

John McGraw in Iowa Baseball

The spring of 1891 found the people of Cedar Rapids anxiously awaiting the opening of the baseball season. Citizens of the town made their way daily to the "home" of the local entry in the Iowa-Illinois League to observe the team in practice and "to size up the merits and demerits of the new men of the nine." Reports on the ability of the assembled players were very favorable. The team seemed to be unusually skillful in hitting, "every man showing strong with the stick." Although it was pointed out that many of the recruits were "quite young", most of them showed "exceptional talent in practice" and displayed an abundance of nerve and coolness, qualities absolutely essential in a baseball player. Prospects for a good season were bright enough to warrant the prophecy that the local club "would have the pennant or be very close to it when the season closes."

In the morning and afternoon practice sessions such players as Henry Fabian, John Gedar, "Jake" Drauby, Delos Woods, and the diminutive catcher, "Kid" Williams, cavorted about the diamond with an enthusiasm and a spirit found only

in those who love to play the national game. But the pep and confidence of these men were mild in comparison with the same qualities displayed by a new recruit from the East. The young fellow was literally "all over the diamond", stopping hard drives, making almost impossible catches and throws, and displaying prowess entirely out of proportion with his limited stature and weight. The name of this diminutive youngster was destined to be known long after those of his mates in these practice sessions were forgotten. This young recruit was John McGraw, later to be called the "Little Napoleon" of baseball, and one of the greatest players and managers in the history of the game.

Young McGraw had made his first venture in professional baseball in 1890, signing a contract with the Olean, New York, club of the Iron and Oil League. He was to receive \$60 per month and board for his services at third base. But the callow newcomer, fresh from his experience as an amateur player with the Truxton Grays, fared badly in his debut. McGraw participated in six games for the Olean club, all of which were lost. "I could field the ball all right," he wrote, "but on the throw I couldn't hit the first baseman or any where near him." As a result of his poor performance, the young player was benched by Manager

A. F. Kenny. McGraw was disappointed and almost heart-broken. Nevertheless he realized many years later that the Olean manager's action in removing him from the line-up was the making of him.

McGraw soon left the Olean club and joined the Wellsville team of the Western New York League. Though still in his 'teens he was rapidly gaining valuable baseball experience. And the quality of his playing had improved to such an extent that he was invited to join an All-American team which was going to Cuba on an exhibition tour. He was delighted to accept, and enjoyed a profitable trip. On his return to Florida, McGraw joined the Gainesville team of that State, which gave him an opportunity to play against major league clubs. This experience helped his performance wonderfully. He was quick to learn and profit from the example of the big leaguers.

Splendid work against the big league clubs brought McGraw a great deal of publicity. As a consequence he had to choose from twenty-eight different offers which were tendered him for the 1891 season. "I looked over the offers carefully", relates McGraw in his autobiography, "and then decided to grab the job that paid the most money, no matter where I had to go. This happened to be in Cedar Rapids. They offered me \$125 a

month, \$75 advance money, and transportation. I got the \$75 by wire and started."

Spring training had not progressed far before the rest of the players began to be impressed by the new shortstop who had played in Cuba and against major league clubs. Henry Fabian, crack first-baseman of the club, pronounced him "the freshest and cockiest kid that ever broke into a ball game". And McGraw subscribed to Fabian's judgment. "I sassed every body", he wrote. "I thought I was just as good a ball player as any big leaguer in the business." This robust confidence in himself always was to remain an important trait in McGraw's character. He asserted repeatedly that the "fresh cocky youngsters, who think they know it all, are the best prospects. They have to be taken down occasionally, of course, but if they can keep that cocky spirit they will be good ball players nine times out of ten."

Much interest was aroused in Cedar Rapids by the announcement that the Chicago National League team was to play an exhibition game with the Cedar Rapids club on April 16th. Of special interest to the Cedar Rapids "cranks and enthusiasts" was the fact that the player-manager of this big-league team was Adrian, "Cap", Anson, a native of Iowa, and at that time, the "most famous man in baseball".

Yet the enthusiasm of the members of the team far surpassed that of the local admirers. It was to be the first game against a big-league club for most of the players, and every man desired to exert his best efforts. Thus the "fans" and players alike were keyed up to a high pitch in anticipation for the most interesting game of the year.

The famous Chicago team arrived in Cedar Rapids on schedule, prepared to exhibit its superiority over the Cedar Rapids aggregation. But shortly after noon a heavy rain began to fall, soaking the diamond until it resembled a quagmire. It was feared that the game could not be played. At a little after three, however, the skies cleared and the sun broke through the clouds. Manager "Jim" Plumb, of the Cedar Rapids team, hastened to the ball park and after an inspection announced that "with a little work" the game could be played. A crew of men went to work immediately. With large sponges they soaked up the water which stood in little pools on the playing field.

Meanwhile the spectators were filing into the grounds: "one of the most patient crowds that ever assembled in the park". Fully five hundred onlookers turned out, each of them surprised at the work that was being done to make the grounds suitable for playing. On either side of the diamond the players of the rival teams were tossing

the ball back and forth, exercising themselves, "and at the same time amusing the spectators". Finally, at about 4:30 o'clock some one ventured to shout "Play Ball". The cry was taken up by many others and fifteen minutes later Umpire Pfeffer of Chicago called the batteries. Even then the diamond was hardly in good condition. The first and third base bags still "floated as ships on the mud and water".

The Cedar Rapids club elected to bat first. The game got under way immediately with the Cedar Rapids lead-off man, Fabian, facing "Bill" Hutchinson, Chicago pitcher and a product of Yale University. Fabian drove the first pitch down to the Chicago third baseman, "who made a clever catch" and threw him out at first base. McGraw was the next batter in the line-up. He strode to the plate with all his confidence and even more determination. "It was the first time I had played in a class that I thought I was entitled to", he recalled later. "I made up my mind that I would show up that big league club, and I felt confident that I could do so." But on this first attempt McGraw failed to get a safe hit, although he succeeded in "giving 'Hutch' another rap, driving the ball out to the left fielder, who took it in". The big leaguers retired the side a moment later when Magee hit to the shortstop who snapped the ball

to first base before the runner could cross the bag.

It was then Chicago's turn at bat. The crowd expected the worst to happen with the first big league batter taking his place at the plate. But a long fly easily disposed of the first hitter. A drive by Foster was then handled neatly by McGraw to make the second out. Dablen next tried his hand and "put a fly to Wilson in the right field, and it was cleverly taken in, retiring the side". The spectators sent up rounds of applause as they saw the famous Colts put out without a man reaching first base.

In the second inning the Cedar Rapids team put up a slight threat. After two batters were out, the Chicago pitcher appeared to have "lost his nerve". Williams was given a base on balls. Then Jones, the local center fielder, came to the plate determined to drive Williams around the bases for the first score. But he succeeded in hitting nothing more than a long fly which was easily caught. The threat was over.

The first man to come to bat for Chicago in the second inning was the great "Cap" Anson himself. The applause which greeted the famous player as he advanced to the plate was almost deafening. But applause turned suddenly to laughter as the giant first baseman stood alongside of Williams, the midget catcher for Cedar

Rapids. Finally the noise subsided and Anson prepared for Cutler's pitch. The tension produced by Anson's appearance at the plate was not even effectively broken by the lively McGraw, who was chattering and "talking it up" from his short-stop position, scoffing at the reputed prowess of the great Anson, and daring him to hit one.

Cutler pitched, and Anson took a mighty swing, missing the ball by a small margin. Again Cutler pitched, and again the Chicago manager struck the empty air. The spectators looked on with fearful interest, expecting the next pitch to be knocked out of the park. But on this occasion Anson was to be denied his accustomed glory. On the next pitch he drove the ball down near the shortstop position with tremendous speed. But McGraw, who had followed the course of the hard "liner" from the time it left the bat, dove quickly to his left and made a sensational one-handed catch of the hard-hit drive. He then threw the ball to the pitcher, "as coolly as if it were a common every day occurrence." Anson was chagrined at the result of McGraw's great effort which merited recognition as "one of the finest plays of the game".

In the third inning Chicago made the first run of the game. Wilmont walked, and the next two men singled to fill the bases. Cooney hit sharply

to McGraw who quickly threw to the plate, but it was decided that Williams did not have his foot on the base, thus allowing the run to score. The spectators fidgeted in their seats. It appeared that this piece of luck might have grave consequences. But the next two batters were easy outs, and the Cedar Rapids pitcher was given a tremendous ovation for his fine work.

It was in the middle innings that McGraw flashed a remarkable exhibition of his skill in fielding and hitting. He was responsible for all three put-outs in the fourth inning, and in the fifth he threw out the first two batters in succession. The spectators were amazed at the performance of the youthful infielder as he scurried about the diamond covering a wide range of territory, and daring the opposing batters to hit the ball in his direction. The big leaguers had seen few players with such energy and enthusiasm.

The sixth inning for Cedar Rapids threw the local supporters into a state of feverish excitement. Fabian opened the inning with a safe hit to right field. The fiery McGraw was the next batter. After throwing a few spirited remarks at Anson, the young infielder, batting left-handed, steadied himself at the plate. Hutchinson's arm went up and the ball flashed toward the plate. The result of McGraw's accurate swing was a

drive to right field which turned out to be a clean single. "Say, old timer," said McGraw to Anson as he rounded first base, "so that's what you call big league pitching, eh? We'll murder that fellow." Anson stared at the youngster in pained amazement. "My impudence almost took his breath away", McGraw related many years afterward. "You can imagine how this must have sounded, coming from a kid of eighteen years who weighed but 120 pounds."

McGraw's hit was followed by two strike-outs. Fabian then elected to steal third. But he had not taken the muddiness of the diamond into account, for "instead of sliding the ten feet to the third plate he slid twenty and stopped ten feet from the base. He could not extricate himself from the heap of earth in time to touch the plate and he was out." The onlookers were disappointed as they watched the home club's brightest chance to score a run suddenly extinguished.

Chicago made another tally in their half of the inning after two were out. But in that inning Anson was again neatly retired by McGraw who made another sensational catch of a hard drive off the great player's bat. The Chicago manager was sorely piqued at the young man's behavior, for the recruit infielder jeered at him continually, attempting to "get his goat". Finally Anson saw

the humor of the situation and smiled encouragingly at his tormentor. "I'll never forget how good that smile made me feel", confessed McGraw in recalling the incident.

The last three innings produced no scores for either side. Sensational plays abounded, and good pitching overcame effectively the run-making possibilities of both teams. The game ended shortly after six o'clock and the spectators left the park satisfied after having seen a great game of baseball. Although the local club had been shut out without a run, they had out-hit the major leaguers, five hits to four. Each player had performed creditably.

McGraw was the star of the contest. He had accepted eleven difficult chances on the field without committing a single error, and had made one of the five hits. In addition, his fighting spirit contributed much to the firm stand which the players of his team had put up before the skill of their illustrious opponents. "It was a big day for me", he wrote. "After the game Anson, forgetting my freshness and impudence, said some nice things about my playing — actually asked me how I would like to play for Chicago sometime. That went to my head immediately. Gee, but I was chesty over having attracted the attention of the great Anson!"

Thereafter McGraw became obsessed with the desire for a career in big-league baseball. Anson's faith in his ability spurred him on to a firm determination to advance and grow up with the game. Nevertheless he decided that a season with the Cedar Rapids club would give him necessary preparation for a step upward, and he prepared to exert his best efforts throughout the season which opened on April 30th.

The Rockford, Illinois, team faced Cedar Rapids on the opening day of the regular season. The visiting club was made up of "husky youngsters, with at least two American Association back numbers sandwiched in." Their multi-colored, queer-looking uniforms furnished the occasion for many a laugh on the part of the spectators, as well as for caustic criticism by the press. The Cedar Rapids *Standard* suggested that the designer of such a freaky creation "should be lashed to the tail of a playful mule and be dragged through yellow clay until he is dead, dead, dead. No death is too horrible for a person who displays such taste. He is an enemy of mankind and deserves to die."

Yet the style of their uniforms did not affect the playing of the Rockford club. At times they played ball that was almost "out of sight", and one sports writer declared that whatever "they didn't do in the way of playing they made up for

in trickery." The game ended with Rockford the victor by a score of 10 to 6. The visiting club took the next game also, and the Cedar Rapids fans began to lose faith in the ability of their team.

A month after the season had opened the team was floundering in last place in the league standings. One newspaper began to charge lack of teamwork among the players. To Manager Plumb the irate editor addressed his principal remarks. "Make them play ball", he wrote, "and if they won't do it, fire every mother's son of them." Erratic playing by the home team also provoked criticism. A game at Davenport was marked by "eight festering errors". The loss of another contest to Quincy was reported to have been caused by inefficient umpiring, but, said the *Standard*, "six juicy errors tell the story of the defeat."

Despite the criticism of the press and the despair of disappointed supporters, the team continued to slump. But one player at least continued to work as hard as if the team were in first place. The dynamic McGraw never curbed his playing nor relaxed his enthusiasm. His hitting improved from day to day. He always had "his striking clothes on, in fact he never lays them off", commented a reporter in admiration of the youthful star.

Early in August the club made an astonishing

spurt. But it did not last, for it was not long before the team was losing daily. The players reported that bad umpiring was responsible for the majority of the defeats. The *Weekly Gazette* endorsed this view, and also commented on the ungentlemanly conduct of the other teams in the league. Toward the end of August the Cedar Rapids club was scheduled to play Quincy, then leading the Joliet entry in the race by a narrow margin. "Should Quincy rob us," advised the *Weekly Gazette*, "the boys should give Joliet three games straight. While Joliet has treated us in rather mean style, and there are a few bad pills in the Joliet aggregation, they have never used so vile and obscene language here on the grounds in the presence of ladies as Murray's foul-mouthed croakers have."

Although the club was in desperate straits, the fine playing of McGraw was attracting attention elsewhere. By the middle of August he had received several offers from other clubs. In addition, the little infielder had favorably impressed "Billy" Gleason, famous old shortstop of the Saint Louis Browns, who was then playing in the Iowa-Illinois League. Gleason corresponded in McGraw's behalf with "Billie" Barnie, manager of the Baltimore Orioles club in the American Association.

The Baltimore manager apparently was given good reports on young McGraw, for it was not long until he sent McGraw a ticket and ordered him to report to his team immediately. The overjoyed "rookie" packed his bag and left Cedar Rapids "with a running jump." He was ready to take his place in faster company.

McGraw's departure brought spirited criticism from the Cedar Rapids sportsmen. The American Association was denounced in the press for its policy of watching young players and finally persuading them "to become contract-jumpers, dishonorable players." It was admitted readily that McGraw had "put up good ball to the last" but the *Standard* observed tragically that he had made "a grievous mistake in jumping his contract."

McGraw felt that he was entirely justified in taking any step to improve his status in professional baseball. "In those days," he wrote, referring to this incident, "we had no such baseball government and system as we have now [1923]. If a player in a small league got an offer from a big league team he would simply jump his club and take it. There was no penalty attached. That was quite customary."

The Iowa-Illinois League disbanded shortly after McGraw joined the Orioles. "We do not think there will be much serious regretting here",

predicted the Cedar Rapids *Weekly Times*. Baseball has ceased to be interesting to our people generally. We think that after another summer, at most, we will not see baseball the national game."

But succeeding years revealed the error in this prophecy. And the career of John McGraw provides a measuring stick by which the development of the game may be determined. His successful years as player and manager with the Baltimore Orioles saw a revival of interest in major-league baseball and the development of many of the fine points of team play. During his twenty-odd years as manager of the New York Giants, the game reached its maturity and became one of America's most cherished institutions.

McGraw will long be remembered as a great player and a great manager. He always insisted that every ball player give his best for the good of the team. He was firm, but not unjust; imperious, but never tyrannical. His skill in handling men was evidenced in the pennants won by the teams he managed and in the performances of the stars whom he tutored. "Rube" Marquard, Roger Bresnahan, Joe McGinnity, Christy Mathewson, and "Bugs" Raymond are a few of the luminaries whom he developed during his early years as manager of the Giants. But no measure of success could make him forget the days he spent as a mem-

ber of the Cedar Rapids club of 1891. "All my life I have had a deep sentiment for that Cedar Rapids club", he wrote shortly after his Giants had won the World Series in 1922.

To illustrate what he meant by that statement, McGraw related an incident. He was scrutinizing a list of minor-league players which the Giants had a chance to obtain by the draft method. Halfway down the list he encountered the name of a player who had been with a Cedar Rapids club. "That's the fellow I'll take", he said to the Secretary of the Giants, "and I'm taking him simply because he comes from Cedar Rapids. That's where I got my first start. This new fellow, I'll bet, is good." And the career of Otie Crandall, the player selected in such a novel fashion, bore out the truth of the great manager's guess.

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