

## INTRODUCTION

His speech was a baseball moment that had nothing to do with playing. It was baseball's Gettysburg Address.

—Marty Appel, baseball historian

*Fans, for the past two weeks you've been reading about a bad break. Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth. I've been walking into ballparks for seventeen years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans. Mine has been a full life. Newspapers have said nice things about me, which I found hard to believe myself. When you look around, wouldn't you consider it a privilege to associate yourself with such fine-looking men as are standing in uniform in this ballpark today? Sure, I'm lucky. Who wouldn't consider it an honor to have known Jacob Ruppert? Also, the builder of baseball's greatest empire, Ed Barrow? To have spent six years with such a grand little fellow as Miller Huggins? To have spent the next nine years with that master psychologist, the greatest manager in baseball today, Joe McCarthy? And when you have the privilege of rooming, eating, playing cards, and knowing one of the greatest fellows that ever lived, my roommate, Bill Dickey. When the fellows from across the river, the New York Giants, a team you would give your right arm to beat, and vice versa, sends a gift, that's something. It's something to be remembered by a rival organization. When the groundskeepers and office staff and writers and old timers and players and those boys in white coats all remember you with trophies, that's something. When*

*you have a mother-in-law who takes sides with you in squabbles against her own daughter—that’s really something. When you have a father and a mother who work all their lives so that you can have an education and build your body, it’s a blessing. When you have a wonderful wife who has been a tower of strength show more courage than I ever dreamed existed—that’s the finest thing I know. So I close in saying that I might’ve been given a bad break, but I’ve got an awful lot to live for. Thank you.*

The man in baggy pinstripes stared plaintively down at the Yankee Stadium turf, like a hitter facing long odds with a game hanging in the balance. Like a man facing death. The illusory focus of Lou Gehrig’s awkward gaze, his eyes descending, face grim, was something dark, like the mood of the 61,808 fans in attendance that day, July 4, 1939, as the fabled New York Yankees, who would win the World Series that season, prepared to take on the lowly Washington Senators in the second game of a doubleheader.

As noir author Mike Roscoe proclaimed in the title of his book, death is a round black ball, and Gehrig knew plenty about round balls—white ones with red seams, each representing new hope as it zoomed toward his sizzling bat at high speed. After all, in seventeen seasons as a major-league ballplayer, he had swatted plenty of balls around various major-league parks: 2,721 of them for hits, 534 for doubles, 163 for triples, and 493 for home runs. Gehrig’s lifetime batting average of .340 ranks sixteenth on the all-time list of major-league career leaders.

In sports parlance, Gehrig was a “baseball great,” except for that 1939 season when something went terribly wrong and he relegated himself to the Yankees bench en route to hitting an unfathomable .143—that, after driving in 114 runs the previous year.

On the nation’s 163rd birthday, Gehrig had come to a place where he didn’t want to be: Yankee Stadium. He stood at a spot where he didn’t want to stand: near home plate. He spoke to a crowd whom he didn’t want to address. Those listening didn’t want to hear what their hero had to say, either, not on that day. For Gehrig—the Iron Horse, Larrupin’ Lou, Buster Pants, Locomotive Lou—had come to say goodbye, to a Hall of Fame career, to the fans who had supported him since the year that Yankee Stadium opened, to his cherished teammates, and effectively to life itself. On that day he was facing a round, black ball.



Figure I.1. Lou Gehrig at Columbia University, ca. 1923. Columbia University.

Though dressed in familiar Yankees pinstripes with the number four blazoned on the back, surrounded by celebratory bunting and looking fit enough to start the afternoon game at first base, Gehrig would not play baseball again; he was replaced at his position by Babe Dahlgren, who decades later would die in Arcadia, California, my hometown. As he stood at home plate surrounded by members of the legendary 1927 Yankees as well as his contemporary 1939 teammates, some of the game's most accomplished on-field executives, and other dedicated Yankees employees,

with trophies and gifts propped delicately at his feet, Gehrig, the idol of New York, faced a veritable death sentence. He had 698 days to live.

Those generous remembrances fit the man, the event, the mood. They included a silver service set from Yankees management; two silver platters and a silver pitcher from the Harry M. Stevens company, the ball club's concessionaire; a fishing pole and assorted tackle from the team's ushers and employees; a silver loving cup from the team's office staff; a pair of silver candlesticks and a fruit bowl from the crosstown rival, the New York Giants; a tobacco stand presented by the Baseball Writers' Association of America, several of whose members covered the team; scrolls from fans of the Washington Senators; a parchment from the Old Timers Association of Denver; a ring from Dieges & Clust, the makers of Gehrig's 1927 and 1936 World Series rings; and, perhaps most meaningful to the slugger, a silver trophy graced with an eagle, presented by Gehrig's teammates. Inscribed on the trophy were the names of each player along with a poem written by sportswriter John Kieran of the *New York Times*, a favorite scribe of Yankees players and Gehrig's neighbor and close friend. The poem, requested by Gehrig's roommate, Dickey, read,

To LOU GEHRIG

We've been to the wars together;  
 We took our foes as they came:  
 And always you were the leader,  
 And ever you played the game.  
 Idol of cheering millions,  
 Records are yours by sheaves;  
 Iron of frame they hailed you;  
 Deckerd you with laurel leaves.  
 But higher than that we hold you,  
 We who have known you best;  
 Knowing the way you came through  
 Every human test.  
 Let this be a silent token  
 Of lasting friendship's gleam  
 And all that we've left unspoken.  
*Your Pals of the Yankee Team.*<sup>1</sup>

Gehrig stood uncomfortably, hands clasped in front of him, toeing the dirt back and forth with his cleats, probably wishing the ground below

would open up and collapse around him in a maw. As the revered slugger fought back tears, Babe Ruth, like Gehrig once a feared cog in the Yankees' famed Murderer's Row and a former roommate of his, spoke to the crowd, as did New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia, Postmaster General James A. Farley, and Yankees manager Joe McCarthy. Gehrig had indicated beforehand he did not wish to address the fans, and as sportswriter Sid Mercer, master of ceremonies for the event, told the restless crowd that Gehrig was too emotional to speak, it appeared as though the slugger's wish would be honored. As fate would have it, that wouldn't be the case. In this singular instance, swept up in emotion by a crowd that wanted to hear his voice, many for the first and last time, Gehrig became the unluckiest man on the face of the earth.

Those in the crowd had something entirely different in mind than Gehrig had. Rising to their feet, they began to wave fedoras and chant loudly in unison for their hero to speak. On that day, despite the emotion that wrung his soul, Gehrig *had* to speak—and his manager, McCarthy, a veteran of the Yankee wars, knew as much—for the ages. McCarthy prodded his star, patting him gently on the back and offering words of encouragement in an effort to steer the big first baseman toward the microphone against the player's wishes. McCarthy, who had earlier told the crowd “it was a sad day” when Gehrig told him he was quitting baseball,<sup>2</sup> succeeded. So, jaw clenched, chewing on a stick of gum likely provided by his usual supplier, team trainer Earle V. “Doc” Painter, rubbing his eyes, and speaking without the notes he had penned just the night before, Gehrig composed himself and began to talk, ever so reluctantly but with the same command and intensity he had exhibited on the baseball diamond so many times throughout his memorable career—until May 2, that is, when he broke the bad news to McCarthy that he was through, a decision that made more sense when the Mayo Clinic revealed to the Yankees seven weeks later that Gehrig had developed amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Gehrig's speech was simple, eloquent, touching, memorable—and miraculous, given the emotion and futility that were etched on his face, pained but still youthful.

Watching from behind the Yankees dugout was his wife, Eleanor, who was seated with Gehrig's parents; her brother, Frank; and the wives of Yankees executive Ed Barrow and manager McCarthy. They were joined by *New York Daily News* reporter Rosaleen Doherty, who wrote that despite people openly sobbing all around her, Eleanor remained composed.

“I'm glad Lou was able to walk out there and make his little talk over the microphone,” Eleanor said. “I knew he wouldn't let the fans down.”<sup>3</sup>

After Gehrig finished his “little talk” and the crowd began to cheer for what seemed like an eternity, Ruth walked over and embraced his teammate, then said something that made him smile. For Gehrig, there would be few smiles during his final 698 days.

Eighty-four years later, what Gehrig said in his farewell speech remains to us as a paraphrase. There is no transcript, no complete sound recording exists, and only a snippet of film was preserved. The film that exists captured seventy short words, among them the most memorable ever uttered in a sports theater: “Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth,” a phrase that former Yankee Irv Noren, who played with the club from 1952 to 1956, put into unique perspective shortly before his own death. “It’s pretty neat that he was able to say that in front of a lot of people who believed him,” said Noren, who made the American League All-Star team in 1954, fifteen years after Gehrig retired. “I consider *myself* the luckiest man because although I’m ninety-five I still remember things.”<sup>4</sup> Noren died three weeks later.

The rest of Gehrig’s heart-rending oratory was compiled from news dispatches that varied by sportswriter; it encompasses 334 words, shorter than a letter home. Shorter than a codicil.

As speeches go, his “Luckiest Man” discourse was classic Gehrig—sweet, humble, incontrovertible in its message and simplicity. Only eighty-four words longer than the Gettysburg Address, it has withstood the test of time. Few speeches have resonated as poignantly. President Abraham Lincoln’s battlefield oration, delivered in South Central Pennsylvania on November 19, 1863, did. So did President Franklin Roosevelt’s Pearl Harbor address to Congress on December 8, 1941. And Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, presented in Washington, DC, on August 28, 1963. In the history of sports, no speech reverberates more resoundingly than Gehrig’s brief dialogue.

Henry Louis Gehrig was born on June 19, 1903, at 1994 Second Avenue in an Upper East Side section of Manhattan known as Yorkville. His parents were Heinrich and Christina Gehrig, German immigrants who had moved to the area shortly before their son was born. From the beginning the Gehrigs strove to ensure that their young boy would succeed, although his father had difficulty finding employment as a metal worker. That, combined with the senior Gehrig’s chronic ill health, made things challenging for the Gehrig family, and Mrs. Gehrig eventually took on miscellaneous jobs, including cooking for wealthy New York residents, laundering, and house cleaning, in hopes of balancing the household budget;

she also managed the family home, more so after her husband became disabled. Although facing other difficulties along the way, including the deaths of Lou Gehrig's unnamed infant brother and two young sisters, the family somehow managed to survive.

The Gehrigs moved several times after the future ballplayer's birth, eventually residing at Amsterdam Avenue and 170th Street near a ballpark where the old New York Highlanders, predecessor to the Yankees, played. From his earliest days the boy was inundated with sports, including football, gymnastics, soccer, and, of course, baseball. While his father insisted he strengthen his body, Lou Gehrig's mother demanded their son receive a good education. He accepted both of their good wishes and hoped to become an engineer.

"You must study," Mrs. Gehrig said.<sup>5</sup>

"He must play, too," Mr. Gehrig added.<sup>6</sup>

While her husband continued to struggle at times, Mrs. Gehrig was committed to making sure that their boy received an education, which he did. After attending Public School 132, he enrolled at the High School of Commerce in 1917, where he excelled in athletics—especially baseball and football. At first he declined to play on the baseball team because he was shy about appearing in front of crowds. However, with encouragement from his coach, the youth finally gave in and agreed to play. He was positioned at first base after demonstrating control issues as a pitcher and a lack of coordination in the outfield.

Despite those shortcomings, it was at Commerce, established the year before Gehrig's birth, where people first began to recognize his ability to play baseball, especially after he led his team to the New York State Baseball Championship and the inter-city championship game in Chicago. Gehrig's ninth-inning grand slam during the final game in the Windy City sewed up the title for Commerce, resulting in a tumultuous reception when the players returned home to New York by train. By virtue of his momentous home run, Gehrig, whose family had by then moved to 2079 Eighth Avenue in the same Yorkville neighborhood, was all everyone talked about, and the reception was his first intersection with fan adoration.

After graduating from the High School of Commerce in 1921, Gehrig attracted the attention of the New York Giants, who offered him a tryout that he eventually failed despite hitting six consecutive home runs. He was down and nearly out, but the indomitable Gehrig recovered and continued forging ahead with his new dream, that of becoming a professional baseball player.

Setting baseball aside at least for the moment, Gehrig enrolled at Columbia University in 1921 under a football scholarship. The fit was a good one, as Gehrig's parents were employed, according to varying accounts, at either the Sigma Nu or Phi Delta Theta fraternity on campus, Mr. Gehrig as a handyman and his wife as a cook; while in high school, the younger Gehrig helped out during dinners. In fact, a fraternity brother who remembered Gehrig as his graduation from Commerce came into view was instrumental in securing his enrollment at the Ivy League school after learning of the young man's prowess as an athlete. Once there, Gehrig played fullback on the football team, showing excellent form. He also joined the baseball team as a pitcher and first baseman, once striking out seventeen players in a game and earning the sobriquet "Columbia Lou." Gehrig was so good in college that he drew the attention of a Yankees scout, and in April 1923—the same month that Yankee Stadium opened—the team signed him to his first professional baseball contract. For nothing more than autographing a piece of paper, something he would do often over the subsequent seventeen years, Gehrig received a \$1,500 bonus—significant spondulix during the Roaring Twenties, and his family's ticket out of Yorkville. The future Larrupin' Lou was on his way.

After signing with the eventual Bronx Bombers, Gehrig left college in 1923 and joined the Yankees' minor-league club in Hartford, Connecticut, playing in the Eastern League. It was there that he hit a lofty .304 during his only season in the minor leagues—good enough to earn him a trip up to the big leagues.

"We were mighty short on infielders in those days," the big first baseman modestly said years later, intimating it was that shortage that enabled him to reach the major leagues.<sup>7</sup> It was not.

His early seasons in the majors were disappointing, even though his statistics—although sparse—were acceptable. During his first season with the ball club, Gehrig was largely used as a pinch hitter, and he performed capably at the plate, hitting well over .400 with a home run in twenty-nine at bats. His reward was even fewer at bats in 1924, when he hit .500—six for twelve. While his offense had been limited to just forty-one at bats during his first two seasons as a Yankee, by 1925 his name would for the first time enter the conversation for the American League Most Valuable Player (MVP) Award.

For Gehrig, everything was happening with head-spinning speed: a short "season" at Columbia University, an even shorter one with the Hartford Senators, then a brief learning curve with the Yankees before



settling in as a star playing alongside his heroes, including the legendary Ruth. Over the next few seasons Gehrig would mature as both a person and a player, and by 1927 he was recognized as a solid member of the feared Murderers' Row and an indispensable cog in one of the finest teams ever compiled.

In 1925, his first season as a regular position player, Gehrig hit an impressive .295 with twenty home runs and sixty-eight RBI. After that there was no holding back the quiet New Yorker: he hit .313 with sixteen home runs in 1926, .373 with forty-seven home runs in his 1927 MVP season (at that time, players were only allowed to win the award once), .374 with twenty-seven home runs in 1928, .300 with thirty-five home runs in 1929, .379 with forty-one home runs in 1930, and .341 with forty-six home runs in 1931.

“Irrespective of any other players on our club, I am the man to whom the team looks as a pacesetter,” he once said. “Every year I am told I am the hitter who must lead the Yankees to the pennant. That suits me fine.”<sup>8</sup> It is not known what slugging leader Babe Ruth thought of the comment.

Perhaps the player's greatest individual accomplishment occurred during his tenth season with the club, in 1932, when Gehrig, whom the late *Los Angeles Times* sports columnist Jim Murray once described as “a symbol of indestructibility—a Gibraltar in cleats,”<sup>9</sup> recorded the finest game of his exceptionally fine career. The game, a 20–13 drubbing of the Philadelphia Athletics in front of the A's home fans, would mark him forever as one of the greatest ballplayers the game has ever known. On that day Gehrig slugged four home runs and narrowly missed a fifth, becoming the first player in the modern era and the first in the history of the American League to achieve the feat.

There were other highlights during his long and illustrious career: two MVP awards (1927 and 1936), one batting crown (1934), a Triple Crown the same season, seven times an All-Star (1933 through 1939—the All-Star Game did not originate until its creation in concert with the Chicago World's Fair in 1933, ten years after Gehrig's career began), home-run leader three times (1931, 1934, and 1936), and RBI leader five times (1927, 1928, 1930, 1931, and 1934). At one time or another he also led the American League in hits, doubles, triples, on-base percentage, and slugging percentage.

Still, Gehrig's four-home-run game indisputably elevates him above most ballplayers of his or any other era. Ruth, who for decades was the

major-league career home run leader, never accomplished the feat. Neither did Hank Aaron, the man who surpassed Ruth, nor Barry Bonds, who succeeded the great Aaron. Others who never hit four home runs during a single game include Ted Williams, Mickey Mantle, Ernie Banks, Mel Ott, and Joe DiMaggio.

Even more important than his on-field legacy is the speech, which elevates the man to an almost mythical stature. Ballplayers have been playing and retiring from the game for 150 years, sometimes holding press conferences to announce their departure, other times delivering brief statements or press releases to announce their superannuation, and still other times making no public gesture whatsoever. Few have departed with the dignity and courage displayed by Gehrig, who likely would have preferred to avoid Yankee Stadium altogether on Independence Day 1939. After all, he hadn't played in months, the announcement of his ALS had been made, there were few expectations of him as either a player or a representative of the Yankees organization as their season reached the halfway point, and his denouement was settled. A day honoring—indeed, memorializing—Gehrig may have been the last thing he wanted as his life began to fade into immortality.

“It took a lot of courage,” said the late Yankee star Noren, Mantle's one-time road roommate. “He meant what he said.”<sup>10</sup>

A perfect man might have relished an opportunity to bid farewell to those who had supported him for so many years, but Gehrig wasn't perfect. A strange mixture of confidence and insecurity, he was frugal yet displayed great generosity when so moved. He was affable yet moody and was still closely attached to his mother, although he easily switched his devotion to the woman he would marry, the socialite Eleanor Twitchell. He wrote poignant letters, wiped away tears when his wife read passages from literature, and won a ribbon after entering his dog in a local show; the dog, named Afra, was a breed of—what else?—German shepherd. Gehrig even played the lead role in the long-forgotten movie *Rawhide*, the only true all-star in a less-than-all-star cast.<sup>11</sup>

Why did Gehrig address his speech only to the fans when others were lined up along the infield to bid him goodbye? Why did he acknowledge those whom he named in the speech, including the Yankees general manager Barrow, the owner Ruppert, former field manager Huggins, current manager McCarthy, and the catcher Dickey? Why did he acknowledge the New York Giants, of all teams? And his mother-in-law, Nellie Mulvaney Twitchell? What about the groundskeepers, office staff, concessionaires, and,

especially, the sportswriters, some of whom were less than friendly to him toward the end of his career—why were they referenced? And why did he consider himself lucky while facing a dreadful death?

The answers to those questions are inferred in responses to his death by those who either knew Gehrig or wished they had. One sportswriter described him as “the gamest guy I ever saw.”<sup>12</sup> When Gehrig passed away, a tearful Ruth, who had not been close to the slugger for several years, rushed to his home, as did a shaken Barrow. Across town, McCarthy and his players were, like Barrow, stunned and distraught. Dickey, Gehrig’s closest friend, wept. Before long, automobiles lined the street in front of the home where Gehrig had spent his dying days wasting away. As a tribute to its fallen hero, flags across New York City flew at half-staff.

For nineteen years Gehrig was a beloved Yankee—seventeen as a player and two as a casualty of life. He seldom missed a game, hit home runs when the team needed them most, and helped lead the Yankees to eight World Series titles. Then, suddenly, he was gone forever. His legacy? A preponderance of impressive statistics, one major-league record that stood for decades (most career grand slams), one American League record that still stands (most RBI in a season), one four-home-run game, twice hitting for the cycle, and a speech for the ages.

*Bronx Epitaph* is a window into Lou Gehrig’s rich, full life, viewed through the cataract of his “Luckiest Man” speech. Voiced by a player who was peerless at what he did, the speech defines the man in conflicting terms. Gehrig likely saw himself as others did: exceedingly lucky and blessed with good parents, a loving wife, limitless fame, outstanding health, a Corinthian attitude, and abilities far beyond those of most mortal men. Toward the end, however, the picture changed dramatically. After two years away from baseball, his familiarity among New Yorkers had begun to diminish, his physicality had departed, and all that was left was a shell of what Gehrig once represented—his parents, wife, and winning attitude notwithstanding. Perhaps the writer Steven Goldman put it best: “Lou Gehrig didn’t have a great deal of luck in the end.”<sup>13</sup>

Today, with that ending a part of baseball history, there’s an unmistakable certainty: the revered Iron Horse’s famous speech was one for the ages.