

Pass It On®...

The Greatest Man Babe Ruth Ever Knew.

The greatest among us have been encouraged, mentored, even cajoled into reaching their potential by wise role models who took the time to elevate a child others may have overlooked.

Babe Ruth was a troublemaker. He smoked, drank, and stole eggs and tomatoes off street vendors and threw them at delivery trucks with great accuracy. He was often whipped when caught but would not change his ways.

Home was no help. Both of his parents worked long hours and drank heavily. Their marriage was strained, and their boy, George Herman Ruth, was incorrigible. When he was only 7 years old, his parents, who had no interest in further raising the boy, sent him to St. Mary's Industrial Training School in hopes that he could be reformed or at least avoid a life of crime.

It was here that young George met Matthias Boutlier, or Big Matt, as the boys called him because of his imposing stature and role as school disciplinarian. Brother Matthias had a love for baseball, having grown up in East Boston with other immigrant children who considered the game sacrosanct to becoming an American. He also had a spiritual side and chose to dedicate his life to the Xavierian order. He was assigned to the Industrial school with the task of reforming irredeemable boys like the young George Ruth.

Brother Matthias took a liking to George Ruth. He recognized in him a natural inclination for baseball, a game that he often used as a metaphor for life.

"Brother Matthias had the right idea about training a baseball club. He made every boy on the team play every position in the game, including the bench," Babe Ruth writes in his biography. "A kid might pitch a game one day and find himself behind the bat the next, or perhaps out in the sun-field. You see, Brother Matthias' idea was to fit a boy to jump in in any emergency and make good."

Young George Ruth started as a catcher. And when Brother Mathias caught him taunting the pitcher for not throwing strikes, he made Ruth pitch. Ruth was a natural and quickly became the most feared pitcher in the school.

But it was batting technique that birthed the Sultan of Swat. Brother Matthias could pound the ball 350 yards using an uppercut swing, unheard of at the time. When every ball player swung a level stroke designed to hit line drives, Big Matt could loft homerun balls at ease with that powerful, unorthodox swing. Babe Ruth emulated his idol and learned to swing for the fences every time he stepped up to bat.

The most famous swing in baseball history was in 1932, game three of the World Series: Ruth's Yankees against the Chicago Cubs, and Ruth himself against the whole city of Chicago. The crowd was heckling him relentlessly, the Cubs dugout was shouting insults, and Babe Ruth was behind in the count with two balls and two strikes.

Ruth stepped away from the plate for a moment, paused and pointed prophetically at center field. The next pitch came in high and hard, and Babe Ruth slammed it deep over the centerfield fence into the bleachers.

"Whatever I have at the bat or on the mound or in the outfield or even on the bases," Babe Ruth wrote. "I owe directly to Brother Matthias."

Perhaps he was pointing to his lifelong friend, sitting somewhere in the humble cheap seats, and thinking to himself: "This one is for you."

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