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Urban Shocker

Steve Steinberg

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URBAN SHOCKER

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URBAN SHOCKER

Silent Hero of Baseball's Golden Age

STEVE STEINBERG

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
Lincoln and London

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Set in Lyon by Rachel Gould.

Designed by N. Putens.

*To Brian, Mat, and Allie, who have
patiently endured my travels to and
preoccupation with the past in my
baseball explorations over the years*

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Preface

You've shown the fickleness of Fame,
But with it the eternal worth
Of one who dares to Play the Game
Beyond the scorers of the earth;
Who sees above the maudlin roar
Something beyond the final score.

—from “New Year’s Dedication” by Grantland Rice

I first connected with Urban Shocker in 1998. I found him on an old baseball card, when my ten-year-old son and I were frequenting card shows and shops. Shocker’s pitching accomplishments, key role with the great 1927 New York Yankees, and untimely death all intrigued me. I soon came across a quote in *The Yankee Encyclopedia*: “Quite possibly Urban was the most courageous man in sports history. Ill with a swollen heart, Urban fought bravely in his last few years to play baseball and indeed for life itself.” I was now completely hooked and chose to follow my curiosity, to embark on a search for this forgotten star.

In early 1999 my correspondence with baseball historian Robert Creamer (1922–2012) provided me with encouragement from the start. On March 19, 1999, he wrote,

Preface

If you're fascinated by Shocker and are "crazy" enough to want to do a book on him, sure. . . . It's tedious work, going through microfilm day after day, looking for nuggets of information, but it can be marvelously rewarding. . . . Don't depend only on the *New York Times*, microfilm of which seems to be in every library in the country. Other papers often had more sports detail. Look at as many papers in the same city as you can. . . . I wish I could give you specific leads on Shocker, but I can't. . . . Even though he was one of the best pitchers of his era, he seems remarkably unknown.

I was going through a period of immense change and turmoil at the time. I had recently sold my retail company, which had been a central part of my life for more than twenty years. I was lost without it. I was also approaching the age of fifty and suddenly realized I was no longer young.

I began researching Shocker's life and writing his story. Originally a creative work, it had dialogue between the personalities, as well as my search for Urban and his story, a memoir of sorts. After more than three years, in the fall of 2002, I had written almost 200,000 words. It was long and unwieldy. The story wasn't ready. Neither was I.

I revisited the Shocker manuscript in 2009. At that same time, I was diagnosed with heart failure. It was a complete and inexplicable surprise. My family history is one of great genes and longevity. I had been feeling fine, and none of the symptoms of the disease were present, even at my annual checkups. My cardiologist, who could find no medical explanation for my heart failure, said it may have been caused by a virus.

Had my regular doctor not run an EKG during my 2009 annual physical and noticed an irregularity, I might not have lived to finish this book. I might have simply died in my sleep later that year. For the third time in my life, I had come close to death. The other two were a near-drowning and a very bad car accident decades earlier. For the third time, I have moved forward, in this case because we have been able to treat the disease so successfully.

My illness provides me with a stronger understanding of and connection to Shocker's story. From my first meeting him back in 1998 in a baseball card shop with my son, Shocker and I have reconnected ever

more strongly on the same playing field. The discovery of my own heart failure has added another dimension to my understanding of him.

Now more than ever, after collaborating on two books on the Yankees of the 1920s with Lyle Spatz, it is time for Urban Shocker's story to be told. He has been waiting for almost ninety years.

In my correspondence with Shocker's nephew, Roger Shockcor (1920–2003), I was able to pique his interest, and he wrote me on April 19, 1999, "Thank you so much for the articles, cards, etc. about Urban Shocker, which you enclosed with your letter of 3.29.99. I did not realize what a great pitcher Uncle Urb was until after I read and digested the material you sent me. In addition, he was also quite a guy and someone we can be proud of. You have sparked my interest in the story you are trying to put together, and it could have more potential than I originally thought."

Baseball has a unique beauty and rhythm. By understanding this and Urban's story, I have gained perspective on life. I have learned to experience time and make the most of it. By taking the time to go back in time, within the timeless framework of baseball, I have discovered that it is possible to slow time down and savor it. For more than fifteen years, this perspective has guided my life and enriched it immensely.

I have reshaped this book as a traditional nonfiction biography. It is a story of courage, love of the game, and passion for life. Back on April 4, 1999, baseball historian Donald Honig wrote me, "You have picked out one of the more silent stars of baseball's past." During my journey with this book, I have often been asked, "Who? Who's Shocker?" People more familiar with the game and its history have been equally puzzled and asked, "Why? Why Shocker?"

I hope this book answers both of these questions. It certainly has for me.

Acknowledgments

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Jennifer McCord was an invaluable mentor in my early writing career, when I spent countless hours with drafts of Shocker's story. The following people were generous with their advice and expertise: Art Black, Stephen Boren, Bill Deane, Marshall Eaton, Irv Goldfarb, Bill James, Bill Loughman, Norman Macht, Cyril Morong, Peter Morris, Rob Neyer, Bill Nowlin, Stephan Saks, Jay Sanford, Fred Schuld, Ron Siegel, Barry Sparks, Joe Wancho, Robert Wiggins, and Russell Wolinsky. And the SABR research community continues to be an incredible source of knowledge and support. My apology for any omissions here.

I always want to provide unique images to accompany my work, and many of the images came from my collection. The assortment has been enhanced by photographs from many other sources. Urban Shocker's relatives who provided family photos and information were Linda Jordan, Rene Josephson, Roger Shockcor, and Joan Willenbrock. Private photo

Acknowledgments

collectors who have continued to support my work are Dennis Goldstein and Michael Mumby.

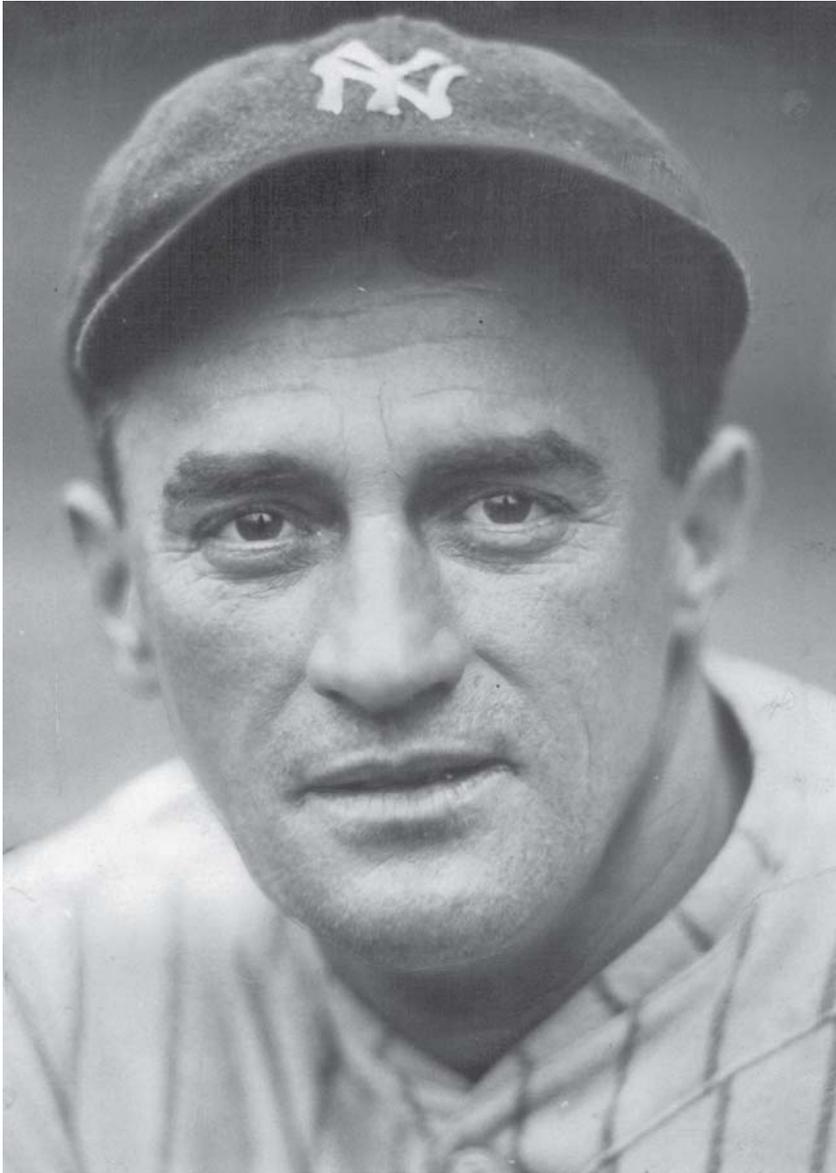
I have also drawn on the images of a number of libraries and museums: Library and Archives of Canada, Cleveland Public Library, Toronto Public Library, Mary Wallace and the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University, Charlie Brown and the St. Louis Mercantile Library, Missouri History Museum, SABR-Ottoson Photo Archive, and of course John Horne and the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library. I have rounded out the assortment with images from the Associated Press, Diamond Images' Bob Olen Collection, the Rucker Archive, Bill Loughman, and Roland Hemond and Margo Quinn Hemond.

Hillary Levin at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* provided photos, as did Alicia Samuel at Bettmann/CORBIS.

All of the above people and institutions helped the story of Urban Shocker come alive. My sincere thanks to all of them.

URBAN SHOCKER

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1. Urban Shocker made his home in St. Louis for the last decade of his life, but he longed to be a member of the New York Yankees. His return to the club after the 1924 season “brought balm to his injured spirit.” *Cleveland Public Library Photograph Collection.*

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1

Passing By and Drawn In

I am the start and the beginning,
I am the first and the final inning,
Soul of the ancient game;
I take them raw and I show the way
That leads in promotion and to pay,
The road that leads to fame.
I catch them young and I send them far
Where great crowds welcome the coming star,
And I am forgotten then;
And when they are old, on the outer rim,
When their arms are gone and their eyes are dim,
I take them back again.

—from “The Bush League Speaks Again” by Grantland Rice

Rennie Heydt had never been to a funeral. He had not seen so many people in one place, except at baseball games at Sportsman’s Park here in St. Louis. He watched as a hearse slowly drove past the gates and the archbishop’s summer home at St. Louis’s Calvary Catholic Cemetery.¹ The hearse wound its way past the small lake and headed north, traversing the road closest to the cemetery’s stone walls. It was followed by dozens of automobiles and hundreds of people alighting from streetcars and streaming through the gates of the vast burial grounds.

Rennie, his curiosity prodding him, shoved his bike under a bush and fell in with the somber crowd. They slowly made their way through the rolling green hills, shaded by the majestic oak, gum, and poplar trees.

Rennie was just shy of his tenth birthday, and death was the farthest thing from his mind. Growing up in a row house in St. Louis's Baden neighborhood nearby, he had mixed feelings about his "neighbors" in Calvary Cemetery. Over the years he had not gotten used to them, and they still gave him the creeps. Between this Catholic cemetery and the adjacent nondenominational one, Bellefontaine, there were almost eight hundred acres of land for the dead. Land that could have been a park with ball fields, bike paths, and trails, Rennie thought.

A hush came over the crowd as the casket was lifted out of the hearse. Six well-built young men in dark suits carried the shiny wood box to its final resting place. Archbishop John Joseph Glennon began chanting in Latin:

Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine
(Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord)
et lux perpetua luceat ei
(And let perpetual light shine upon him)

Rennie worked his way through the mass of people, squeezing toward the front of the gathering. There must be at least a thousand people here, he thought. A couple of these men looked vaguely familiar, but where had he seen them?

Then, with a start, he realized he was looking at New York Yankees stars Lou Gehrig and Waite Hoyt. He had seen them only in their baseball uniforms, either at the ballpark or in newspaper pictures. They looked different so dressed up. They were somberly leading the other pallbearers to the pit of freshly dug earth.²

De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine
(From the depths I have cried unto thee, Lord, Lord hear my prayer)
Domine, exaudi vocem meam
(O Lord, let my prayer come unto thee)

He could hear the sobbing of the women nearest to the casket and the murmurs and hushed remarks of the men nearby. This was the final

farewell to St. Louis's great pitcher Urban Shocker, a man the city called one of its own and a man who called St. Louis home, even after he was traded to the Yankees.³

In paradisum deducant te angeli
(May the angels lead you into Paradise)
In tuo adventu, suscipiant te martyres
(May the martyrs greet you at your arrival)
et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Jerusalem
(And lead you into the holy city of Jerusalem)

A chill went down Rennie's spine. He had discovered Major League Baseball in the last couple of years. He knew about Shocker, winner of almost twenty games for the Yankees in each of the past two seasons and a star for the St. Louis Browns a few years earlier, before Rennie had become interested in baseball.

Many questions were spinning through Rennie's mind, as he listened to the comments of mourners as the funeral was ending. Was Shocker really as good as these people surrounding the grave were saying? Was he sick while he played for the great Yankees teams of 1926 and 1927? Why did he die so young?

Requiescat in pace
(May he rest in peace)
In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen
(In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.)⁴

Rennie went on to learn much more about Shocker. One of St. Louis's leading sportswriters, James Gould, had written, "Shocker's death removes from the world of sport one of the greatest pitchers in the game and one of the game's most colorful figures."⁵

Rennie Heydt never forgot that day in the cemetery. More than seventy years later, the memory was still clear in his mind's eye.

I met Rennie Heydt, the "Candy Man," an eighty-year-old fixture in St. Louis baseball circles, at a spring 1999 St. Louis Browns reunion dinner.

Passing By and Drawn In

Rennie shared his memories of Shocker's funeral. A longtime employee of the Peter Paul Candy Company, he was so welcome at Busch Stadium that when he invited me to a game that year, we were admitted on sight. In March 2000 Rennie was killed in a car-pedestrian accident on I-270 outside of St. Louis.⁶