

STEINBERG AND SPATZ'
MIKE DONLIN BIOGRAPHY
WINS 2025 LARRY RITTER AWARD

by Doug Skipper

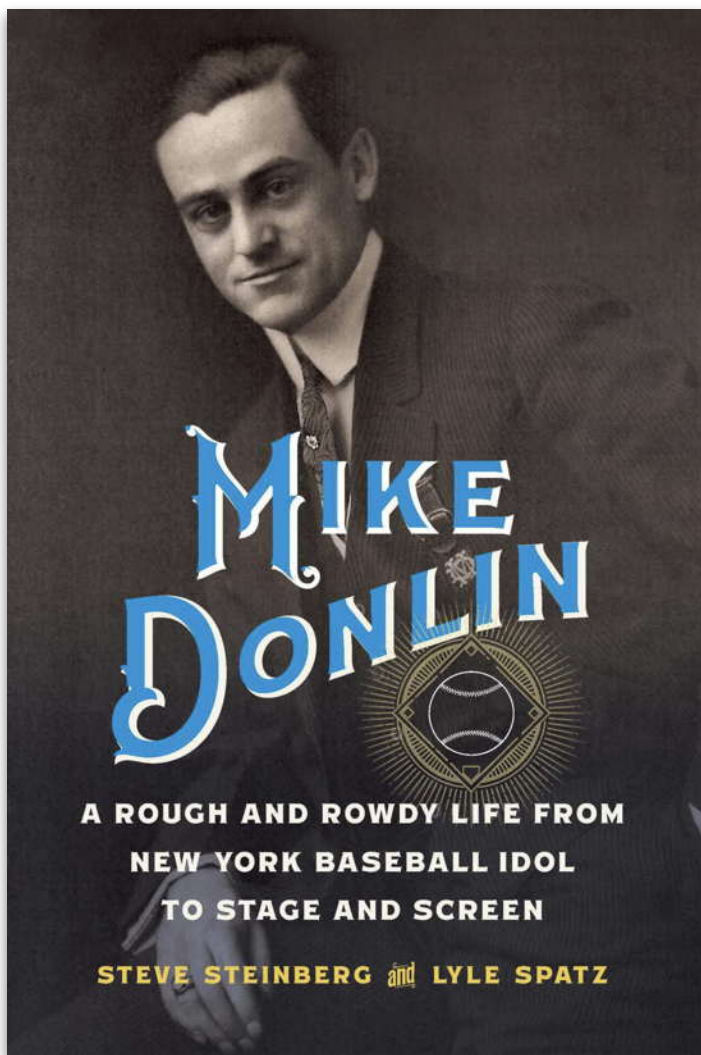
In recognition of their illuminating and informative biography of one of the Deadball Era's most colorful and controversial stars, *Mike Donlin: A Rough and Rowdy Life from New York Baseball Idol to Stage and Screen* (University of Nebraska Press, 2024), Steve Steinberg and Lyle Spatz will receive the 2025 Larry Ritter Award.

Carefully researched and captivatingly written, Steinberg and Spatz's biography recounts the family tragedies of Donlin's childhood and his contentious and confrontational rise to major league stardom. "Turkey Mike" enjoyed a string of successful seasons and helped lead John McGraw's New York Giants to two pennants and the 1905 World Series title. But he battled alcoholism and was unable to master his temper, missed part of a season while in jail, skirmished with teammates, management, umpires and fans, and despite his success and stellar talent, wore out his welcome in several cities.

In 1906, Donlin famously and fortuitously met, fell in love with and married Broadway and vaudeville comedy sensation Mabel Hite, one of America's most beloved and popular personalities. Steinberg and Spatz masterfully examine the celebrity couple's very public and passionate relationship and how the union shaped the remainder of Donlin's baseball career.

After sitting out the 1907 season due to a contract dispute, Donlin enjoyed an epic 1908 for McGraw, then stepped away again for the next two seasons to appear with Hite in the baseball-themed production *Stealing Home*. In addition to spending more time with Mabel, Donlin hoped to capitalize on his baseball fame to seek fortune on the stage, but any success he enjoyed was likely based more on his notoriety than his acting skill.

He returned to baseball in 1911 and renewed what had been a complicated and sometimes contentious relationship with McGraw, who promptly traded him away. After two nomadic seasons, tragedy visited yet again, when Mabel was diagnosed with intestinal cancer and died months later at the age of 29. After Hite's devastat-



The INSIDE GAME

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ing demise, Donlin endured a couple of seasons of diminishing skills, making one final curtain call with McGraw's Giants in 1914. He did some acting, moved to Hollywood, and appeared in nearly 100 early moving pictures before his death in 1933.

Although a celebrity during his lifetime, Donlin's legacy has faded during the elapsed century since. While we will never know what Donlin's career might have yielded had he been able to master his demons or if he had devoted all his energies to baseball, or for that matter, what the celebrity couple might have accomplished if Mabel had not been felled by cancer, Steinberg and Spatz revive his memory in what is both a baseball biography and an enduring love story.

"My baseball 'sweet spot' is the Teens and 1920s, which years straddle two eras," Steinberg reflected. "Mike Donlin took Lyle and me back to the first decade of the last century. It provided an opportunity to explore new seasons and personalities and to delve into a new world, that of vaudeville. This project revealed how great a ballplayer Mike had been—and could have been, had he not left the game for the woman he loved. A common focus of the books Lyle and I have written is people who have been forgotten, even though they were well known in their times."

Steinberg and Spatz have each written several award-winning baseball books, and teamed together on four books, including *The Colonel and Hug: The Partnership that Transformed the New York Yankees* (Nebraska, 2015), winner of the SABR Baseball Research Award and *1921: The Yankees, the Giants, and the Battle for Baseball Supremacy in New York* (Nebraska, 2010), winner of the Seymour Medal.

"Like many fans, my baseball "sweet spot" remains the years covering when I first became enamored of the game," Spatz stated. "In my case, that would be the years from the end of the war to the first expansion, 1946 to 1960. But as the game continues to change, I have found myself digging deeper and deeper into its history. In the four books that I have collaborated on with Steve Steinberg, we have written mainly about the Deadball Era. While I was familiar with most of the players, managers, and owners of the period, research into the books

has been a learning experience for me, especially our latest on Mike Donlin.

"Neither I nor Steve, whose "sweet spot" is the Deadball Era, realized how good a player Donlin was, and how unfortunate that he has been so overlooked. It was a joy to uncover his story and to be rewarded for it by the Deadball Committee icing on the cake. When (informed that) the Donlin book had won the Larry Ritter Award I looked up the previous winners. I am humbled to be in such outstanding company."

The award is bestowed annually by the Deadball Era Committee (DEC) of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) to the author(s) of the best book about baseball between 1901 and 1919 published during the previous calendar year. The winner's work must demonstrate original research or analysis, a fresh perspective, compelling thesis, impressive insight, accuracy, and clear, graceful prose.

The award honors Larry Ritter, the author of *The Glory of Their Times*. In the 1960s, Ritter interviewed a number numerous Deadball Era players about their experiences and memories, and the resulting book launched the field of Deadball Era research.

"No one did a better job of bringing Deadball Era players back to life than Larry Ritter, with his book, and cd's, *The Glory of Their Times*," Steinberg noted. "In the early 2000s I was away from my family during my birthday for the first time, on a research trip to NY. I spent a wonderful afternoon with Larry Ritter that day, a visit that cemented my connection to the Deadball Era players as extended members of my 'family.' It is indeed an honor to be recognized with this award by the committee that has done so much on behalf of this fascinating era."

RITTER AWARD NOTES

Conferred annually since 2002, the award is presented at the DEC meeting at SABR's annual convention each summer. The presentation of the 2025 award is planned in Irving, Texas in June.

The winner is selected by the Larry Ritter Book Award Committee, chaired by Doug Skipper, with members Mark Dugo, Ben Klein, Craig Lammers, Mark Pattison,

Andrew Milner, Don Jensen, Art Mugalian and DEC Chairman John McMurray.

Two other books were finalists for the 2025 Larry Ritter Award: Ron Rapoport's *Frank Chance's Diamond: The Baseball Journalism of Ring Lardner* (Lyons Press; February 6, 2024) and John R. Husman's *Roger Bresnahan: A Baseball Life* (McFarland; May 8, 2024).

William Ecenbarger's *Work, Fight, or Play Ball: How Bethlehem Steel Helped Baseball's Stars Avoid World War I* (Temple University Press; February 2, 2024), Travis Stern's *Ballplayers on Stage: Baseball, Melodrama, and Theatrical Celebrity in the Deadball Era* (University of Tennessee; July 3, 2024) and Timothy Zarley's *1901: The War of the Baseball Magnates: How the battle for baseball supremacy shaped the future of America's pastime* (Yelraz Publishing; March 5, 2024) received honorable mention.

CHICAGO WILL INCLUDE BALL TEAMS IN ORDINANCE AGAINST SCALPING

CHICAGO—Baseball parks are to be held to account in the same manner as theatres in the practise [sic] of ticket scalping if an ordinance recommended by the license committee of the City Council becomes a law.

An amendment pertaining to the parks was tacked on to the theatre ordinance after a lively debate in the committee meeting last night.

The ordinance forbids theatre owners to allow tickets to go out unless payment is received for them and forbids the return of unsold tickets and refunding of money by the theatre management.

Hawking of tickets on street corners [at] or near a theatre is forbidden. The penalty is revocation of license.

Newark (New Jersey) Evening Star and Newark Advertiser, May 3, 1912

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Norwich (Connecticut) Bulletin, June 26, 1912