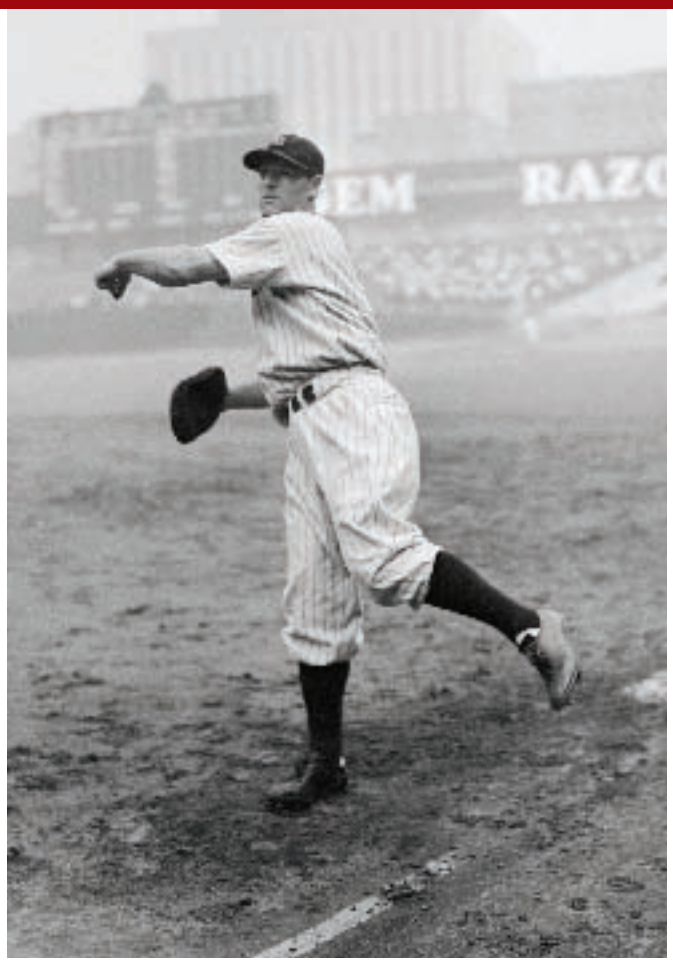
Lou Gehrig

The legendary Yankees slugger became known not only for baseball greatness, but also for incredible courage and dignity.

By Sue De Pasquale



The moment is one that will go down in the annals of sports history.

The mighty slugger Lou Gehrig, the "Iron Horse," stood on the Yankee Stadium diamond on July 4, 1939, a pile of trophies and gifts at his feet. In the stands, tens of thousands of admiring fans were silent. Wiping away tears, Gehrig leaned into the microphone and began, "Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the Earth …." His voice catching, Gehrig went on to praise by name the "grand men" he had known on the field and off, his parents, and wife Eleanor, a "tower of strength." He concluded, "I may have had a tough break, but I have an awful lot to live for."

The "tough break" he referred to, of course, was ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis)—the progressively fatal neurological disease that came to bear his name. The affliction had cruelly struck him down in his prime, as the 36-year-old came off two world championship seasons for the Yankees in 1936 and 1937. Though ALS felled the nation's favorite first baseman with heartbreaking swiftness, the grace and dignity Gehrig showed in facing his illness ultimately sealed his legacy as one of the most heroic sports figures of all time.

Born in New York City on June 19, 1903, young Louis was the only one of four children born to German immigrants Christina and Heinrich Gehrig to survive. An imposing woman, Christina plied her only child with food and worked tirelessly to make ends meet, earning her son's lifelong devotion. "If there were a Hall of Fame for mama's boys, Gehrig would have been a shoo-in," writes Jonathan Eig, in *Luckiest Man: The Life and Death of Lou Gehrig* (2005).

Young Lou enjoyed pickup baseball, but wasn't particularly coordinated. "Some ballplayers have natural born ability," the left-hander once said. "I wasn't one of them." He practiced relentlessly and by his teens was hitting balls out of the park at New York City's High School of Commerce. In 1921, he enrolled at Columbia University on a football scholarship, though he also played pitcher and first base for the Columbia Nine. Amazed by his hitting ability, baseball scout Paul Krichell signed him to the Yankees with a $1,500 bonus (about $93,000 in today's U.S. dollars). On June 2, 1925, Gehrig was tapped to replace an ailing Wally Pipp at first base. He would not miss a Yankee game for the next 14 years.

Lou Gehrig, No. 4, was a powerhouse at the plate. From 1926 until 1938, his batting average never dropped below .300. He clouted home run after home run, and hundreds of runs batted in. In 1931 he set the all-time record for most RBIs in a season (184) and the following year, on June 3, 1932, he became the first American League player to hit four home runs in a game. "To see his broad back and muscular arms as he spread himself at the plate was to give the impression of power as no other ballplayer I ever saw gave it," teammate Joe DiMaggio would later recall.

Throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, Gehrig played in the shadow of fellow slugger and teammate Babe Ruth, whose outspoken, fun-loving nature compared to the reserved Gehrig made Ruth a favorite with sportswriters and fans. "The fact that he was being taken for granted didn't bother Gehrig a bit," DiMaggio remembers. "He was courteous, gracious and informative whenever the writers asked him anything, but he didn't mind being left to himself."

Like the dependable train he was nicknamed for, the "Iron Horse" kept chugging along, leading the mighty Yankees to

postseason victories while playing through injuries that would have benched lesser men: a broken thumb, broken toe, back spasms, lumbago. (X-rays later showed 17 different fractures in his hands that had healed while he played.)

It was in 1933, when sportswriters first noted that Gehrig was on a "streak" of consecutive games played. That year he married the outgoing Eleanor Twitchell of Chicago, who became Gehrig's "manager." She urged him to start signing autographs, get chummier with the press and (for the first time) negotiate with Yankees management for a higher salary. With his wife's encouragement, the dimpled Gehrig even went to Hollywood, starring in the 1938 Western, *Rawhide*.

But during spring training in 1938, Gehrig began to falter. He tripped rounding base more than once, and developed painful blisters and bruises on his hands. Gehrig went hitless the first four games of the season and ended April with a dismal .133 batting average. The frustrated slugger had no idea that his once bulging shoulder muscles were atrophying, his calves shrinking; refusing to give up, he tinkered with his stance, ordered lighter bats, changed his grip—and continued to play in game after game. Named to the American League All-Star team that July, he came back after the break with a vengeance, recording 12 hits—including three home runs—in 33 at-bats. Though his body was betraying him, Gehrig pushed himself to the limit, ending the regular season with a .295 average and 29 home runs. The Yankees went on to win the World Series, handily beating the Chicago Cubs.

By the following spring, however, Gehrig realized his "slump" was inescapable. On May 2, 1939, he sadly told Yankees manager Joe McCarthy that he was removing himself from the lineup, ending his streak of consecutive games played at 2,130 (a record that stood until the Baltimore Orioles' Cal Ripken Jr. broke it in 1995). "It's a black day for me," McCarthy told reporters. "And the Yankees."

At Eleanor's insistence, Gehrig traveled to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota in a desperate effort to discover what was sapping his strength. It was there, in May, that Gehrig received the diagnosis of ALS. He died two years later, on June 2, 1941, with Eleanor at his side.

"His records will attest to future generations that Lou Gehrig was one of the greatest baseball players who ever lived," noted then *Herald Tribune* writer Richards Vidmer. "But only those who have been fortunate enough to have known him during his most glorious years will realize that he has stood for something finer than merely a great baseball player—that he stood for everything that makes sports important in the American scene."