

THE BEST OF TIMES

With vim and verve he walloped the curve
From Texas to Duluth;
Which is no small task, and I rise to ask;
Was there ever a guy like Ruth?

—John Kieran, *New York Times*

The Roaring Twenties was a decade of ballyhoo, silly crazes, and outrageous stunts; of flagpole sitters and marathon dancers; of new games such as mah-jongg. It was a boom, boom time in America when even the impossible seemed possible. It was a time of new beginnings.

Stock market prices were zooming. Wall Street fortunes were made and made again. People became millionaires overnight, it seemed. By the end of the decade Americans were shelling out \$5 billion annually on recreation and entertainment and were spending money like never before.

Industrial production doubled in the 1920s. Hyperbole was on parade. *More* was the operative word of the times. There were more and more products, more and more cars, and more and more highways,

giving people more freedom to go more places and do more things. More and more heroes.

Twenty-three million cars were sold in the United States in 1927, one car to every 5 persons, compared to one car to every 43 persons in Britain, one to 325 in Italy, and one to 7,000 in Russia. Massachusetts became the first state to require auto insurance. Some families who lacked indoor toilets and baths owned automobiles. The Ford Model T was giving way to the Ford Model A. Construction of roads became a national priority in the United States, where one could drive on paved highways only from New York to St. Mary's, Kansas. Beyond that, until one reached the West Coast, were dirt roads often made soft by rain, where cars got stuck in the mud. Gasoline stations and rest stops were few and spread out.

Women smoked cigarettes, danced, flapped, bobbed their hair, wore skirts just above their knees, consumed bootleg whiskey in public, and had the right to vote. Gertrude Ederle swam the English Channel. Dorothy Gerber invented commercial baby food after tiring of straining the stuff at home.

It was a consumer's paradise, a time of Wonder Bread, introduced in a balloon-image wrapper, Band-Aids, Kleenex, the pop-up toaster, and the recliner. Sears launched its Craftsman and Kenmore brands.

Bloomingdale's opened in Manhattan, taking up an entire city block from East 59th to East 60th streets, from Lexington Avenue to Third Avenue. The Sherry-Netherland was the world's largest apartment building. In Coney Island, the Cyclone made its debut. The book publisher Random House was founded. In 1927 the New York-New Jersey Holland Tunnel, the first twin-tube underwater auto tunnel, began operation. Pan American World Airways launched the first scheduled international flight. The first iron lung, to help polio victims breathe, was installed at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan. The Brooklyn Museum opened, and the first automatic record changer was introduced.

In Manhattan, on hot summer nights, hundreds of East Siders slept alfresco on their fire escapes, laughing and gossiping and enjoying a breeze when it happened to come by.

An automobile tunnel was constructed stretching seven miles through the Rocky Mountains. The St. Lawrence Seaway was in the planning stage. Gutzon Borglum began drilling into the 6,200-foot mountain that would become Mount Rushmore.

Eleven-year-old Yehudi Menuhin made his Carnegie Hall debut, playing Beethoven's Violin Concerto. Calvin Coolidge Jr. was president of the United States. Italian-born anarchist immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, convicted of murder in 1921, were executed in Boston in 1927 despite worldwide protests.

New York City was the commercial and media capital of the world. At Bell Labs on West Street, television was introduced, and its pictures were sent over phone lines from Washington, D.C., to New York City. Radio brought the world into the living room. The Grand Ole Opry made its first broadcast in Nashville. Al Jolson starred in *The Jazz Singer*, the first talking film. Fox Movietone News was first with sound news film in New York City. Theaters projected moving pictures, then talking pictures into towns and boroughs across the country. Steel Victrola needles traced discs, producing simulated sound. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was founded. The first transatlantic commercial telephone service offered connection between New York and London. For \$75 a New Yorker was able to speak to a Londoner for three minutes on a transatlantic phone.

Newness, new starts, echoed the time. Duke Ellington first played the Cotton Club. The first snowmobile patent was granted. The Roxy, Royale, and Ziegfeld theaters opened in Manhattan. In 1927 "Ain't She Sweet?" was number one on the pop singles chart. Other hit songs included "Blue Skies" and "Ol' Man River." A record 270 shows opened on Broadway, including 53 musicals, such as *A Connecticut Yankee*, *Hit the Deck*, *Rio Rita*, *The Royal Family*, *Show Boat*, *Funny Face*, and *Porgy*.

A dozen shows were padlocked for being immoral or obscene. Comedienne Mae West was found guilty of obscenity for off-color material and suggestive ad libs in her Broadway show *Sex*. She was sentenced to 10 days in jail by a New York City court. The Ziegfeld Follies and George White's Scandals showcased what newspapers called

“bare-chested women.” New York City police looked the other way. When these shows toured, more clothing was supplied for the performers to cover up. Newspapers featured scantily clad favorites such as “Flapper Fanny” and “Syncopation Sue.”

Despite a failure rate of about 50 percent, the rubber condom grew in popularity. It was reported that about 2 million were put to use daily.

Babies born that memorable year of 1927 included Clive Barnes, Harry Belafonte, Geoffrey Beene, Erma Bombeck, Rosalynn Carter, Cesar Chavez, Roy Cohn, Barbara Cook, David Dinkins, Isadora Duncan, Bob Fosse, Stan Getz, Althea Gibson, Hubert de Givenchy, Günter Grass, Alan King, Coretta Scott King, Eartha Kitt, Tommy Lasorda, Janet Leigh, Robert Ludlum, Sidney Poitier, Leontyne Price, Vin Scully, Neil Simon, Jerry Stiller, Kenneth Tynan, and Andy Warhol.

Americans ate hundreds of thousands of Eskimo Pies. More than \$1.5 billion were spent on advertising, much of it designed to arouse feelings of guilt and anxiety over body odor and bad breath. The beautician became a recognized professional. In 1927, 18,000 income-tax payers listed themselves as beauticians.

Josef Stalin became the undisputed ruler of the Soviet Union. Adolf Hitler held the first Nazi meeting in Berlin. In New York City and in grim small towns across America, workers labored long and hard under horrible conditions in sweatshops.

Despite Prohibition, which forbade Americans to engage in commerce in hard liquor, beer, or wine, all were readily available in ample supply. It was said that Prohibition doubled the amount of drinking outlets in New York City and that there were tens of thousands of speakeasies. “Scarface” Al Capone became the country’s biggest bootlegger, making many millions from illegal liquor sales, the protection racket, gambling, and prostitution.

Charles Lindbergh was given a grand ticker tape parade on his return from Paris after his solo, nonstop transatlantic flight that began on Long Island, New York. In Harlem, dancer Shorty Snowden—inspired by the headline “Lindy Hops the Atlantic”—named his dance step the Lindy Hop.

William Randolph Hearst's twenty-two newspapers, published in fifteen cities, had a daily circulation of 3.5 million, reaching 4 million on Sundays. New York City had 18 daily newspapers in the 1920s. The *New York Daily Mirror* was a morning tabloid first published in 1924 by the Hearst organization to compete with the *New York Daily News*, the most widely circulated newspaper in the United States. The *News* had begun in 1919 as the first picture newspaper, one that sports fans loved. In 1923, the year Yankee Stadium opened, the circulation of the *News* moved past 600,000, making it the best-selling newspaper in the United States. In that year 17 percent of newsprint was devoted to sports; in 1890 it was 4 percent. Widespread coverage of baseball was already in place in specialized publications such as the *Sporting News* and *Baseball Magazine*.

By 1927, newspapers in New York had 10 columns of sports. The news tabloids often led their front pages with sports news and pictures. Even the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune* were giving over more and more column space to sports.

It was a time when most people received virtually all of their current information from newspapers. Afternoon newspapers cost 3 cents; morning papers were 2 cents. The half dozen or so afternoon papers such as the *Sun*, the *Telegram*, and the *Journal*, featured baseball results on page one. Papers were positioned face up on newsstands, and fans could see the score without buying the paper.

Arguably, the most talented bunch of newspaper sports journalists in action at one time worked back then. They called themselves "the Gee-Whizzers," and their zeal and love for sports and games at times surpassed that of the people they wrote about and for. They told the stories, provided the game accounts, and wrote the poems. There was no television coverage and little radio, and photographs were somewhat limited. What images, views, and information on sports there was came in the main from these sportswriters.

The sports pages had the facts but were also sources of entertainment—soft news. Educated and eloquent, dedicated and opinionated, lyrical and knowledgeable, the sportswriters of that time plied their trade in an era when players were their drinking buddies, not

their antagonists. Yet the writers competed among themselves to tell the stories, break the scoops, and come up with new angles.

Those who plied their trade on the New York City newspapers were a who's who of sportswriters. The *New York Times* boasted sports editor and columnist John Kieran and Yankee writers Richards Vidmer and James Harrison. W. B. Hanna, Rud Rennie, and sports editor W. O. McGeehan worked for the *Herald Tribune*. *New York Daily News* writers included Paul Gallico, Marshall Hunt, and Roscoe McGowen. Ford C. Frick wrote for the *Evening Journal*. Frank Graham, Joe Villa, and Will Wedge did their stuff for the *New York Sun*. The *New York Telegram* featured Fred Lieb, Dan Daniel, and Joe Williams. Lieb later wrote for the *New York Post*. The *Monitor* had George Bailey. Dan Parker and Charles Segar were on the *New York Mirror*, Edward Luster and Bill Slocum wrote for the *New York American*, and Arthur Mann was on the *New York Evening World*. Still doing their thing on the newspaper scene were icons Ring Lardner and Damon Runyon.

Jack Dempsey held the heavyweight boxing title from 1919 through 1926. Then in 1927, in an epic grudge match seen by more than 150,000 fans who had paid \$2.5 million at Soldier Field in Chicago, Gene Tunney won a controversial decision over Dempsey for the title. "Big Bill" Tilden dominated a lot of the tennis news in a sport that was the most rapidly growing one in America. Golf was also expanding big-time. The great golfers Bobby Jones, Walter Hagen, and Gene Sarazen dominated not only American courses but the venerable British greens as well. Red Grange at Illinois was a three-time football All-American. At Notre Dame, Knute Rockne coached the "Fighting Irish" to three national championships. The Harlem Globetrotters played their first basketball game in 1927. The New York Giants won the National Football League title game, and Johnny Weissmuller set several swimming records. Henry G. Steinbrenner (the father of George) won the 1927 NCAA low-hurdles championship.

In that golden age of sports there were those who towered above the rest: Red Grange in football, Jack Dempsey in boxing, Bobby Jones in golf, Big Bill Tilden in tennis, and the poster boy for excess, George Herman "Babe" Ruth in baseball.

The 1920s, the age of Ruth, witnessed the largest increase in a decade for recreation and entertainment. In the previous decade those who attended baseball games were mainly affluent, white-collar workers. In the twenties a better standard of living and the introduction of Sunday baseball widened the audience, attracting all classes, including recent immigrants. Like the cities baseball was played in, urban stadiums were now becoming meeting and melting grounds for Americans of all classes and backgrounds.

Major league baseball, played in the daytime and concluding before darkness fell, saw its average annual attendance rise 50 percent in the Roaring Twenties, reaching 93 million—nearly 3,000 a game more than it had been in the previous 10 years.

In New York City all sports were pretenders to the throne that baseball sat on. In the 1920s, at least one Big Apple baseball team played in the World Series in eight of the ten World Series. From 1921 to 1923 the Yankees and the Giants played in the Subway Series.

According to one 1927 estimate, 107 men from 79 colleges made up nearly one-third of big league regulars. The farm system belonged to the future.

Players spent a lot of time on long train trips. It was time to bond, rest, eat and sleep, play cards, or read books and newspapers. Liquor and beer were the refreshments of choice, both available in abundance. Baseball was the national pastime; all the best athletes gravitated to it. So many with a very strong work ethic and competitive fire were drawn to the game.

The game was very different from baseball in the twenty-first century. Pitchers didn't throw nearly as hard. Strikeouts were way down because batters focused more on putting the ball in play by making contact. Pitchers threw far fewer pitches. Conserving strength and going the distance were the goals.

In 1927 batted balls bouncing into the grandstand were counted as home runs instead of ground-rule doubles as they are today. But each of Babe Ruth's home runs hit that year has been examined by historians, and they are convinced that none bounced into the seats. But there were four-baggers smacked by others that got where they got on the bounce.

The time it took for games to be played was much less than today. There was no need to build advertising into the structure of the contests. A batter rarely got in and out of the batter's box during his at-bat. When he did, the home plate umpire would call for a pitch. And if it was anywhere near the plate, it was deemed a strike.

Babe Ruth totally dominated the game. In that glorious decade he finished number one in home runs (467), RBIs (1,328), walks (1,240), strikeouts (795), and slugging percentage (.740). Ruth was a self-made man, the American dream come true, a free swinger in a free-swinging time.

"Once my swing starts," he said, "I can't change it or pull up on it. It's all or nothing."

Babe Ruth was the king. The 1927 New York Yankees were royalty.

Historian A. D. Suehsdorf said: "If you didn't like the Yankees, it was a tough time to be alive."

But if you loved the Yanks, it was the best of times.