

Batter Up

Two of baseball's best went head to head in 1941—in a golf match

Few could recall a time when so many fans came to watch two ball players compete. The New York Yankees' prodigious home-run hitter, George Herman "Babe" Ruth (left, above), and Detroit's Ty Cobb (right), the "Georgia Peach," who had fashioned a career out of singles, had always drawn large crowds when they stepped onto the ballfield, due to their talent and the fierce rivalry that had developed between them.

But this contest was different. Instead of a baseball game, the two squared off in a golf match. The legendary baseball heroes had split two previous matches in the summer of 1941, one in Boston and the other on Long Island, both in front of sparse crowds. At the final event on July 29 in Michigan, however, more than 2,500 fans gathered for what they figured would be an exciting afternoon.

Accounts vary as to how the two men, both left-handed golfers, wound up competing. The most likely explanation, made in newspaper accounts, is that in early 1941 Ruth, 47, and Cobb, 55, devised the matches over drinks at Ruth's New York apartment. They concluded that not only would it be fun, they could also raise money for charity.

Both loved golf. Ruth played three or four times a week at St. Albans Golf Club on Long Island, usually registering scores in the high 70s and low 80s and exhibiting the same zeal he brought to every other endeavor.

Cobb belonged to eight different clubs, including Olympic in San Francisco and Augusta National, where he sometimes received golf tips from Bobby Jones. When he played his best, he could match Ruth's scores.

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Once Ruth and Cobb devised the matches, sportswriters and the PGA took over. Fred Corcoran, tournament manager of the PGA, promoted the competition, while actress Bette Davis provided a cup to be awarded to the winner. Newspaper reporters built interest by exaggerating the animosity between the two and by claiming the matches would pit Ruth's brawn against Cobb's finesse.

Time magazine reported in a July 1941 story Cobb's boast that, "I could always lick him on a ball field and I can lick him on a golf course now." When Ruth heard of the remark, he wired his rival a challenge: "Okay, if you want to come here and get your brains knocked out, come on."

Cobb purposely lobbied to have the determining match played at Grosse Ile Golf and Country Club, a Donald Ross masterpiece 15 miles south of Detroit, deep in the heart of Tiger territory. He had played the par-71 course before and loved its rolling slopes, small, tricky greens, and the premium the course placed on strategy. Cobb figured that on the 6,720-yard layout, he could outthink Ruth, who preferred to step up to the tee and unleash a

mighty whack at the ball.

The methodical Cobb hired a golf pro to help improve his game, then spent hours practicing. In the practice round on Monday, July 28, Cobb filled a notebook with details on each hole. He hired 15-year-old Pete Devany, the son of the club's longtime professional, as caddie. Devany dished out tips, especially on the greens. The *Detroit Free Press* mentioned that Cobb "trained so hard for this match he took off 25 pounds. And the great Babe took off 23 ounces."

Ruth played only nine holes before rain shortened his practice session. He declared himself ready, however, telling the *Detroit Times* that "nine holes are enough to sharpen me for the match. . . I'm ready for Ty."

On the 29th, Ruth and Cobb offered each other perfunctory best wishes, then walked to the first tee. The event Cobb had labeled "The Has Beens' Golf Championship of Nowhere in Particular" was on.

Temperatures soared close to the 90s, but that didn't stop fans from lining the first fairway. Walking to the tee with the baseball players were their two playing partners, Walter Hagen and trick-shot artist John Montague.

A slightly nervous Cobb lost the first hole by missing a short putt. Ruth's erratic drive cost him on number three, a 488-yard par five ending on an elevated green, which Cobb won to even the match.

Cobb frequently consulted his teenage caddie. Not only did Devany remind Cobb of the best places to land the ball in the fairways, but he often dropped to his knees with Cobb to whisper advice on putts. Cobb lingered so long over each shot that Ruth teasingly stretched out on the

ground a few times and pretended to take a nap.

Ruth, on the other hand, bounded down the fairways, joked with the gallery, and rarely took longer than a moment before attacking the ball.

Neither man played his best. According to the *Detroit News*, wild shots hit six spectators, though no one was hurt.

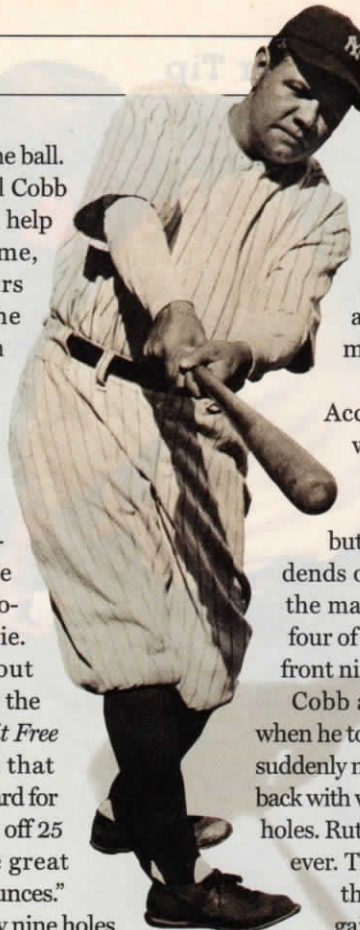
Ruth usually outdrove Cobb, but Cobb's preparation paid dividends on the greens. After squaring the match on three, Cobb captured four of the next six holes to finish the front nine four up.

Cobb appeared to have the match when he took the 10th to go five up, but a suddenly more determined Ruth stormed back with victories on two of the next three holes. Ruth was still in a deep hole, however. The best he could do was halve the next three holes, and Cobb gained a three-and-two victory.

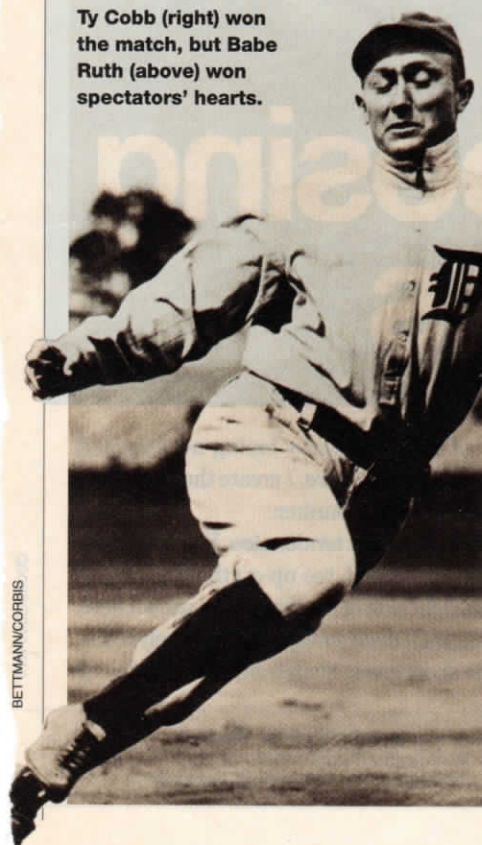
"Cobb's Old Shrewdness Beats the Bambino, 3 and 2," trumpeted a *Detroit Free Press* headline the next day. A jubilant Cobb placed the trophy on the mantel over his fireplace, right next to his baseball Hall of Fame plaque.

But, while Cobb had won the contest, Ruth stole the gallery's hearts. Spectators responded to Ruth's humor and warmth with an affection normally reserved for local heroes. "Tyrus Raymond Cobb and Peter Devany took the match seriously, so they won," concluded the *Detroit Times*. "George Herman Ruth had an outing and lost, but he did furnish a surprisingly large crowd of more than 2,500 fans with a most enjoyable afternoon."

The popular star showed after the match why he gained such adulation. Anxious to leave Grosse Ile so he would not miss a boat trip to Ohio, Ruth left the clubhouse to find a throng of youngsters waiting for his autograph. Instead of barreling through the crowd, Ruth stopped, chatted with the boys and girls, and signed every piece of paper handed to him. When the last child left, according to the *Detroit Times*, Ruth told a friend, "That makes it all worthwhile." ◉



Ty Cobb (right) won the match, but Babe Ruth (above) won spectators' hearts.



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