Fanning the Mighty Ty Cobb

St. Louis College vs. Detroit Tigers

by Donald W. Olson and Robert H. Newton
A pitcher-batter confrontation played out in dramatic fashion, almost like a scene from a Hollywood script, in a baseball game on the campus of St. Mary’s University 100 years ago.

When we recently discovered an eyewitness account of this long-ago game, we were reminded of the classic 1984 baseball movie The Natural. In that film a young unknown amateur pitcher (played by Robert Redford) first attracts national attention when an exhibition is arranged, and he strikes out the major league’s greatest hitter (called “The Whammer” in a role clearly modeled on Babe Ruth and played by Joe Don Baker).

Something very much like this movie scene actually happened on the St. Mary’s campus a century ago, when a seventeen-year-old student from St. Louis College (as St. Mary’s University was known then) faced the greatest hitter in major league baseball—and struck him out.

The Detroit Tigers, champions of the American League in both 1907 and 1908, came to San Antonio for spring training in 1909. The Detroit team prepared for the upcoming season with daily workouts and exhibition games with local teams. On March 18, 1909, the morning edition of the San Antonio Daily Express announced a game with the headline “Detroit vs. St. Louis College. Tigers to Face School Lads This Afternoon at West End.”

One of Baseball’s All-Time Greats

The star player for Detroit was Ty Cobb, who still holds the major league record for the highest lifetime batting average. Although modern baseball fans often name Babe Ruth as the greatest player of all time, baseball writers who saw both Ruth and Cobb play generally accorded that honor to Cobb. For example, when the Baseball Hall of Fame inducted the first group of players in 1936, Ty Cobb led the voting (with 222 votes out of 226 cast), with Honus Wagner and Babe Ruth tied for second (215 votes each).

The result was similar when the Sporting News in 1942 asked former baseball stars and managers the question “Who was the greatest player of all time?” Of the 102 replies, 60 voted for Ty Cobb, 17 for Honus Wagner, 11 for Babe Ruth, with 14 votes going to several others.

This was no ordinary player who led the Tigers onto the college campus in the spring of 1909.

The Game

To face Ty Cobb and the rest of the Tigers, St. Louis College sent Melvin Allys “Bert” Gallia to the mound. An electrical engineering major from Woodsboro, Gallia not only pitched for the team but also proved to be their strongest hitter, batting in the cleanup position. In the bottom of the first inning, Gallia stroked a double and took part in a double steal, as the students took an early 2-0 lead.

The newspaper account the next day described the young pitcher’s memorable strikeout: “Gallia pitched good ball for St. Louis. He had the pleasure of fanning the mighty Ty Cobb and a couple of others just about as dangerous.

The Detroit lineup eventually prevailed and won the game, as expected, but the Daily Express noted that “the Collegians arose to the occasion with a spirit that surprised even their most hearty rooters. The game was a credit to the school and the Tigers complimented them on their showing.”

Discrepancies Put to Rest

Tales of this legendary game have been told and re-told over the years, but misinformation has crept into those accounts.

Recent baseball historians mistakenly place the game in March 1910, and although the Detroit Tigers did train again in San Antonio during 1910, in that year Cobb elected to work out by himself in Georgia. With this fact in mind, a search through the microfilm reels of the San Antonio Daily Express from 1909 yielded the
original accounts of the game.
Similarly, historians and yarn-spinners alike tell us that Ty Cobb gained a measure of revenge on Gallia by hitting a long home run late in the game. The box score shows five doubles by the Tigers and one triple—but no home runs by either side. The newspaper story praises Gallia for pitching “good ball” and explicitly states that the “triple was the liveliest performance off his delivery.”

After the Game
The Detroit Tigers won the American League pennant again in 1909. Ty Cobb himself achieved the rare feat called the Triple Crown, leading the American League in 1909 in batting average, runs batted in, and home runs. Melvin Gallia went on to a major league career, pitching for the Washington Senators from 1912 to 1917, the St. Louis Browns from 1918 to 1920, and the Philadelphia Phillies late in 1920.

But it was 100 years ago that Gallia first showed that he was a “natural”—with the talent to strike out “the mighty Ty Cobb.”

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