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REFERENCE SERIES

WALTER PERRY JOHNSON - 1887-1946

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Walter Perry Johnson is considered equal to Babe Ruth, Honus Wagner, and Ty Cobb for his prowess in baseball. His professional life began as a result of playing on the Weiser, Idaho baseball team; and was known in Idaho as "The Weiser Wonder." Sportswriters dubbed him "The Big Train" due to the relentless velocity of his pitching. Johnson's greatest fame lies not only in his pitching ability, but also in his thoughtfulness and genuine modesty.

Johnson was born November 6, 1887 in Humboldt, Kansas and raised on his family's farm until they moved to Olinda, California in 1901. In California, Johnson attended Fullerton Union High School, graduated, and signed with Tacoma, a Northwest League team. At the age of sixteen Johnson was sent to Weiser, Idaho where he played for three seasons, pitching seventy-five scoreless innings and averaging fifteen strikeouts a game. He was discovered in Weiser by a baseball scout and offered a chance to play baseball in Washington, D.C. In 1914 Walter Johnson married Hazel Lee Roberts. Together they had five children.

Johnson played for the Washington Senators, a second division team, from 1907 to 1927, and set numerous records. He was noted as the hero of the 1924 World Series, and was presented the American League Most Valuable Player Award by President Calvin Coolidge. He was one of the original five baseball players that were the first inductees of the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1936. At the time he was considered the fastest pitcher in baseball. Ty Cobb said of Johnson, "We couldn't touch him. . . he had the most powerful arm ever turned loose in a ballpark." Sportswriters noted that Johnson was a kindly man who did not want to hurt anyone with his blazing fastball.

A biography of Johnson was published in 1995 by his grandson, Henry W. Thomas. The book notes that "It was Johnson, above all other players, who came to personify gentlemanly conduct in the heat of battle. . . one of a small number of like-minded stars tempering the game's roughneck reputation in the century's early years." Johnson later managed at Newark and Washington, but was not as successful.

Johnson won his Republican bid for the Board of Commissioners in Montgomery County, Maryland, and later became a contented farmer in Germantown, Maryland. He stated upon his retirement that he guessed he would always be a country boy. He died of a brain tumor December 10, 1946 in Washington, D.C. at

the age of fifty-nine.

According to his biographer, Johnson "remained an unspoiled individual, his name unmarred by any hint of wrongdoing, on or off the field." The Walter Johnson Memorial dedicated at Griffith Stadium in 1947 now stands at Walter Johnson High School in Bethesda, Maryland. Some of Johnson's records and baseball statistics, as recorded in the Biographical Dictionary of American Sports - Baseball include:

- 416 wins in 21 seasons
- won 20 or more games a season twelve times
- record number of strikeouts - 3,947
- record number of consecutive scoreless innings-56 in 1913
- pitched in most games in American League history - 802

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(This information has not been edited.)

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