



Football practice, Wisconsin Fall 1918.

“The Game Must Go On...”

In the past special editions we have discussed many of the parts of life that changed or stopped for Americans during the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic. In this edition we will focus on some of American’s greatest passions, sporting events. Starting in April 1917 sports had already been thrown a bit of a curve ball due to American entry into World War One. In 1917 very few professional players enlisted or were drafted. The 1918 season was different. Hundreds of Major League Baseball players joined



the military in part out of a sense of duty and in part due to the May 1918 “Work or Fight” rule issued by the Selective Service System. This rule required that by 1 July 1918, all men ages 21-31, and not otherwise exempt, holding "non-essential" jobs must enlist, make themselves draft-eligible, or apply for work directly related to the war. Baseball teams had to scramble to replace these players. Those who remained shifted the balance of power in baseball and led to the rise of one of baseball's greatest legends.

During spring training 1918, the Red Sox held batting practice for the troops at Camp Pike in Little Rock, Arkansas, where a 23 year old pitcher named Babe Ruth smashed five home runs. His opportunity to shine was made in part due to 11 Red Sox players enlisting and five more being stricken with a then unusual flu like disease. Babe Ruth’s opportunity almost ended when he contracted the flu as well and almost died when a “doctor” treated him with silver nitrate. He fortunately made a full recovery and got back to hitting. "The Great Bambino" hit 11 home-runs in May and June 1918, more than five American League teams hit all year.

Due to increasing concern over the spread of influenza, the regular season was cut short with the Boston Red Sox winning the American League and the Chicago Cubs winning the National League. The 1918 World Series was still played with the first three games in Chicago. 1918 is probably best known to Red Sox fans as the start of the Bambino curse. Ruth pitched (and won) Game 1, but was benched in Games 2 and 3 (which they split) to stay fresh for his Game 4 start. Yes, Babe Ruth was benched. In the World Series. Game 1 was also the first time "The Star Spangled Banner" was played at a sporting event. The Red Sox won the series but little did fans know it would be 86 years before they'd win another World Series.

As the second wave of influenza began ravaging the country in the Fall of 1918, hitting young adults particularly hard, the college football season petered out, with teams struggling to field rosters and schedule games. Most teams played five games or fewer, and entire conferences shut down. By the start of November, just 87 college games had been



Baseball player, catcher and umpire wearing a mask in 1918.

played nationwide, compared to 253 one year earlier. In an unusual end to the year Michigan (5-0) and Pittsburgh (4-1) were named co-champions. The 1919 Rose Bowl was played between a Marine and a Navy team. George Halas played for the Navy and was the MVP. The 1918 professional football season also took a hit with many regional leagues suspending operations due to travel restrictions.

The spring of 1919 brought fresh hope that life was returning to normal and with that hope hockey. The season was completed in April of 1919 with the final Stanley Cup game being played between Seattle Metropolitans and the visiting Montreal Canadiens. The morning of game six, all but four Canadiens came down with the flu, causing the game and series to be canceled. Unfortunately, one of the Canadiens team members passed away two days later from flu complication. Both teams were later engraved on the Stanley Cup above the words "SERIES NOT COMPLETED." The 1919 Stanley Cup game is often used as an example of the dangers of a virus returning to claim more victims if sports start too soon.

Starting in the Spring of 1919 most of the United States opened its doors with the last quarantine ending in February. A third wave came and went with dramatically decreased numbers of flu related deaths. Americans desired a return to a normal life. Sports helped. Despite the Stanley Cup debacle, the 1919 professional baseball season went on as scheduled, as did the 1919 college football season. Professional football resumed including the founding of the Green Bay Packers. In sum, sporting events are an indication that the U.S. returned to normal about 7 months after the Influenza Pandemic took off.



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