



Book, Cubs bobblehead bring the Babe's Called Shot back to life

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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On Friday, May 16, as part of the Wrigley Field's 100th anniversary celebration, the Cubs celebrate Babe Ruth's "Called Shot" with a bobblehead giveaway that commemorates the most famous event in Wrigley Field history.

The *Chicago Tribune* ranked the Called Shot No. 1 of its Wrigley Field top 100 memorable events, just in front of the Bartman Game on Oct. 14, 2003:

"For decades the argument has persisted. Did Babe Ruth call his home run shot or did he not at Wrigley Field in Game 3 of the Yankees' 1932 World Series sweep of the Cubs? As Cubs bench jockeys jeered him, Ruth clearly waved one, then two fingers to signify his strike count against pitcher Charlie Root. Before pitch No. 3 rocketed off his bat and over the flagpole in center, the Babe appeared to wave toward the pole."



Dr. David J. Fletcher



**The Called Shot
bobblehead to be
given out at Wrigley
Field.**

True to history and tradition (and often Ruth's own mistaken memory) surrounding the Called Shot, the Tribune got the pitch count wrong until this author pointed out the error on April 14, 2014 and the newspaper quietly corrected the mistake. It was not the third pitch, but the fifth, that the 37-year-old Ruth belted out of Wrigley Field in the fifth inning on Oct. 1, 1932.

For this baseball historian, the legend surrounding the Called Shot has held my attention my entire life. Ever since I was a young boy living in Peoria in the early 1960s, I would constantly re-read stories regarding baseball's most famous player making his prediction come true at Wrigley Field like it was baseball gospel.

Artist Robert Thorn's famous painting of Ruth pointing to the center-field stands, holding up two fingers in front of Cubs catcher Gabby Harnett, captured my young imagination. Adding to the

mysticism of history is the stark fact Thorn's painting is historically inaccurate, depicting Wrigley Field's post-1937 layout when the bleachers were reconfigured and the vines were placed on the outfield brick walls by a young Bill Veeck. In my young mind Ruth's mythic homer was like hearing stories of King Arthur and The Knights of the Round Table and other popular-culture mythology.

Later, when the Chicago Baseball Museum project began nearly 10 years ago, I spent a lot of time with Jerome Holtzman, Major League Baseball's first official historian, who would often talk about Babe Ruth and the Called Shot. Jerome's best work was *No Cheering in the Pressbox* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), which was an oral history of the generation of sports writers before his. Featured were such literary luminaries as Jimmy Cannon, Red Smith, Paul Gallico, Shirley Povich and Ford Frick, who happened to be Babe Ruth's ghostwriter and publicist, and the leading proponent of the creation of the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Frick had provided Holtzman a lot of insight on the Called Shot. Frick said when Ruth was asked to comment on the Called Shot, he would usually wink and say, "It was in the paper, wasn't it?" Eventually, the CBM was fortunate in Nov. 2007 to acquire Holtzman's personal papers and naming rights to the Jerome Holtzman Library and Research Center. Included in the papers was a Jan. 6, 1993 hand-written letter to Holtzman from Ed Jensen of Hardy, Ark., who was an eyewitness to the Called Shot.

Only book focusing on just 1 at-bat

With my sustained interest in the Called Shot, I was thrilled to hear two years ago that my friend Ed Sherman, a longtime *Tribune* sportswriter who went on to become proprietor of the *ShermanReport.com*, had embarked on writing a book on the Called Shot. Sherman's work also still appears in the *Tribune*. While his current focus is sports media, Sherman also has worked as a baseball beat writer. Now, his status as a historian of the game continues to distinguish him.

I am not aware of another baseball book that focuses on just one at-bat, which is the most unique and singular plate appearance in MLB history.

A lot of attention has been paid to Bobby Thomson's "Shot Heard Around the World in 1951." Every time I would see the late Cubs-turned-Dodgers great Andy Pafko, I would always joke with him if Thomson's ball was still flying over his head because he was playing left field in the Polo Grounds that day for Brooklyn. Bill Mazeroski's walkoff homer that captured Game 7 of the 1960 World Series at Forbes Field in Pittsburgh also is an all-time clout. But these two homers pale



Ed Sherman's book looks at the Called Shot from all angles.

to the legend that surrounds the Called Shot mostly because of Ruth's big-sized personality and the mythology that surrounds what really happened at Wrigley Field in front of an overflow crowd of 49,986.

Sherman's book, *Babe Ruth's Called Shot: The Myth and Mystery of Baseball's Greatest Home Run* (Lyons Press, published in March 2014), is without question the most complete account of the Called Shot. The book includes original interviews with many of the last living witnesses, including a rare visit with the now-retired 94-year-old Supreme Court Justice John Stevens and Lincoln Landis, the 92-year-old nephew of Baseball Commissioner Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis. Sherman recounts how Root tried for the rest of his life to live down his infamous role and yet would be forever tied to it. Root even had California personalized license plates that read "BabeWho?"

Arguably the greatest pitcher in franchise history, Root pitched for with the Cubs from 1926 to 1941 holding the franchise record for career wins (201) and seasons (16). For Root, all of his greatness at Addison and Clark was overshadowed by Game 3 of the 1932 World Series. "I gave my whole life to baseball," and "I'll be remembered for something that never happened," he'd say. Root even turned down the role playing himself in the 1948 move *The Babe Ruth Story* starring William Bendix.

Sherman has a whole chapter called "Hollywood Strikes Out" regarding the dramatic film adaptations of the

Jan. 6, 1993.

Dear Jerry:

I thought you might like to write an off-season Hot Stove League story with a different angle on the Ruth-Bid-Ne-Point subject.

I wish you would use your influence with the Hall of Fame, or whoever, to correct the common error everyone makes when referring to this famous event. The ball couldn't have gone into the center field bleachers. There weren't any then. There was a right field and a left field bleacher. But in the center was the scoreboard which was at ground level.

I was there in Wrigley Field when Babe Ruth hit his famous home run in the 1932 World Series. I got in line at 4 a.m. for a bleacher seat. So I was in the park at 9 a.m.

I remember the Cubs players taunting and razzing the Babe as he came to bat. After a couple of pitches, he stepped out of the batter's box and swept one hand in the direction of the outfield. He didn't specifically point to one area.

My recollection is that the towering home run landed on top of a ticket kiosk just to the scoreboard side of the right-field bleachers.

Enjoy your baseball columns and really liked your ode on Marge Schott.

Regards,

Ed Geusea,

8 N. Lake Shore Dr.,
Hardy, Av. 725+2.

Called Shot, including the movie *Babe*, starring John Goodman, that filmed at Wrigley Field in 1991 and was released the following year. Holtzman had written a column blistering Goodman's lackluster performance with revisionist history: "Did The Babe Really Point? Only In Hollywood Version."

The organization of Sherman's book, like Chapter 9's "Pitcher" and Chapter 16's "What Does This Mean?" that makes this one of the best baseball books I have ever read. He expertly sets the stage, seeking out Justice Stevens and his memories as a 12-year-old of witnessing Ruth's 15th and final World Series home run.

Baseball Babylon set up Called Shot atmosphere

Sherman lays out what baseball and our country was like in the throes of the Great Depression and how Ruth, baseball's greatest showman, had hoped for "One Last Pennant" in Chapter 4. He traces the origin of the Ruth-Cubs feud that prompted the Bambino's animated reaction against the taunts from the home dugout, after Cubs fans had earlier thrown objects at Ruth in left field. The feud stemmed from the Cubs giving ex-Yankee shortstop Mark Koenig only a half-share of World Series money after coming over to the Cubs in mid-season 1932 to fill in for the "young stud shortstop had been shot by a crazy lady." Amid a romantic entanglement befitting of Baseball Babylon, shortstop Billy Jurges was shot by Violet Popovich on July 6, 1932 at the Carlos Hotel two blocks north of Wrigley Field after she first tried to kill Kiki Cuyler. Future Hall of Famer Cuyler was not in his hotel room, so Jurges took the bullet.

The book's strongest section, "View from the Press Box" (Chapter 11), retraces the contemporary accounts in an attempt to make sense how the myth was created. Sherman talks about the research done by author John Evangelist Walsh, who exhaustively compiled the press coverage about Game Three to determine what was written right after the home run.

Walsh wrote about the famous homer for *Sports Illustrated*. He later published a 21-page treatise in the summer 1994 edition of *Wisconsin Magazine of History*. His analysis of 38 writers in the press box, representing 27 different newspapers, reveals that 21 reporters had nothing to say about a Called Shot, whereas 17 others definitely record



Robert Thorn's painting that perpetuates the Called Shot story.

Ruth's pointing to the stands in center field, or in some manner strongly imply a similar prediction.

In the Oct. 18, 1965 issue of Sports Illustrated, Walsh makes the "Case For Faith In The Babe's Called Shot—A true believer summarizes the evidence on Ruth's famous homer at Chicago in the Series of 1932." The significance of the moment still resonates almost five decades later after Walsh wrote:

"This was baseball's supreme player in the twilight of an incredible career but still the dominating personality on the American sports scene. Now, in one electric moment, all of the old bravado and vestiges of the once-great skills suddenly rose up again. He pointed, definitely and deliberately, toward the distant stands. It was a hurried gesture missed by many in the big park, but it was Ruth's quintessential moment of triumph. He had never done such a thing before, and (if he had stopped to think about it at all) he knew he could never do it again, but just this once he had put down all his chips. Then Charlie Root tried to whip over a third strike, Ruth swung and the ball soared into the bleachers. It hasn't stopped yet, and I think it never will."

I agree with Walsh. Baseball fans will never tire of the debate over the Called Shot.

I was honored when Sherman wrote me nearly at the end of finishing his book: "Wanted to see if I can include you in my book about The Called Shot. I am including a chapter about the perspective of modern historians on the Called Shot. Since you are the founder of the Chicago Baseball Museum, and since the event took place in Chicago, it seems only fitting to get your insights."

He wanted my answer to two enduring questions:

Do you believe Ruth pointed to center field on that day?

Why does the homer still have relevance after all these years?



Wrigley Field as it was laid out for the 1932 World Series.

A historian's final verdict

I wrote a brief essay that is featured on pages 203-204 of the book in the chapter "Modern Viewpoints":

"The Called Shot still reverberates and is still relevant today. The incident has prime mythological place in baseball history involving still the greatest baseball player of all time and also because of its location -- the pre-ivy/vines of Wrigley Field.

"Babe Ruth was robbed of an opportunity to hit at Wrigley Field in Sept. 1918 for the Cubs-Red Sox World Series. The Cubs were afraid of their very short right-field fence at the four-year-old ballpark would be a launching pad for the pitcher-outfielder and because they wanted to sell more seats to the fans at the more spacious Comiskey Park. So Ruth finally got a chance to hit in the place he called 'a dump.'

"In essence, the Babe Ruth Called Shot is a wonderful fable. But that's all it is -- a fable.

"I have seen the two home movie Zapruder-like home movies that show Ruth that fateful fifth inning Oct. 1, 1932. Like Kennedy assassination conspirator theorists, one can attempt to make a case that Ruth called his shot by pointing."

When I pointed out to Sherman that his own newspaper's error when it named the Called Shot the most memorable moment in Wrigley Field history last month, he tersely responded:

"They didn't read my book. Bought into the myth..."

Sherman did get rewarded by the *Tribune* a few days later with a glowing review by columnist John Kass.

So, in closing as a baseball historian, it is with tremendous joy that I am glad that the Cubs will highlight this singular baseball historical moment with this Friday's bobblehead celebration of the Called Shot.

As a historian I will be there.

The Cubs should erect a flagpole marker, where Ruth's homer finally came down on the ticket kiosk near where Murphy's Bleachers bar stands today.

Finally, I hope that the Cubs invite Lincoln Landis and Justice Stevens to throw out the first pitch during the game while play-by-play broadcasters Pat Hughes and Len Kasper interview Sherman about the Called Shot.



Lincoln Landis, who witnessed the Called Shot from a front-row seat, with Robert Thorn's painting in 2008.