

Billy Graham Keeps His Eye on the Prize

Baseball and ministry. The connection between the two may not seem like a home run until you take a closer look at the life of Billy Graham.

Mr. Graham has been intertwined with the national pastime since he was a kid, playing ball on his family's dairy farm.

That is, when he wasn't busy milking the cows.

So as Major League Baseball opens its 2013 season, what better time to look back at how the game of baseball played a surprisingly key role in shaping the ministry of Billy Graham.

Dreaming of Playing Pro

Chores were Billy's main priority growing up around the farm, but a close second was playing baseball, or as Billy called it "pitching ball."

Pitching ball usually happened "at lunchtime and in the evenings after chores with the husky McMakin boys—Albert, Wilson and especially Bill," Billy Graham explained in his book "Just As I Am."

Baseball was a vehicle for Billy to connect with the neighbor kids and opened the door to a close friendship with Bill, who became his closest friend.

At one point, Billy Graham had dreamed of playing baseball professionally, sparked by reportedly meeting Babe Ruth during one of his "Barnstorming Tours," which were very popular during Graham's youth.

"But the talent for baseball obviously was not there," he said about himself.

Billy Graham barely made the Sharon High School baseball team, playing only as a substitute, when someone else was sick.

"It turned out I was a fairly good fielder because of my long reach," he said. "I was not a good hitter, though. I batted from the left side of the plate, cross-handed somehow, the same way I later played golf."

But he did remember one quirky highlight from his high school years.

"I did make it into the Charlotte Observer once, though, playing basketball for Sharon High School," he said. "I got into the game as a sub and somehow my name made it into a sports column."

The Billy Sunday Factor

It was the early 1920s and the legend of Billy Sunday was coming to town.

Graham was five years old. He didn't know much about Sunday, who was around 60 at the time, or his ministry, which was at its peak, but he did know that Sunday used to play baseball.

Sunday was popular. Not the best hitter, but his great speed, dazzling outfield catches and base-stealing excitement (246 steals in 9 seasons) made him one of the game's most likeable players.

But now, Sunday was using his fame for the Lord and Graham's father wanted to take him to hear Sunday preach.

"I was overwhelmed by the huge crowd," Billy Graham recalled, "and properly subdued by my father's warning to keep quiet during the service lest the preacher call out my name and have me arrested by a policeman."

Sunday's ministry made a powerful impact on a man named Mordecai Ham. And in 1934, Billy Graham was later saved at a

Moredcai Ham meeting in Charlotte, N.C.

A Father-in-Law's Influence

Dr. L. Nelson Bell, father of Billy Graham's wife, Ruth, had a promising baseball future, starting in college at Washington and Lee.

But Dr. Bell gave up a chance to play professional ball – the Baltimore Orioles reportedly wanted to sign him – to become a medical missionary in China, where Ruth was raised and gained her worldview.

After 25 years of work in east Asia, Bell and his wife, Virginia, moved across the street from Billy and Ruth in Montreat, N.C., and had a strong influence on Billy Graham's ministry.

Yankee Stadium (1957)

The date was July 20, 1957. The temperature at Yankees Stadium was 93 degrees.

One of the most memorable Billy Graham Crusades was held in one of the most historic and iconic baseball stadiums of the 20th century.

Even Vice President Richard Nixon came that night, sitting on the platform and extending greetings from President Eisenhower.

"That was the first time a national political leader of his prominence had attended one of our Crusades," Graham said.

The stadium was packed. A record crowd of 100,000 people shoe-horned inside, with another 20,000 outside who couldn't get in, increasing the temperature of the historic event. And it highlighted a 16-week nightly crusade at Madison Square Garden.

“The heat was fierce,” Graham remembers.

How fierce?

“105 degrees on the platform and how anyone, including me, managed to concentrate is still beyond my imagination.”

Camden Yards (2006)

Baseball marked another historic moment in Billy Graham’s history as his final public speaking event happened at Baltimore’s Camden Yards on July 7, 2006.

Franklin Graham spoke all three days at the Metro Maryland Festival and on the final night, over 35,000 came to Camden Yards, where Billy Graham also preached.

The Orioles were in a rebuilding year, finishing 70-92 and Billy couldn’t pass up an opportunity to connect with the home-team crowd about the team.

“From what I read, they need our prayers,” he said.

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