

Did Babe Ruth really ‘call’ this legendary home run?

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HISTORY & CULTURE

Legend goes that the lefthanded slugger of the New York Yankees predicted he would hit a homer in the 1932 World Series against the Chicago Cubs.



Renowned New York Yankee slugger Babe Ruth during a season opener at Yankee Stadium. During his 22-year career, Ruth finished with 714 home runs—including his

apocryphal "called shot" home run during the 1932 World Series that is still hotly debated today.

Photograph by Bettmann, Getty

By Dave Kindy

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It is one of those moments that is etched in history forever.

In the 1932 World Series, Babe Ruth of the New York Yankees was at the plate, facing pitcher Charlie Root of the Chicago Cubs. With two strikes and the score tied 4-4 in the fifth inning, the slugger pointed toward center field. He then proceeded to whack the next pitch over the ivy-covered brick wall at Wrigley Field and rounded the bases for a home run. It proved to be the game-winning hit, giving the Yankees a 3-0 Series lead.

But is that really what happened?

Many think so, including an unidentified purchaser who recently spent more than \$24 million on the jersey Babe Ruth wore for the "Called Shot," as that impressive feat became known. The gray Yankees uniform top with his name stitched on the inside sold at auction on August 25 to "become the world's most valuable sports collectible," according to Heritage Auctions.

(What exactly is a Yankee?)

However, others are not so sure Ruth was actually predicting he would hit a homer. They think the legendary lefthanded slugger might have been indicating something else. "The 'Called Shot' remains one of the most enduring stories of the Ruth legend," says John Thorn, official historian of Major League Baseball. "Why is America still fascinated with this athlete, who retired nearly 90 years ago?"

Perhaps the legend of the "Called Shot" lives on because Ruth himself was a larger-than-life personality and talented player who could do things like no one else on a baseball diamond. Bombastic, colorful, and extremely gifted, he lived a lavish life as the game's highest-paid player, yet reportedly existed on beer and hotdogs. And he was still able to hit moonshot homers.



Does this illustration show Babe Ruth predicting where he was about to hit a home run in the 1932 World Series—or is he pointing at his hecklers in the opposing team's dugout? We may never know for sure, but that hasn't stopped anyone from having opinions.

Illustration by Transcendental Graphics, Getty Images

A called shot—or a warning to hecklers?

What exactly happened that fall day in Chicago is open to debate. Ruth told several versions about what he did during that at-bat.

Initially, Ruth stated he was pointing at the Cubs bench, which had been heckling the immortal ballplayer, to indicate he still had one strike.

Thorn explains that the Cubs players had been razzing Ruth throughout the game as part of an ongoing dispute between the clubs over Mark Koenig's share of his World Series bonus.

(How the first pitch became baseball's Opening Day tradition.)

Koenig had been a Yankees shortstop until he was traded mid-season to the Cubs. Because he had only been with the team half a year, Chicago players voted him a half share of the postseason money. Many Yankees were not pleased. Ruth reportedly hollered “Cheap bums” at the Cubs bench during Game 1 of the World Series, which got the Windy City players jeering back.

But in a subsequent interview with Movietone News, Ruth changed his story, saying he was indeed indicating that he would smash one out of the park:

“Well, I looked out to center field and I pointed. I said, ‘I’m going to hit the next pitched ball right past the flagpole.’ Well, the good Lord must have been with me.”

So what really happened?

Let’s take a look at the tape

One witness who believed Ruth predicted the homer was the late Supreme Court Associate Justice John Paul Stevens. In a 2010 The New Yorker article, he remembered what he saw as a 12-year-old fan attending the game at Wrigley Field:

“Ruth did point to the center-field scoreboard. And he did hit the ball out of the park after he pointed with his bat. So it really happened.”

After the ball cleared the wall, Chicago Cubs shortstop Billy Jurgens also thought Ruth had signaled he was planning to hit a home run. Then he spoke with his teammate, catcher Gabby Hartnett, who was standing next to the slugger when he made the gesture.

“Gabby Hartnett told me that the Babe said, ‘Well, that’s only two strikes,’” Jurgens recounted in a 1994 interview—which would seem to support the argument that he was signaling to the Cubs bench that he still had one strike left.

Film of the historic at-bat is inconclusive, however, showing Ruth raising his arm with two fingers extended. Was he pointing to center field, responding to Chicago criticism, or something else?

We may never know for sure. What is known are the prodigious statistics of George Herman Ruth, who retired in 1935 and was one of five players automatically selected to initially enter the then-new Baseball Hall of Fame in 1939.

During his 22-year career, the Sultan of Swat finished with 714 home runs—a record that stood for 39 years—as well as a .342 batting average, 2,214 RBI, 2,873 hits and 2,174 runs. Epic numbers, by any standard, especially for someone who learned to play baseball at reform school.

“Babe Ruth had ascended to the level of myth long before he died, starting with ‘poor boy makes good,’ then living his life like a king among mere mortals, but also ascending heights in the game previously unimagined, changing it forever,” Thorn says. “I recall telling my eldest son bedtime stories about Ruth’s exploits, which at some point elicited, ‘Wait ... you mean he’s real?’”

