a common fan. Yet maybe there is an item or two here for the aficionados to chew on.

Cy was the National League’s first great home run hitter starting in the 1920s. He had already achieved one home run crown in the dead-ball era. He would go on to collect three more crowns (1920, 1923 and 1927), the

second-most of any player in the NL in the '20s. He remains the oldest player ever to win a league home run crown, getting it done at age 39. The first player in the NL to achieve 200 clouts (Ruth was first in the American League), Cy was the NL leader at his retirement with 251 career home runs. Rogers Hornsby would later eclipse his record.

You will see references to The Game, the big picture of the sport of baseball at all levels. I will provide my take on why the MLB Commissioner must carry out a vital role in order to maintain the highest level of integrity for The Game.

You will read about our society and the times as we enter each of the two decades, so as to gain a good perspective of how MLB fit into the bigger scheme of life of the day. At the end of the book I present some observations and opinions based on my experiences and research about sports and Major League Baseball back then and today. I expect that some subjects will stir controversy.

You will find a section titled, "Then and Now," which explains how MLB was the same and different in the 1910s and 1920s compared to today. I also bring in matters of ethics as a theme, including Cy's confrontation with famous Architect Frank Lloyd Wright. There are stories, quotes, and other featured players. Hopefully there will be something for every reader to enjoy. However, every reader will want to keep in mind that since 1900 there have been nearly 20,000 MLB players. Percentage-wise, very few played the game for 19 or more years, and few reached the success level achieved by Cy Williams.

There is no intentional bias to what I bring to you. I lived with Cy and Vada, my grandparents, for three summers while working on Cy's construction crews to support my college costs. We talked a little baseball, not much. I was a White Sox fan then, Brewers now. If only I had known to ask more questions about his baseball years, to probe a bit, and to have recording sessions. In retrospect, I truly missed an opportunity. I am sure that if I would have known intelligent questions to ask, Cy would have been gracious with me. However, he was not one to sit me down and tell me about his stardom.

A final point: Cy was reserved in manner, though do not think of him as

being a wallflower. Reservedly, he would allow himself some limelight. He was driven more by his limited, mostly simple personal needs and the larger needs of others who were dependent on him, such as teammates, family, employees, and the community. My take is that Cy was driven to be exceptional not for fame but rather for excellence.

The format of the book makes it easy to read some, set it down, and pick it up again later. Take your time.

Enjoy the read!

-- Gary Williams

As you make your way through the stories, text and clippings, notice how much of the baseball lingo, which flourishes today, had roots 100+ years ago.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some form of attribution is given whenever possible, which is not often. Many newspaper clippings had the references to authors, dates, and publications cut off. I still used them. Photo attribution was also a common problem. For these, statistics and general helpers, I give recognition in "To Acknowledge."

Originally there were three large scrapbooks kept by Cy's wife, Vada. I saw them. Two were destroyed after Cy's death, supposedly in a garage fire while in the possession of a woman who had represented herself to Vada as being from the Wisconsin State Historical Society. Doubtful... and quite a loss. One had a telegram to Cy from former President Teddy Roosevelt congratulating him on getting three home runs in a doubleheader (dead ball era). What a keepsake lost.

Yes, some aspects of this book may seem like a scrapbook... with a salting of intrigue.

Researching was difficult yet enlightening. I appreciated the many knowledgeable people who came forward to help and encourage. Yet going after "stuff" that is 100 years old is like hopping across ice flows in search of a polar bear.

Also note that the book's primary focus is on the National League, the senior circuit, where Cy played his whole career.

Glossary is on page 471