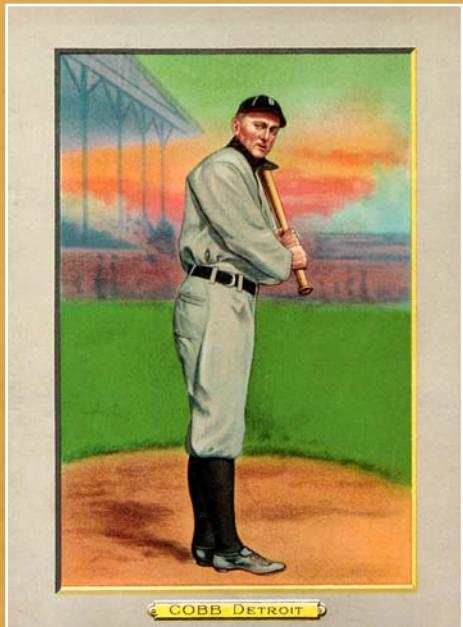


Fanning the Mighty Ty Cobb



St. Louis College
vs.
Detroit Tigers

by Donald W. Olson and Robert H. Newton



A

"Bert" Gallia



After the game, players from the Detroit Tigers and St. Louis Collegians posed for this photograph, taken on the front steps of St. Louis Hall.

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 Ally "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

Rattler Athletics – Extending the Tradition of Excellence

Although Don Olson's and Robert Newton's story may feature the "Collegians" of yesteryear instead of today's Rattlers, and that 1909 game likely was played on a patch of dirt on the "West End" campus instead of at V.J. Keefe Field with its stands that hold 2,500 fans, there is little disagreement that baseball – and sports overall – at St. Mary's enjoy a long, colorful and successful tradition.

With five national titles in four sports, winning at St. Mary's is a testament to the spirit of competition and the tenacity and talent of thousands of student-athletes.

While records show interscholastic competition began in 1902 with baseball, over the years women's and men's teams in 11 sports at St. Mary's have won more than 100 conference championships and advanced to NAIA and NCAA Division II postseason play more than 50 times.

Just as athletic competition a century ago hinted at the legacy of success that exists today, it is St. Mary's goal to expand our campus and our achievements through the *Extending the Tradition of Excellence* campaign.

The \$23 million initiative includes – along with scholarships and professorships – a new Outdoor Sports Complex that will rival the Alumni Athletics & Convocation Center with its 3,800-seat Bill Greehey Arena, home to Rattler indoor sports. Nearly \$7 million has been raised or pledged for the \$13 million Outdoor Sports Complex that will feature facilities, fields and courts for baseball, softball, soccer and tennis.

These additions and upgrades to the University complement St. Mary's efforts to revitalize the neighborhood and the Westside, as well as strengthen our partnership with the city to make San Antonio an NCAA destination for championship tournament play. Last year the Bill Greehey Arena was site of the NCAA Final Four Slam Dunk/3-Point Shot competition and this spring the NCAA Division II Women's Elite Eight Basketball Championship.

Besides bringing with them the opportunity to host national sporting events, new outdoor facilities certainly will benefit St. Mary's by providing our students and student-athletes alike with the finest facilities for varsity and recreational play and by attracting prospective students to the University.

Through the *Extending the Tradition of Excellence* campaign, the leadership of St. Mary's is ensuring that the University's winning traditions and legacy of success, borne of the likes of Melvin "Bert" Gallia – the boy who struck out the world's best baseball player – live on in the decades to come.

For more information about the *Extending the Tradition of Excellence* campaign, contact the Office of Development at (210) 436-3718.

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." ■



Donald Olson, a professor in the Department of Physics at Texas State University, is a lifelong fan of the Detroit Tigers. Olson grew up in Toledo, Ohio, where the Detroit Tigers are considered to be the local team. While teaching at Texas State, Olson began researching Ty Cobb's visits to Texas and discovered the connection to St. Mary's University.



Like Olson, Robert Newton is an avid baseball fan and loves learning about how the game was played in years past. In his senior year as a physics major, when he heard that his professor had made an exciting discovery pertaining to baseball history, Newton couldn't pass up the opportunity to be a part of the research.

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