

Passing On An Untruth

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Given 30-Apr-16; Sermon #1320c

I have to break myself in here to making a commentary. I went through a couple of Sabbaths without one, and I've got one for you. It's titled, "Passing On an Untruth."

What is the exact distance between the point from which a baseball pitcher throws the baseball and the front edge of home plate in a major league, minor league, college, and high school level baseball game in the United States, Canada, and Latin America? Thank about that. What is the distance *exactly*?

Why am even asking this question? It is because I read the transcript of a speech delivered recently at Hillsdale College in Michigan. I subscribe to *Imprimis*, which is the title of Hillsdale's free publication of speeches given on its campus during recent months.

The speech was titled: "Who Was Ty Cobb? The History We Know That's Wrong." It was authored by Charles Leerhsen. He was an editor for *Sports Illustrated*, *People* and *US Weekly*, and for eleven years senior writer for *Newsweek*. It was not prepared and delivered by an amateur.

The subject was interesting to me because of two issues that formed the heart of what the author was speaking about. Baseball provided the venue for the evidence he found within his research for a specific story. But what he found was a far more serious nugget of wisdom that he passed on at the conclusion of his speech.

What began his search was a brainstorm. Since he was is now free lancing his expertise, he proposed an idea for a book to Simon and Schuster Publishers. He would do the work and then if they liked it they would buy the book and it would become their property. They liked the idea so they gave him the go-ahead and the funds by which to operate.

The article would be on Ty Cobb. Nobody had written extensively on him for well over 20 years. Ty Cobb was arguably, among three or four others, the best player of baseball ever. At the very pinnacle of statistics that can be gathered regarding the level of his play is that in his over 20 years of playing baseball at the major league level, his lifetime batting average is .366. No other professional baseball player ever is anywhere even close to that height.

Why is that distance question I asked at the beginning pertinent? The distance is 60 feet, six inches. Why are those six inches there? Nobody knows! The baseball is three inches in diameter. It is because when the pitcher throws the ball for the batter to hit at that 60 feet, six inches, it is traveling at between 90 and 100 mph.

It is very often not traveling in a straight line, and the batter has to begin swinging at the ball within about .3 to .4 seconds, which means just a few feet after the ball leaves the pitcher's hand. Most players are considered good hitter if their average is around .300. That means that except for the very, very best of hitters the batter is going to be a failure at making a solid connection with the ball well over 2/3 of the time. For an employee in almost every American business, that 2/3rd failure rate would probably get them fired.

Let me give you another example of how hard this is. Babe Ruth, who was the second person accepted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, struck out. He never made contact with the ball more than any other player in the history of baseball. He was good, too! A 2/3rd failure rate is okay for baseball, but almost nowhere else.

Mr. Leerhsen did his research thoroughly. In 2015, his book titled *Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty*, won the Casey award for the best baseball book of the year. He names the names of those he interviewed, including the writers of previous books on Ty Cobb. He also interviewed actors, like Tommy Lee Jones, who portrayed Cobb in an entire movie on Cobb's life; Al Stump, noted author on sports for many newspapers; Ken Burns (you've probably heard that name), who produced a most noted long run TV series on baseball that included a great deal on Ty Cobb.

He included Charles Alexander, another noted author of sport books, and asked them all point blank why they lied about Ty Cobb—his personality and the way he played the game—when the information that would refute much of the mythology surrounding him was available.

They all gave the same basic answer. It was that they repeated what was available. Mr. Leerhsen proved them wrong because he found a great deal more in his research. The real problem was they simply did not do good, honest research. The reality was they were simply supporting a lot of lies.

There is no doubt Cobb played the game hard—to win. And that he was indeed thin-skinned, as we call it. But Leerhsen found no evidence whatever of racism, and in fact, Cobb encouraged baseball as a collective group before Jackie Robinson was hired to open the doors to black players.

There are clear records of Cobb attending Negro League Baseball games and sitting on the bench with the players for the games. Cobb indicated in an interview that his own personal favorite players in the major leagues were Willie Mays and Roy Campanella—both black. One of the major charges against him was racism. Leerhsen couldn't find any.

Leerhsen could find no interviews of other professional players who personally played against Cobb who disrespected him. Just the opposite, in fact; they admired him in the interviews Leerhsen found.

There are two lessons from this speech, one of which Mr. Leerhsen passed on:

I knew going into this project—having been at one time an editor at *People* magazine—that human beings take delight in the fact that the rich and famous are often more miserable than they are. [So if you find a flaw, great!—see?] What I didn't understand before was the power of repetition to bend to truth. In Ty Cobb's case, the repetition has not only destroyed a man's reputation, it has obliterated a real story that is more interesting than the myth.

A second lesson was this: That the ones responsible for generating the mythology about Ty Cobb were the writers, especially newspaper writers,

because out of self-concern they wanted to appear greater than they actually were, so they exaggerated within their reports.

This fits right into today's news because this week the results of a poll were in of Americans regarding their assessment of the reliability of the national media. Eighty percent of the respondents replied that with varying degrees of distrust, from "they didn't believe a thing they said or wrote," to a "merely mild questioning of what the reporters said or wrote," that they disbelieve because media is merely working for the government, attempting to sell the party line. Interesting. Americans are catching on, slowly but surely.