

**1921**

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### **Award-winning baseball history**

By Christina Kahrl

Last weekend, I was in Cleveland attending the Seymour Medal conference as the keynote speaker, but that's less interesting than the conference, and particularly the *raison d'être* for the event itself. The Seymour Medal, named for the eminent baseball historians Harold Seymour and Dorothy (Seymour) Mills, is awarded by the Society for American Baseball Research; it honors the best work of baseball history published in the previous calendar year. This year, SABR awarded the hardware to co-authors Lyle Spatz and Steve Steinberg for their book, *1921: The Yankees, The Giants, and the Battle for Baseball Supremacy in New York* (University of Nebraska Press).

After the conference, they discussed their work with me, with an eye towards explaining why it's a volume you might want to add to your own baseball bookshelf:

**CK:** *Your book 1921 talks about a season that concluded with an all-New York World Series showdown. Besides the series itself, what was at stake for baseball?*

**Lyle Spatz:** Because the public did not become aware of the 1919 Black Sox scandal until very late in 1920, the 1921 season was in many ways a test, to see if fans would still care about the game. Two great pennant races and several heroic individual performances showed they did. Also at stake was baseball supremacy in its major market, New York City, and the way the game would be played in the future.

**Steve Steinberg:** It was also the first year of the commissioner [Kenesaw Mountain Landis], who was solidifying his power and banned the Black Sox. It was a year in which Babe Ruth has his second power season in a row, in New York, solidifying the emergence of a new

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long-ball game, and the end of the Deadball Era. And 1921 reflected New York's rise to the top of the baseball world, where it would stay for most of the century.

**CK:** *The game itself was different, but so was the sportswriting. In your research, where did you notice the biggest differences between the game, then and now, and what were they?*

**LS:** Before radio and TV, to say nothing of the blogosphere, fans got all their information from newspapers. New York had a multitude of newspapers, morning and afternoon, and most with several editions. Writing for these papers were some of the most memorable reporters and columnists ever to cover the game, a group that included Grantland Rice, Fred Lieb, Damon Runyon, Joe Vila, Hugh Fullerton, and Sam Crane. While in some cases, the language was a bit flowery, references were sometimes made to poetry and the classics that unfortunately many modern day readers would find incomprehensible.

While these men were not averse to criticizing the players, managers, or club executives, each had his favorites and those they wanted replaced. Even Ruth, McGraw, and Miller Huggins came in for their share of bad press, yet there was a seemingly unwritten line regarding personal habits they mostly did not cross. Nevertheless, discerning fans knew that when the newspaper said that Giants pitcher Phil Douglas was taking some personal time off, what was really happening was that Douglas had disappeared on one of his periodic drinking sprees. Now, of course, we would know the flophouse he was in and the brand of outlawed whiskey he was drinking.

**SS:** Sportswriters -- most of them -- assumed the role of making ballplayers "heroic." The start of a 1920s' emergence of sports superstars: Jack Dempsey (boxing), Bobby Jones (golf), Bill Tilden (tennis), and the Babe. We drew on a dozen or so New York papers alone, and others in other cities. Each added perspective to the season; each revealed some things that others did not provide.

In '21, a dominating, control(ling) guy such as John McGraw could still flourish (as a manager)... that's almost inconceivable today. He called every pitch of the 1921 World Series from the dugout.

**CK:** *Why should contemporary fans care about the 1921 season, and what lessons does it provide them as they follow the game today?*

**LS:** As a baseball historian, my belief is that fans should care about every season; realistically, not everyone does. However, no living fan can remember a time when the Yankees were not the most famous franchise in baseball. That all began in 1921.



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**SS:** It was the first Yankees pennant; up until then, this was a team with a long history of losing. It ended with one of the greatest conflicts in baseball history, as the Yankees-Giants battle was about who would dominate New York, which style of baseball would dominate the game, and which man -- McGraw or Ruth -- would be number one in New York.

It's almost incomprehensible, Babe's dominance of the game in 1921. He was 12.4 percent of all American League home runs that year. Had Barry Bonds hit 12.4 percent of all National League homers in 2001, he would have had to have hit 366. 1921 reminds that, while fans love great players and managers, they really enjoy the really colorful great ones even more.

Finally, the wealthy teams -- as these two teams were -- could pay for talent from the less wealthy clubs, a trend we have seen repeatedly since. The '21 Yankees had the Red Sox, the '21 Giants had the Braves and Phillies. Money has and will continue to influence the game, yet baseball still continues to thrive.