

## From Vaudeville to Vikings

### Baseball Players from Stage to Screen

This is going to be about baseball players and the entertainment world, from the early days of vaudeville and baseball up to television and feature films. It was hard to include Canadians in the early years (George Selkirk didn't appear in any feature films) but the last half of this presentation revolves around Canada.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, theatre and sports were following the same path in North America: both were just grabbing the interests of Americans who had some leisure time to watch live entertainment. The major form of such entertainment was vaudeville, a live theatre where on any given show (evenings and matinees) you'd see comedy, singing, dancing, feats of strength and people reciting famous passages of literature. Baseball players were considered to be the most interesting and accessible of all athletes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Salaries fluctuated for baseball players at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the best players were making anywhere from \$2,000 to 5,000 a year. The 1867

Digby Bell



New York Knickerbockers had an 18-year-old player named Digby Bell who left baseball to find fame as a singer/comedian on vaudeville stages across America until 1917.

Contemporaneous with Digby's success was an actor named William DeWolf

Hopper, who loved the New York Giants. On August 14, 1888, his friend Tim Keefe had his record 19-game winning streak stopped. He chose to recite the then-obscure poem *Casey at the Bat* to Giants and Cubs players. He ended up making that poem famous, performing it more than 10,000 times. He made a

William DeWolf Hopper  
Casey at the Bat 1916



recording in 1906 and appeared in a film in 1923. Three years earlier, in 1885, on the Broadway stage he was appearing in a show called ***The Black Hussar***. He and Digby Bell acted out a comic baseball scene with Hopper as the pitcher, Digby Bell wearing a birdcage and boxing gloves as the catcher, and petite actress Mathilde Cottrelly using a tiny bat trying to hit a home run. That skit was a huge hit with fans and players.

It was Hopper who was drawing baseball players to the stage. In the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century some of the biggest attractions were baseball stars. Cap Anson would dance with his daughters. Mike “King” Kelly was the most famous player of his era; he would come on stage to recite *Casey at the Bat* but substitute Kelly for Casey’s name. He would appear in sketches, and finally got starring roles in such plays as ***A Rag Baby***, ***Temperance Town*** and ***The Vaudeville Club***, performing in New York, Boston and Chicago. He was travelling to a show in 1894, after his retirement, when he contracted pneumonia and died.

Cap Anson also caught the performing bug in 1888. He had a line (delivered stiffly according to reviewers) in a play called ***A Parlor Match***. It wasn’t until 7 years later, in 1895, that Anson felt comfortable enough to return to the stage. He never got great reviews, but when he retired from baseball in 1897 he continued in theatre, performing occasionally with his daughters in dance skits and light comedy.

Rube Waddell was a popular attraction, if only for his ability to wrestle alligators on stage. In the early years of the Negro Leagues there was a New York-based team called the Cuban Giants; they would perform before, during and after games, many of their routines developed from study of comedians and dancers performing on the Chitlin Circuit.

Helen Dauvray, 1893



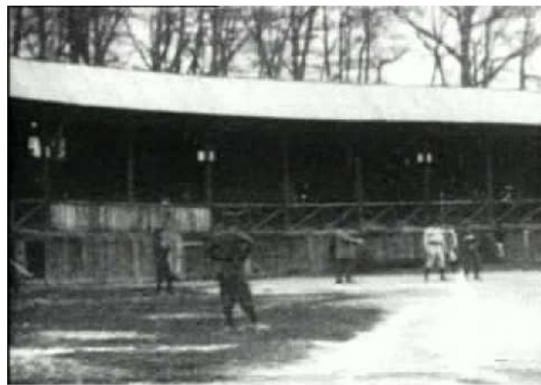
Baseball caught the attention of famous Broadway actress Helen Dauvray through her engagement to John Montgomery Ward. She created the first trophy for the winner of a post-season series between the champions of the National League and their American Association counterparts: the Dauvray

Cup. Teams were not allowed to keep the cup until they had won it three years in a row. That finally happened in 1893 when the Boston Beaneaters won the trophy for a third consecutive year. Unfortunately that was the same year that Helen and John Montgomery Ward divorced; she then lost interest in baseball and never provided another cup. That original trophy has never been found, by the way.

In 1898 Thomas Edison filmed 26 seconds of a game between The Reading

## First Baseball Game on Film May 20, 1898 Edison

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dR91pkww9M>



Phillies and the Newark Bears. You can see that short film on YouTube.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the best known players on stage were New York-based players. Christy Mathewson was the highest paid player in baseball at \$10,000 per year; he moonlighted in vaudeville making \$1,000 a week in the off-season. Even his manager, John McGraw, would join the circuit, making \$3,000 a week telling stories about his life in baseball.

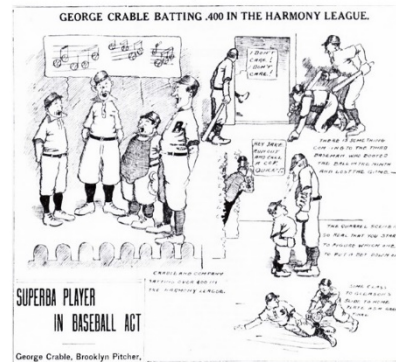
Rube Marquard was a great dancer. But it was Mike Donlin who had the best stage career of any player. He was married to an actress named Mabel Hite, and on October 26, 1908, Donlin made his stage debut in ***Stealing Home***, a one-act play written by Donlin and Hite. Although the reviews for Donlin were mixed, critics raved over his wife's performance, and the show became a smash hit. Claiming he made more money from his play, Donlin left baseball and vowed never to return; after three successful years, however, the play's popularity

diminished, and with Hite unable to land any successful roles, Donlin did return to baseball.

Donlin later made the career change from baseball to acting a second time, gradually switching from stage to screen. He had more success on the baseball field than in the entertainment industry, although he did appear in a number of movies in small roles, including the silent classic *The General* (1926), and in Paramount's first sound feature *Warming Up* (1928). He was also retained as an advisor on a number of baseball movies. One of Donlin's great friends and drinking buddies was renowned actor John Barrymore. Donlin appeared in at least two of Barrymore's silent pictures, *Raffles the Amateur Cracksman* (1917) and *The Sea Beast* (1926).

In 1911, George Crable of the Brooklyn Superbas was the lead in a show called *The Baseball Four* with three teammates; Thomas Dillon, Ed Brennan and James Thorn were the other players. It was very popular.

George Crable  
Brooklyn Superbas Pitcher



Ty Cobb appeared in a play called *The College Widow*, touring across much of America, making \$10,000

Ty Cobb in the College Widow (1911)



for the winter tour, and receiving very good reviews wherever the show was performed. The show even made a stop in Toronto. Joe Jackson had also been hired to perform in this play, but he backed out to go home. Cobb quit the show early because he was four pounds

underweight due to stage fright and the stress of travelling. He never returned to the stage.

One player who gave up baseball for the entertainment world was a pitcher for the Montreal Royals (1909), Toronto Maple Leafs (1910) and London Tecumsehs (1912) named Sammy Smith. He ended up working as a "song plugger", selling sheet music and convincing big name entertainers to perform

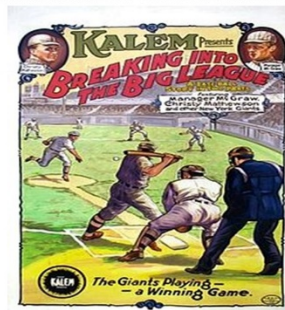
songs by his artists. He once got Fats Waller out of trouble because one of the detectives was a former catcher for him. As well, in the 1950s he was involved in weeding out payola from the American music world.

While many players were now popular and making an income on stage, Christy Mathewson, Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth were just some of the names appearing in feature films. Here are some examples.

### ***Breaking Into the Big League* 1913**

In the championship game between Squashville and Stringville, Montjoy Jones of Squashville messes up the game and his team loses. His girlfriend is Mamie Wallace; she and the rest of the town won't talk to him the next day. Mamie's

Baseball Films of the Silent Era  
Christy Mathewson & John McGraw 1913



Sammy Smith  
Montreal Royals,  
Toronto Maple Leafs, London Tecumsehs



father doesn't even allow her to see Montjoy. He's very sad, takes a nap, and dreams about the play, this time making the catch. It so happens that the New York Giants were watching the game, and they then sign him. John McGraw and Christy Mathewson feature in

the film, where Montjoy hits a game-winning home run and makes a triple play in the field. News gets back to Squashville and Mamie (and her father). Montjoy wakes up and realizes it's only a dream, but there's a note from Mamie saying she wants him back, on the condition that he not talk about baseball. He throws away his glove and goes off into the sunset with Mamie.

### ***Somewhere in Georgia* 1917**

Ty Cobb stars in this low-budget movie (weren't they all?). Ty is kidnapped when he returns home for an exhibition game after being signed by the Tigers. Fear not!



Baseball Films of the Silent Era  
Ty Cobb, 1917



He beats up his kidnappers to make it to the game on time. Legendary columnist Grantland Rice wrote the story on which the film is based.

**Slide Kelly Slide** 1927

One of the most popular baseball films ever made, **Slide**,

**Kelly, Slide** solidified the stardom of MGM leading man William Haines. In his usual brash, cocky manner, Haines is cast as Jim Kelly, a self-styled baseball whiz who talks himself into a job with the New York Yankees. Though his boundless braggadocio is backed up by his talent on the baseball field, Kelly soon alienates himself from the rest of his teammates, who can't stand his arrogant behavior. Filmed on location at the Yankees' spring training camp in Florida and at Los Angeles' Wrigley Field (one of the best minor-league stadiums in America), **Slide, Kelly, Slide** boasts cameo appearances from such real-life baseball luminaries as Mike Donlin, Irish Meusel, Bob Meusel, Tony "Poosh-em-Up" Lazzeri, and umpire John "Beans" Reardon.

Slide Kelly Slide  
Movie Poster 1927



**Babe Comes Home** 1927

In this silent film Babe Ruth plays Babe Dugan, star player of the Angel baseball team, who chews tobacco and gets his uniform dirtier than any other player.

Baseball Films of the Silent Era  
Babe Ruth, 1927



Vernie, the laundress who cleans his uniform every week, becomes concerned over his untidiness. Babe calls to apologize for unintentionally striking her with a ball during a game. On an outing to an amusement park, a roller coaster throws Vernie into Babe's arms; soon they are engaged,

and Vernie plans to reform him. Scores of tobacco cubes and spittoons are pre-wedding gifts, and they precipitate a lovers' quarrel. But Babe takes the reform idea seriously, though his game slumps, possibly as a consequence, and he is put on the bench. At a crucial moment, Vernie relents and throws him a plug of tobacco; he immediately delivers a four-base blow.

#### Baseball Films of the Silent Era Babe Ruth, 1927



I'll jump ahead to television. The best thing to happen to TV and baseball was the Dodgers' move to Los Angeles. Throughout the 1960s Dodger players and coaches were appearing on TV series filmed in Hollywood. Here are a few examples.

#### **Mr. Ed** 1963

Mr. Ed 1963  
Sandy Koufax, Johnny Roseboro, Leo Durocher,  
Willie Davis, Bill Skowron



This episode featured Sandy Koufax, John Roseboro, Leo Durocher, Willie Davis and Bill Skowron. In one hilarious scene, Mr. Ed (a talking horse) runs the bases and slides in for a play at the plate with Roseboro.

#### **The Flying Nun** 1969

An episode features Willie Davis, with Don Drysdale playing an umpire.

The Flying Nun  
Sally Field breaks up an argument between Willie  
Davis and Don Drysdale (1969)



#### **The Brady Bunch** 1970

The 1970 season featured a couple of guest appearances. In one, Don Drysdale's house is designed by dad Mike Brady. Drysdale helps son Greg's pitching in return. Greg decides he's going to quit school and try out for the Dodgers. Drysdale was apparently of not much help, as Greg gives up 12 runs in one inning. Another episode featured Wes Parker. Greg's

Don Drysdale  
The Brady Bunch (1970)



Wes Parker  
The Brady Bunch (1970)



not doing well in math because he's lovesick over a classmate. His math teacher's boyfriend is Parker, who sets Greg straight on how important math is.

### ***The Munsters* 1965**

In this episode Herman Munster is fooling around and hits a ball 8 blocks away, so

The Munsters  
Herman Munster tries out for Leo Durocher and  
the Dodgers (1965)



Dodger manager Leo Durocher offers him a tryout. Herman proves too dangerous to play with, so he fails to make the team. Durocher loved Hollywood, appearing on such shows as ***Mr. Ed***, ***The Donna Reed Show*** and ***The Beverly Hillbillies***, where he tries to recruit Jethro after seeing how well

he can throw.

In Canada we didn't give baseball much notice on TV, but the National Film Board has made four baseball movies in its history. The first was in 1953 when they followed a Little League playoff game in Vancouver. The second was a 1973 documentary on Fergie Jenkins, followed by a 1995 film called ***Baseball Girls***. The last was ***The Sleeping Tigers***, a 2003 film about the legendary Asahi baseball team. I've taken a couple of minutes from each film to show you.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-yu91RAQJM&t=1s>

Expos and Blue Jays players in recent years have featured prominently in television advertising and promotional spots. Such "stars" include Roger Brulotte, Tim Wallach, Gary Carter, Buck Rodgers, Tim Lincecum and Tony Fernandez, Roy Halladay, Roberto Alomar, Alex Rios, Lyle Overbay, Jerry Howarth/Ryan



Goins/Kevin Pillar, Shea Hillenbrand, Jose Bautista, Kelly Gruber, and Josh Donaldson, among others. Here are some examples:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUbySWB43gE&feature=youtu.be>

Thank you!



Warren Campbell  
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