

# Burns hits home run with baseball documentary

By Henry Herx  
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Whatever the status of the baseball strike, the boys of summers past are back to remind viewers of what the sport of playing ball is all about in "Baseball," a nine-part documentary series premiering with "First Inning: 1840s-1900" Sunday, Sept. 18, 8-10 p.m. EDT on PBS.

The next four innings air Monday-Thursday, Sept. 19-22, at the same time, with play resuming the following week.

The first episode begins with a piece written by Walt Whitman for the 1846 Brooklyn Eagle in which he describes the pleasures to be found in playing "the game of ball."

The program then proceeds to show that the game didn't start with Abner Doubleday but stems from rounders and cricket, English sports adapted by American colonists into the game of town ball, first written about in 1744.

Town ball gradually evolved into the modern form of ball that has remained standard — except for minor changes — since 1845, when the New York Knickerbockers Baseball Club was founded.

Baseball was played on both sides of the Civil War and the soldiers brought it home with them, making it a truly national sport with teams across the country.

The game turned into a professional sport in 1869 when the Cincinnati Red Stockings began paying their players, something *The New York Times* decried as "paying professionals to perspire in public for the benefit of gamblers."

Organized ball began in 1876 with the establishment of the National League. Major league baseball was now a business, and a monopoly at that.

The club owners were in full control, with profits guaranteed by keeping the lid on players' salaries, chiefly through the reserve clause binding a player to his team.

From the start, the players tried to organize, going so far as to set up their own league in the 1880s. The owners responded by raising



The Sporting News Baseball great Lou Gehrig is part of Ken Burns' epic nine-part miniseries "Baseball," a General Motors Mark of Excellence Presentation airing on PBS Sept. 18 at 8 p.m.



Sporting Museum of New England  
Legendary switch-hitting slugger Mickey Mantle of the New York Yankees is in the line-up for Sept. 26 at 8 p.m.

salaries, then dropping them when the Players League collapsed in 1890.

Baseball as a business is the story of the unending battle between the owners and the players that continues to the present day.

The next four episodes follow decade by decade the classic era of the game and the legendary players who dominated it and became national heroes.

It was an era of masterful pitchers — Walter Johnson, Christy Mathewson, Grover Cleveland Alexander — matched by colorful sluggers as diverse as the lethargic Honus Wagner and the redneck Ty Cobb, whose nastiness bordered on the psychotic.

The Chicago Black Sox scandal of 1919 is thoroughly detailed in its account of the gamblers who got six of the players to throw the 1919 World Series.

There is also a good profile on Judge Keenesaw Mountain Landis, who was named baseball commissioner in order to restore the public's confidence in the game.

The fourth episode looks at baseball in the Roaring Twenties and how Babe Ruth changed baseball from a pitcher's game to a hitter's contest.

While "Baseball" focuses on the history of the major leagues, each of the programs calls attention to the owners' "gentlemen's agreement" to exclude blacks from their teams.

Because of this, blacks formed their own leagues after World War I and the fifth program is largely devoted to the talented African Americans who competed in the Negro Leagues.

"Baseball" also gives some attention to women, another minority excluded from the majors but with other forums in which to play ball.

Filmmaker Ken Burns uses much the same approach in "Baseball" as he did in his previous PBS blockbuster, "The Civil War."

The account of big-league wars on the playing field are accompanied by a wide assortment of commentary from writers like Studs Terkel to politicians such as Mario Cuomo.

The programs go from the very specific to much wider perspectives offered by historians, anthropologists, movie actors and a sprinkling of sports writers.

Added to this, along the way, are the letters and other writings on the sport penned by the famous and unknowns as read by personalities such as Gregory Peck and the late House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill of Massachusetts.

Best of all are the old newsreels preserving the visual record of the great players of the past and the context of the times in which they played.

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### SPEAKERS

**Rev. Jack Healy:** "Veritatis Splendor" and the morality of human actions

**John Willke, M.D.:** Abortion and breast cancer

**Beverly McMillin, M.D.:** Abortion; a view from an ex-abortionist

**Dr. Joyce Little:** Trinitarianism and egalitarianism

**Mr. John Regan Jr.:** RICO and abortion protest

**Mother Mary Agnes Donovan:** The Sisters of Life, a new religious order promoting life

**When:** Saturday, September 17, 9 a.m.

**Where:** St. Mary's Hospital, 89 Genesee Street, Rochester

**Cost:** \$15

*A pro-life buffet dinner will be held the Saturday evening of the seminar at 6:00 p.m. at the Mapledale Party House*

**Cost: \$20, dinner only; both events \$30 (children under 18 half price)**

**Make checks payable to the Catholic Physician's Guild**

**Send to: W. Stewart Beecher, M.D., 106 Gregory Park Condo, Rochester, NY 14620**