



The Pitch That Killed

Mike Sowell

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Since major league baseball began in 1871, there have been roughly 30 million pitches thrown to batters. Only one of them killed a man. This is the story of Ray Chapman of the Cleveland Indians, a popular player struck in the head and killed in August 1920 by a pitch thrown by Carl Mays of the New York Yankees. Was it, as most baseball observers thought at the time, a tragic but unavoidable accident? Mike Sowell's book investigates the incident and probes deep into the backgrounds of the players involved and the events that led to one of baseball's darkest moments.

The Pitch That Killed Details

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Spiros says

A gripping account of one of Baseball's watershed seasons, this book unaccountably sat on my shelf for about three years; I only dusted it off after reading HEART OF THE GAME, a book about another Baseball fatality. Like the later book, this book traces the paths taken by the main protagonists, Carl Mays, the man who threw the fatal pitch, and Ray Chapman, the man whose career was cut so drastically short: further, it puts the event into the context of what has to be one of Baseball's most eventful seasons. Before the season, the owners had determined that, in order to promote hitting, which in turn would increase attendance, "trick pitches" would be outlawed from all but 32 pitchers, and that new balls would be frequently put into play as old ones became scuffed and discolored. Also before the season, the biggest name in the Game, Babe Ruth, was sold to the Yankees, where he joined his ex-Bosox teammate, Carl Mays, who had forced a trade from Boston the previous year. Despite the Babe's early season slump (he didn't hit the first of his record-shattering 54 homers until May 1), offense rocketed throughout the Game, leading to allegations of a "rabbit ball". The American League pennant race evolved into a tight, three team struggle amongst the defending champion White Sox, the Ruth-led Yankees, and Tris Speaker's Indians. The first speed bump was Chapman's beaning and subsequent death; the next was the breaking of the Black Sox scandal, with the suspensions of the seven current Sox who had conspired to throw the 1919 Series. Even the Yankees faced adversity down the stretch: Ruth sat out several games with a "chigger bite" on his arm, and Mays, their most effective hurler, skipped several turns in the rotation following Chapman's death.

Sowell does an excellent job recounting this hectic season, and makes clever use of the lexicon of the time to give one the flavor of the events as they are taking place, including this description of Mays on the fatal day: "Before leaving, he had taken a chicken neck out of the icebox and stuck it in his pocket. As was his custom, he would chew it during the game to keep his mouth moist." Ew.

P.S.: this was among the last books I bought at Chelsea Books, and I would like to give props to Brian Bilby. We miss you, and hope all is going well for in Upstate New York.

Barbara says

I think my abandonment of this book says more about me than about the book or its author. This is clearly a meticulously researched book, told in a lively, sports columnist's fashion. I found that I just didn't care enough about the 1920 pennant race to re-live it, game by game.

Gary Anderson says

I've always known that in the early part of the last century a pitcher named Carl Mays threw a ball that struck and killed a player named Ray Chapman, the only fatality ever to occur on a major league field during a game. Intriguing as that was, I never thought much more about it other than as a bit of trivia.

Then last fall Summer Game Books brought out a new edition of Mike Sowell's *The Pitch That Killed: Carl Mays, Ray Chapman and the Pennant Race of 1920*. Sowell's writing combines the weight of a historian's

approach with a sportswriter's flair to create an excellent reading experience that illuminates an era, its players, and an unparalleled baseball tragedy.

Sowell provides in-depth context for the Mays pitch that killed Chapman by giving us not just the life stories of those two men, but also those of their teammates, family members, opponents, and bosses. I was surprised to find that Hall of Famers Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Tris Speaker, and Joe Sewell are large figures in this story.

Maybe that's what I liked best about this completely satisfying book: It's a captivating story with fascinating characters, internal and external conflicts, a century-old setting vividly rendered, and a tragedy more complex than any trivia question.

Tom Stamper says

Whereas accounts of the Black Sox scandal of 1919 feel like ancient history to me, Sowell makes this book about the 1920 season seem modern. The moment we lose Ray Chapman in the story is heartbreaking. You feel the loss although every person in the story is long since dead. I had heard of Chapman previously, but I didn't know he was so popular. He was just an answer to a trivia question. It turns out that he was funny and humble and married to an heiress. 1920 may have even been his last season as a player because his father-in-law would have paid him more in the family business.

I knew a little more about pitcher Carl Mays coming in, but I didn't know he was so despised. That Ty Cobb comes off as level-headed in his dislike of Mays was surprising. And yet Sowell does a great job of explaining how Mays was his own worst enemy and not an altogether bad person taken as a whole. Mays did what Bob Gibson and Don Drysdale did in the 1960s.

The book also takes the time to recall the pennant race that year with Cleveland fighting against the defending A.L. Champion White Sox and the Yankees in their first year with Babe Ruth. Ruth gets a good deal of ink as he was teammates with Mays in New York and Boston. Tris Speaker is also prominent as the Indians player-manager and star Centerfielder. I had never read anything biographical about Speaker before this. I had no idea that he was a Texan. I didn't know he had ever managed in the big leagues.

I think what makes the book easy to read is that it seems more like good reporting than history. The reader gets information and smooth delivery and can draw their own conclusions about the disputes and meaning of it all. If you are like me and tend to read books about the "live ball" era, this book offers a well-told look at the transition between those eras.

Dave says

One of the best books on baseball I have ever read, (and that's saying a lot) It is a story of Ray Chapman (the only player to die during a major league baseball game) and the man who threw the fatal pitch Carl Mays. It is as the cover promo stated the best baseball book no one has ever read. Don't make that mistake, find a copy and read it.

Lisa Kilbride says

This book is extremely well-researched, well-written, informative, and also very depressing. I am glad to have read it, but will be gladder when more time has passed so that I don't feel this close to the events that happened. Hard to say "I really liked it" or "it was amazing," but I don't believe this sad story could possibly have been told any better. Will go ahead and give it the 5 stars on that basis.

Dan says

Impeccably researched book that is a twin bio of Ray Chapman and Carl Mays. In August 1920 Ray Chapman, an all star shortstop and an extremely popular player for Cleveland, was beaned in a game at the New York Polo grounds by Carl Mays, the submarine pitcher of the Yankees. The pitch ricocheted off Chapman's temple and blood was everywhere. Chapman was quickly transported to the hospital and lost consciousness en route. He died the next morning of brain clotting despite doctors' efforts to relieve pressure on his brain. His funeral was attended by thousands of fans.

Mays, the pitcher, routinely led the league in hitting batters and despite an excellent pitching record had a very poor reputation among other players. Ty Cobb on more than one occasion threatened to do him bodily harm if he continued to pitch high and tight. There is no evidence that Mays meant to bean Chapman and there is evidence he was truly remorseful. After some teams boycotted him, with the league's help he went on to a hall of fame worthy career. He never made it into the Hall of Fame ostensibly because many fans and sportswriters believe he tried to throw the 1921 series.

This book is very dense on facts and unquestionably is the authoritative read on Chapman and Mays and the beaning. So five stars on research, probably three stars on the writing. There was a lot of superfluous information such as a chapter on Chapman's replacement, Ray Sewell, that while factual seemed wholly out of place and the tone did not fit well with the tragedy.

So glad I read the book as I learned a lot although it could have been a hundred fewer pages. I would have liked to see more quotes from sportswriters of this period and on the editing side longer paragraphs would be easier for reading.

Lance says

Most baseball fans know about Ray Chapman being the only player to die because of an on-the-field incident when he was beaned by Carl Mays. These same fans may also know that he was very popular, not just with the fans of the Cleveland Indians but also with teammates. Then they may also be aware that Mays was not very popular, even before this tragedy, with the players, teammates and opponents alike.

Just these topics would make a good book, but author Mike Sowell takes these and crafts an even better book by giving readers a complete picture of not only Mays and Chapman and that fateful day of August 16, 1920, but by including so many other key baseball men such as Tris Speaker (the Indians manager), Babe Ruth and Miller Huggins, the reader gets the complete picture of the men involved and the lead-up to that fateful pitch.

Mays was known as a trouble maker before arriving to the Yankees from his days with the Boston Red Sox.

It didn't affect his pitching as he had success with both teams and was a key member of the Yankees staff as they were involved in a three team pennant race with the Indians and the Chicago White Sox. His pitching was affected, however by a new rule that was enacted to disallow trick pitches. Mays' underhanded delivery was deemed to be this, but he still threw in that manner that was effective and hard for a batter to pick up, as would be horribly on display during an at bat by Ray Chapman.

Chapman, on the other hand, was a young player on the rise with the Indians. A gifted shortstop, he was becoming a better player and gaining the confidence of his teammates. Newly married and expecting his first child, the young man seemed to have the world in his hands when he stepped up to the plate during a game against the Yankees. A pitch from Mays was coming in high and tight on Chapman, who never saw it coming. It hit him in the left temple and he was knocked to the ground bleeding and unconscious. He was able to make it off the field with help from his teammates, but died the next day in the hospital.

Just this alone would make a good book, but Sowell turns it into fascinating reading by including many details on both Mays and Chapman, such as when Mays told his wife in 1918 that he may have needed to do something "out of the ordinary" to get his name in the papers, or that Chapman may have retired after the 1920 season after promising his father-in-law to consider giving up the game to run their successful family business. Sowell also weaves the tight American League pennant race into the story along with other people that makes story of Chapman's death even more compelling. Little items such as Speaker getting involved in the decision on where to bury Chapman, a New York writer who tried to implicate Mays in throwing games during the 1921 World Series and the talk of players boycotting any game in which Mays was the pitcher.

All of this and more makes this book one that every baseball fan and historian must read. Even though I had known about this book for many years, I never picked it up until it was selected as a book of the month in an online baseball book club. My only problem with that is that now I am kicking myself for waiting so long to read it.

<http://sportsbookguy.blogspot.com/201...>

Gus Alaka says

Very well-written and detailed account of the death of Ray Chapman, who died when a pitch by Carl Mays hit him in the head. Sowell does a good job of bringing the reader inside of the baseball world in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Some games are recalled almost in box score-like fashion. I'd recommend this to sports fans.

Rick Strong says

The setup could not have been any more dramatic and poignant if it had been scripted: Ray Chapman was an excellent shortstop and very personable player (even Ty Cobb liked him!) and was in what was rumored to be the last year of his major league career: he had just married Kathleen Daly, daughter of a prominent Cleveland businessman, and it looked as if he would retire at the end of the season to devote himself to his new family and the family business. He had at various times led the Indians in runs, walks, sacrifices, assists and stolen bases. He batted .300+ in three seasons, and was hitting .303 with 97 runs when the central incident in this book takes place.

Carl Mays was a top pitcher for the Yankees - he finished the 1920 season with a record of 26-11. He was a sidearm/submarine pitcher, and he threw spitballs, which at the time were still legal. He was very talented, but he was personally abrasive and had few friends.

On August 16, 1920 Carl Mays fatally beaned Ray Chapman in what is still the only deadly at-bat incident in major league baseball. It was not intentional as far as can be determined, but happened at twilight in an era when major league parks had no lighting. Mays threw, Chapman didn't move; perhaps he didn't see the ball. The sound was so much like that of a ball hitting a bat that it wasn't immediately obvious that Chapman had been hit. But then Chapman fell; he was conscious as he was led off the field but could not speak coherently, and several hours later he died as a result of the trauma.

This book is meticulously researched and well-written, centered around the fatal beaning but also providing fascinating looks at the careers and personalities of both players, and at what has been called one of the greatest pennant races of modern times. Cleveland's manager was deeply depressed after Chapman's death, but he and the team recovered to lead the Indians to win the 1920 World Series.

Recommended very highly for those interested in baseball history, and for readers who appreciate how real life can so often exceed fiction in sheer drama and irony.

Fred Shaw says

4.5 Stars

The Pitch that Killed, by Mike Sowell, is a true story of a Cleveland Indians shortstop, Ray Chapman, who was hit in the head by Yankee pitcher, Carl Mays during play on August 15, 1920. Chapman, known as "Chappie", by his teammates and, well, everyone, died in the early hours the next morning. Luckily this is the only time a player was killed by a pitched ball in Major League Baseball. Needless to say, the suddenness of Chappie's death devastated his recently wedded and pregnant wife, his teammates, family, the Cleveland community, and baseball in general. The fallout hit everyone including Mays, the pitcher.

It's hard to say you enjoyed reading a book about a death in sports, but Mike Sowell did a great job of bookending the tragedy with portraits of the two players and games played that season. Great baseball legends were playing at the time, like Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb and Tris Speaker, which allowed Sowell to add a lot of "history in the making" stories.

Some good came out of Chappie's death. His superior fielding and batting had already helped develop the Indians into contenders for the Pennant, and the Indians finished the season as the World Series Champs. Secondly because of the tragedy, players were eventually required to wear protective headgear.

To fill the now vacant shortstop position, the Cleveland Indians brought up a 21 year old player from the minor leagues. His name was Joe Sewell and although he had never played at that level before, his debut was the start of an amazing career. He was eventually inducted in the Baseball Hall of Fame. On the train ride to Cleveland to start his new job, he was scared to death. He thought that the only way he could play in the Majors, was to believe he was "Chappie" reincarnated. Of course he told no one but that is how he mentally prepared.

Sowell, did a great job of writing an interesting book about a sad subject. He did his research well.

Greg Fanoe says

The underlying story is interesting, but in no way justifies a 300+ page treatment. The bulk of the book is made up of biographical sketches of uninteresting people on the fringes of the story and exact details of individual baseball games.

Still and all, it's pretty wild that the only fatal beaning in MLB history involved two star players in their prime, who played for two teams involved in one of the closest 3 way pennant races in history, where the pitcher was probably the most hated player in the league and the hitter was one of the most beloved players in the league.

Ellis Knox says

The book lives up to the press on it. Clear, uncluttered writing; it's the events themselves that are memorable.

The book is about much more than just the one incident and the two men involved. The 1920 American League pennant race was extraordinary, coming right down to the final days. It involved many great baseball figures, including Tris Speaker, Ty Cobb, and Babe Ruth. One of the World Series games included rare events such as a pitcher hitting a home run and an unassisted triple play.

If you like to read baseball stories at all, you need to be sure to read this one.

Harold Kasselman says

An engrossing and fascinating story of the tragically sad end to the life of one of baseball's most popular players Ray Chappie Chapman. The book chronicles the 1920 pennant race in the American League and brings to life the personalities of greats like Tris Speaker and his Cleveland team that beat the Babe and his Yankee team despite the death of their shortstop in August.

It is a little known story that grabs your heart because you know that no matter how much you hope for a change in the historical record, Carl Mays the man that everybody found easy to despise was still going to throw a pitch that killed the beloved Chappie.

It is fascinating to read about the personal loss to his teammates and the emotional havoc that it created for them in human terms. Yet we get to feel that Chappie was still celebrating when the pennant is clinched in the form of rookie replacement Joe Sewell who takes it upon himself to embody the spirit of the fallen leader. This is a book that captures baseball in the early 20th century and makes the game and personalities of the players intriguing

Joy D says

In 1920, major league baseball player Ray Chapman was killed by a pitch made by Carl Mays. This book

tells the backstory of the players involved in this tragic event as well as that of the year's pennant race. Notable names, such as Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb, make an appearance to give the story context. I had mixed feeling about this book.

On the plus side:

- I learned the details about this tragedy, which ultimately led to mandatory use of batting helmets many years later
- It was interesting comparing modern day baseball to 1920's baseball, where a player might get a "ground rule" double because his ball hit a policeman's horse or a game getting called due to darkness or parents handing small children onto the field to shake Babe Ruth's hand after a home run or fans being charged with petty larceny for keeping balls hit into the stands

On the minus side:

- Too much detail for my taste, including blow by blow accounts of many individual games
- Numerous formatting issues, such as spelling errors, inconsistent use of quotation marks, and misplaced hyphens in the e-book
- It lacked a personal connection to the players; instead, it was a straight-forward narrative telling what happened first, second, third, etc. I guess I just didn't care for the style of the author, which is an individual taste.

Recommended to those who enjoy detailed stories of the history of baseball.
