

“He was a nice guy. Joe Cantillon was always kidding. Before the game, Joe came over to the Detroit bench and said, ‘Well, boys, I’ve got a great, big apple knocker I’m going to pitch against you guys today. Better watch out, he’s plenty fast. He’s got a swift,’ . . . And here comes Walter, just a string of a kid, only about 18 or 19 years old [he was 19 at his debut], tall, lanky, from Idaho or somewhere. Yes. Joe Cantillon was a kidder, but he wasn’t kidding that day. Johnson had such an easy motion, it looked like he was just playing catch. He threw so nice and easy – and then ‘swoosh’, and it was by you.”

—Sam Crawford

Walter Johnson’s Career Starts On The Fast Track

By Henry W. Thomas

A week earlier he had been in Weiser, Idaho, pitching for the town team in a bush league of nowhere along the Snake River. Now, on Aug. 2, 1907, Walter Johnson found himself facing the most powerful baseball team in the world, the Detroit Tigers of Cobb and Crawford and the rest, in the process of slugging their way to the first of three straight American League pennants.

But after just 10 minutes of watching Johnson throw batting practice the day before against his own team and the Chicago White Sox, Washington Senators Manager Joe Cantillon realized that he had stumbled upon a “prize package,” as he called his new recruit. “Walter Johnson pitched from the rubber before the game yesterday,” noted *The Washington Post*, “but he afforded little batting practice for the players of both teams, as his fastball seemed unhittable.”

Despite Cantillon’s warning, Detroit was anticipating the usual easy pickings off a rookie, but they weren’t the kind to leave things to chance. “We began to ride him as the game opened,” Cobb remembered in his autobiography. “One of us imitated a cow mooing, and we hollered at Cantillon: ‘Get the pitchfork ready, Joe, your hayseed’s on the way back to the barn.’” But a tremendous ovation from the capacity crowd greeted Johnson as he went out to the mound, and to the Tigers’ dismay he seemed oblivious to their razzing.



The first pitch to leadoff hitter Davy Jones was a called strike – “The fastest ball I ever saw,” Jones described it 50 years later. He grounded out, as did the next bat-

ter, and Sam Crawford popped up to end Johnson’s first inning in the major leagues.

Ty Cobb, Detroit’s cleanup hitter, had seen enough. “We were most respectful, now – in fact, awed,” he would recall, and his answer was to lay down a perfect drag bunt to open the second inning. The next batter also bunted successfully, and Cobb made one of his trademark daring plays, racing full steam around second base before sliding into third ahead of a late throw from the stunned first baseman. Cobb then scored on a sacrifice fly before Johnson struck out Tigers catcher Boss Schmidt for the first of his 3,509 career whiffs, a record that stood for 56 years.

The only other run Detroit could manage against the youngster came on an eighth-inning inside-the-park homer by Crawford. Johnson was lifted for a pinch hitter in the bottom half. The thrilling game was eventually lost, 3-2, but not before everyone present knew that they had witnessed something special.

Ty Cobb also remembered Johnson’s first day in the majors. “The first time I faced him, I watched him take that easy windup – and then something went past me that made me flinch. I hardly saw the pitch, but I heard it. The thing just hissed with danger. Every one of us knew we’d met the most powerful arm ever turned loose in a ballpark.”

Ed Grillo, *The Washington Post*’s baseball writer reported: “It is questionable whether a 19-year-old lad ever broke into baseball who made a better showing as a pitcher than Johnson did yesterday. The writer saw Cy Young when he first broke into fast company and he was forty times rawer than is Johnson. Even the great [Christy] Mathewson did not have when he broke into the game what Johnson has. Furthermore, he is a mere boy. What will he be when he grows up?”



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