

The Babe in San Diego

George Herman Ruth, world's greatest baseball player, came into our midst on the noon train today slanting one eye at his traveling bag and the other at the overcast sky. "Low visibility," quoth the Babe. "But if the raindrops will stay away for a short time I guess I can get the range and park a few baseballs on the far side of your famous stadium."

--San Diego Tribune, October 29, 1924.

The most celebrated player in baseball history was a frequent visitor to San Diego. "Babe" Ruth made several trips to the city as an exhibition ballplayer, performed in a local theater show, and for time, even considered building a home in La Mesa.

Ruth first visited San Diego on December 28, 1919, only two days after his famous sale to the New York Yankees by the Boston Red Sox. Already a prolific home runner hitter at age 24, Ruth had finished the 1919 season with a record 29 home runs, a mark he would improve repeatedly in the following fifteen years as a Yankee.

Ruth's visit was the first of many "barnstorming" tours he would make across the country following the end of the regular major league season. The games were hugely popular in every town, where Ruth and fellow big leaguers played with local amateurs. Batting exhibitions preceded each contest, ensuring Ruthian home runs, even when the Babe failed to hit one out during a game. Many games never finished because fans tended to swamp the field in the late innings to meet their hero up close.

In the Sunday afternoon game at the City Stadium (later known as Balboa Stadium) Ruth's "All-Stars" beat a San Diego amateur team 15-7. Ruth (an outfielder for the Yankees) played first base where he "bungled a couple" of chances, according to a *Tribune* reporter. But he redeemed himself in the ninth inning when he delivered what the crowd of 6,500 had come see: a home run that "soared and sailed like a shot" an estimated 400 feet.

Ruth returned to San Diego five years later, near the finish of a fifteen city tour. The weather had been rainy on October 29, 1924, but a "liberal supply of sawdust in the wet spots" made the field playable. Nearly 3,000 fans braved the chilly breeze at City Stadium, paying 75 cents for adults, 25 cents for children under 12.

In the pre-game warm-ups, Ruth and his Yankee teammate Bob Meusel put on a home run clinic, driving several balls into the concrete stands. Reporters noted that "Ruth has a very peculiar



stance at the plate, and certainly takes a terrific ‘cut’ at the ball.” In the game itself, Ruth had four hits and no homers but his team beat the “San Diegos” 10-6.

Between innings “hundreds of youngsters” swarmed the bench to get Ruth’s autograph on “a baseball, card, or piece of paper.” A reporter noted that Ruth played the entire game with a pencil behind his ear, “ready for instant use.”

The Babe made a winter visit to San Diego in 1927 to work a one-week vaudeville engagement at the Pantages Theatre on Fifth and B Streets. The week of January 10, Ruth performed three shows a day, giving hitting demonstrations and performing a skit that celebrated his recent baseball feats. Each show concluded with the Babe’s invitation to kids to come on stage and receive autographed baseballs.

Apart from his three-a-days at the Pantages, Ruth kept a hectic leisure schedule in the company of friends: playing golf at the Coronado Country Club, duck hunting on Sweetwater Lake, and deep sea fishing off Point Loma. Ruth also found time to purchase a La Mesa home site in the new Windsor Hills tract on the southern slope of Mt. Nebo. Ruth decided to hold the lot for investment purposes, being “sold” on San Diego.

The January visit had a strange epilogue. When Ruth traveled to Long Beach for another vaudeville show he was met by sheriffs’ deputies and arrested. A warrant was served for violating child labor laws in San Diego.

A zealous Deputy State Labor Commissioner, Stanley Gue, accused Ruth with making children a part of his act at the Pantages without obtaining required work permits. A second violation charged him with keeping the children on stage after a 10:00 p.m. curfew. Ruth posted \$500 bail and departed for New York. The next month a San Diego judge dismissed the charges and ridiculed Commissioner Gue for demanding licenses for children “to step up onto a stage to get a free baseball.”

Under happier circumstances Ruth returned to San Diego in October. The slugger had just finished a triumphant Yankee season with a World Series title and a new record of 60 homers—a mark that would stand for 34 years.

The Babe’s visit came near the end of a nine-state, twenty-one city tour. On this trip he was joined by the Yankees rising young star, Lou Gehrig. Babe wore a tour uniform of all black with white lettering emblazoned “Bustin’ Babes.” Gehrig’s white uniform was lettered in black with “Larrupin’ Lou’s.”

In the October 28 game sponsored by the American Legion, Ruth’s team beat Gehrig’s 3-2. Competition for souvenir baseballs hit by the “Homerun Twins” was fierce. “Every time that Ruth or Gehrig cracked one off the diamond, it was a signal for hundreds of the youngsters to make for the spot on the run, and then would follow a free-for-all struggle for possession of the prized agate.”

Ruth's last appearance in San Diego was witnessed by 3500 fans. The afternoon game was called on account of darkness at the end of the seventh inning. The fans were satisfied. "There were no home runs hit," the *Union* reported with regret, "but the two Yankee sluggers gave a mighty account of themselves just the same."

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