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Americans & Their Games: *Sports and the Immigrant's Tale II*



Who was Mike “King” Kelly?

How did Lou Bierbauer, an Erie native and son of German immigrants, give Pittsburgh’s baseball team its nickname “Pirates”?

Who was Wong Kim Ark?

Last week we began an exploration of the immigrant experience in America through the lens of sports concluding it with the story of the first great American sporting celebrity of the 19th century – John L. Sullivan.

If Sullivan was the first genuine sporting celebrity transcending his sport to become famous in the larger culture, then baseball and its early Irish adherents made baseball a sport for the people. The first organized professional baseball league was the National Association of Professional Baseball Players. It was formed in March 1871 at Collier's Rooms, an upstairs saloon in New York City operated by Irish immigrant actor James W. Collier. [1] It evolved into the National Association and eventually, in 1876, the National League. Its original members included the Cleveland Forest Cities, the Boston Red Stockings, Hartford Dark Blues, Troy Haymakers, and the New York Mutuals. [2]

More important than the founding of the first professional league in an Irish bar – let's give a salute to tavern culture – is the fact that the great players of baseball's early days included a great many Irish and German immigrants. Although the anti-Irish bias and bigotry of the era carried over to the ballfield, the early Irish ballplayers' success in America's newly emerging sporting culture opened doors for other immigrants into the larger American culture.

Who were some of these great players?

The first Irishman to play professional baseball was Andy Leonard. Born in County Cavan in 1846, he played for the Washington Olympics in 1871, and then in subsequent years with the Boston Red Stockings, the Boston Red Caps, and the Cincinnati Reds. [3] Tim Keefe starred for the 1886 New York Giants and Pud Galvin began his Hall of Fame pitching career with the Buffalo Bisons. Other great Irish stars included Hughie Jennings, Jimmy Collins, and Cornelius McGillicuddy, who, of course, was more famous as "Connie Mack." [4]

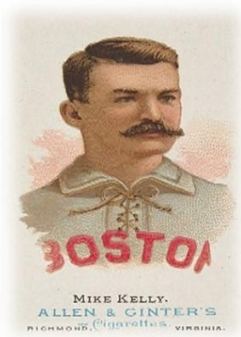


Roger Connor, son of an Irish immigrant, was baseball's first home run king decades before Babe Ruth – Connor hit 138 homers during his 18-year career compared to Ruth's 714. A member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, Connor starred for the New York Gothams. Because of his powerful physical stature and home run prowess, the team's nickname was changed to "Giants." So, the New York Giants now San Francisco Giants honor the great Irish home run hitter of the 19th century. Connor always wore a green shamrock on his uniform. [5]

I'm not sure they were the greatest Irish players of the era, but the three most famous were John McGraw, Mike "King" Kelly, and Ed Delahanty. McGraw became a legend first as a player for the original Baltimore Orioles of the 1890s

– the masters of “inside baseball,” “hitting them where they ain’t,” and a daring, roughhouse style of play – and then as the pugnacious manager of the New York Giants – baseball’s first dynasty.

Delahanty was one of five brothers to play Major League Baseball. A son of Irish immigrants in Cleveland, Ohio where he attended the old Central High School, Delahanty was a power hitter of renown. He died a mysterious death, falling off a bridge over Niagara Falls when the train conductor forced him off the train for rowdy, drunken behavior. [6]



As David Fleitz says in his article “The Irish in Early Baseball,” which can be found at **Irish America** magazine: “The grandest Irish American player of them all during this era was Kelly, the “King of Ballplayers.” Son of Irish immigrants, Kelly was born in Troy, New York on New Year’s Eve 1857. A great player, Kelly “treated every day as a party ... this multitalented player ... saw action as both a catcher and shortstop as well as in the outfield.” [7] In 1880, playing for the Chicago White Stockings, he became the bane of manager Cap Anson.

His free-spirited antics off the field did not interfere with his on-field talent. He led the Chicago White Stockings to five pennants in seven years.

He became “King” Kelly.

Like John L. Sullivan, his fame transcended his sport.

Handsome and gregarious, Kelly was baseball’s first matinee idol.

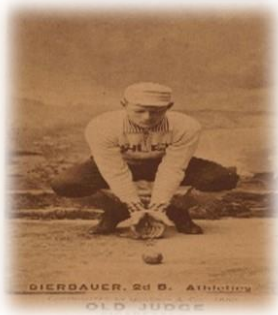
As Fleitz reports, “The King smoked cigarettes on the bench, and once, when asked if he drank alcohol during games, replied cheerfully, ‘It depends on the length of the game.’” Fleitz continues, “He invented new ways to slide into bases, raising large clouds of dust as the fans cheered, ‘Slide, Kelly, slide!’” [8] A video of the 1900 Edison version of the popular song honoring Kelly – “Slide, Kelly Slide” – sung by Arthur Collins can be found here.

One of Kelly’s shenanigans became part of baseball lore. Fleitz relates the story:

(The King) was also known to hide an extra ball in his uniform shirt for special occasions. One day, Kelly was in right field late in the game as the setting sun cast twilight over the field. The batter belted a liner to right, and Kelly made a spectacular headlong dive in the darkness, rising with the ball in his hand as the crowd cheered his game-saving play. Manager Cap Anson complimented him on the catch. ‘What catch?’ asked Kelly in

his Irish brogue. ‘The ball went a mile over me head.’ He had ‘caught’ the extra ball, not the game ball. [9]

How did the Pittsburgh *Pirates* get their name? Once known as the Allegheny City team, then simply the *Alleghenys*, when did they become the *Pirates*? Well, there is an Erie connection to the story, and it involves the son of German immigrants.



While not quite so colorful as their Irish compatriots, the German stars included Erie, Pennsylvania’s Lou Bierbauer who gave the Pittsburgh Pirates their nickname. He was playing for the Philadelphia Athletics in the American Association, but during one of the periods when multiple leagues competed with one another, amid the contractual chaos Lou jumped from Philadelphia to the Pittsburgh Alleghenys amid howls of protest from folks in Philadelphia, who called the Pittsburgh team “Pirates” for stealing Bierbauer. [10]

Over a hundred and thirty years later, the name has stuck.

Other great German players of the era included Pittsburgh Pirate Honus “The Flying Dutchman” Wagner and Addie Joss of the Cleveland Blues, who pitched a perfect game. And, of course, the greatest player of German heritage was none other than George Herman “Babe” Ruth – the grandson of German immigrants from Prussia and Hanover, Germany. [11]

Professional baseball of the 19th century was largely an East Coast phenomenon. While all of this was happening, on the other side of the country, anti-Chinese sentiment was boiling over leading to the first of America’s most significant immigration acts. During all of American history prior to the late 19th century, America was essentially an open border country. If you could get here, you were in. That began to change in the last quarter of the 19th century. America began to close and regulate its borders. The first federal attempt to regulate immigration was the Page Act of 1875. It established federal control of immigration. It banned Chinese women, signaling the end of the open-borders era. [12]

Two points – open borders and Chinese women. As noted, prior to the Page Act, America’s borders were essentially open – if you could physically get here, you were in. The Page Act ended that for all time. More to the point, why ban Chinese women?

Beginning in 1848 with the California Gold Rush, there was a major influx of male Chinese workers. They did not have sufficient money to bring or to send for their wives. One result was San Francisco's flourishing prostitution industry. A large share of the prostitutes was of Chinese descent. It should be said that prostitution flourished among all nationalities during the Gold Rush. But Chinese women came in for particular condemnation. Ignorantly assuming all Chinese women wishing to enter the country must be prostitutes, U.S. Rep. [Horace F. Page](#) introduced an act to "end the danger of cheap Chinese labor and immoral Chinese women." [13] Technically, among other things, the Page Act barred immigrants considered undesirable, which it defined as an East Asian brought to the United States to be a [forced laborer](#) and any East Asian woman who would engage in prostitution.

The derogatory term "coolie" was used to describe laborers brought to the United States "without their free and voluntary consent, for the purpose of holding them to a term of service," that old southern euphemism for slavery. The Page Act imposed a [fine](#) of up to \$2,000 and a maximum jail sentence of one year for anyone importing such a person. [14] Put in its historical context, other than the racist singling out of East Asians, the Page Act actually was part of the ongoing attempt to stamp out slavery in all its forms. Page and others mistakenly assumed the male Chinese laborers were forced laborers, when in fact most were free men who intended to return to China. Page and others made the same error in judging Chinese women.

Since male labor was still needed to build railroads and to dig for silver and gold in western mines, only the ban on female East Asian immigrants was enforced. In 1882, with the railroads largely built and the mines dug, the Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese males. All Chinese and East Asians were banned from the United State. Chinese already residing in the United States were denied citizenship status. [15]



In 1898, however, the Chinese Exclusion Act spawned one very positive and ironic turn of events. Born in San Francisco, Wong Kim Ark was the child of Chinese immigrants. When he was denied re-entry after a visit to China, he sued, arguing that he was an American citizen by right of birth, as guaranteed by the 14th Amendment. He won his suit.

The court said: "Any child born in the United States is a U.S. citizen from birth (jus soli), with the sole exception of children born to a parent or parents with diplomatic immunity. ..." [16]

The Supreme Court decision in the *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* established the precedent that the children of immigrants are U.S. citizens. It would be of

immense importance during the next wave of immigration into the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act was not nullified until 1943 during World War II when the Chinese were our allies against the Japanese. It's hard to ask an ally to fight on your side while banning him or her from entering your country. So, wartime exigency overturned the bigoted legislation.

The second great wave of immigration occurred between 1885 and 1915. World War I brought immigration to a standstill from which it did not fully recover until the 1970s. This second wave differed significantly from immigration between 1845 and 1875. That wave, as we've noted, was dominated by Irish and German Catholics. During the second wave, "Old Immigrants" from northern and western Europe were still predominant – approximately 7.8 million came to America between 1870 and 1900. But they were accompanied by 3.1 million new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Immigration from Asia, because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, was minimal at 244,000. Between 1900 and 1915, the number of new immigrants grew to more than 15 million, marking a 50% increase over the period from 1870 to 1900. [17]

This transformed American culture, just like the Irish and German immigrants had done 50 years before.

In 1900, the population of the United States was approximately only 76 million. [18] An influx of 15 million in the next 15 years had a culture-shifting impact of 19%. It rattled the sensibilities of older Americans. But an estimated 10 million immigrants between 1900 and 1915 from southern and eastern Europe rattled the most. Numbers can quickly get bewildering, but during this period approximately 3.9 million Italians, 1.1 million Hungarians, 2 million eastern European and Russian Jews, and approximately 3 million Poles, Czechs, Slovenians, Romanians, and others entered America. [19]

They changed the face of the country. First, they didn't speak English; second, most were not Protestant, but either eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Jewish, or a mix of religious heritages. In some quarters, they were eagerly welcomed because they filled vacant jobs in the mining, manufacturing, shipping, and slaughterhouse industries, which were desperate for labor in a rapidly growing economy.

In other quarters, they were not.

As we will see in Part III, which explores the anti-immigrant fervor leading to the Immigration Act of 1924 closing the door, America's patrician elite considered these newest immigrants unfit to be considered American. They scorned Italians, all Slavs, and eastern European and Russian Jews. But in the meantime, the waves of immigrants clawed their way into American society as

laborers, artists, musicians, and athletes. And just like the Irish and Germans before them, they found sports a portal into American society.

Why, for example, to this day do Italian Americans have a special allegiance to the New York Yankees?

The answer is simple.

Italian immigrants were confronted by vicious bigotry and discrimination. Their garlic spiced food, their ardent Roman Catholicism, their love for homemade wine, their dark curly hair and dark – bigots said “swarthy” – complexion marked them off from other Americans. In that hyper race-conscious era, some southern and northern elites considered them not quite white. In fact, Columbus Day’s origin as a national holiday resulted from protests from the Italian government to President Benjamin Harrison after 11 Italian immigrants were lynched in New Orleans. [20]

Just as previous waves of immigrants, the newly arrived Italian Americans crowded together in cities forming dense, tightly knit neighborhoods – “Little Italys.” Out of those neighborhoods, the first to succeed in the larger culture were athletes, singers, and actors. Although he was not the first Italian American to play Major League Baseball – that honor goes to Ed Abbaticchio – Joe DiMaggio transcended his sport to become an American icon, just like John L. Sullivan and Mike “King” Kelly.

Before we meet “Joltin” Joe and his brothers, a brief nod to that first Italian American Major League Baseball player – western Pennsylvania’s own Ed Abbaticchio. Not only was Abbaticchio the first Italian American to play Major League Baseball, he was the first Italian American to play professional football. Born in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, Abbaticchio’s time predates the NFL, but he was paid to play football for the Latrobe Athletic Association, the first team entirely composed of paid professionals. In 1895, Abbaticchio was paid \$50 a game to kick and play fullback.



Abbaticchio made his major league debut on September 4, 1897 for the Philadelphia Phillies. Though a great minor league hitter, he was quite ordinary as a major leaguer. Over a 14-year career between 1897 and 1910, he played for the Boston Doves, another name for the woeful Boston Braves, the Philadelphia Phillies, and the Pittsburgh Pirates.

Abbaticchio played for 1909 World Champion Pittsburgh, where he was a close friend of Pirates’ legend Honus Wagner. He almost won the 1908 pennant for the Pirates when a ball he hit into the stands was erroneously called foul by Hall of Fame umpire Hank O’Day. Over time, the

story evolved into an urban legend that Abbaticchio had cost the Pirates a pennant by hitting a woman in the stands with a batted ball. Actually, he hit a game-winning home run, and the umpire blew the call. [21]



But the first great Italian American baseball stars were Joe DiMaggio and his brothers Dom and Vince. Other than Rudolph Valentino in the early days of silent movies, they were the first Italian American celebrities. Their parents were Italian immigrants. Living in San Francisco, they were fishermen. Joe DiMaggio quit school at 14 to play ball and at 17 joined his brother Vince on the San Francisco Seals of the Pacific Coast League. Vince would play for the Pittsburgh Pirates and brother Dom, short for Dominic, played for the Boston Red Sox. [22]



Joe DiMaggio made his major league debut for the New York Yankees in 1936. He hit .323 that rookie year and backed it up with a .346 mark against the New York Giants in the 1936 World Series. Following in the footsteps of Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, “Joltin” Joe led the American League in home runs and runs scored between 1937 and 1940. He twice led the league in hitting with averages of .381 and .352. In 1941, he set a record that still stands and might stand forever. He hit safely in 56 consecutive games. No one has come close in the intervening 82 years. Curiously enough, it is not Joe DiMaggio’s longest hitting streak. In 1933, with those San Francisco Seals, he hit in 61 consecutive games!

A great hitter, he was also a great fielder – playing, as sports commentators of the era opined, “smooth as silk.” In fact, he was so good, so smooth, he seemed so relaxed as he played, some ignorant fans – perhaps betraying an underlying bias – accused him of being lazy! Because he had such keen baseball instincts, he rarely had to overexert himself. He could anticipate the play and rather than scramble and jump at the wall to make a catch, Joe glided to the right spot and simply caught the ball.

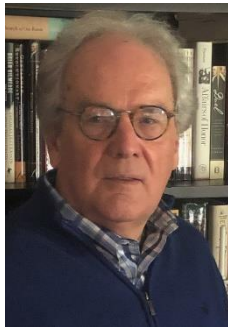
With Italian American teammates like Tony Lazzeri and Frank Crosetti, between that first title in 1936 and the last in 1951, DiMaggio and his Yankees won 10 American League pennants and nine World Series titles. A three-time MVP and member of baseball’s Hall of Fame, DiMaggio in 1954 married movie star and American icon Marilyn Monroe, cementing his status as an American icon. Although they divorced after only one year, DiMaggio remained her friend and benefactor until her death in 1962.

DiMaggio was beloved by Yankee fans for his dignity and demeanor.

So, the answer to the question, “Why do Italian Americans love the New York Yankees?” is that it was Yankees like Joe DiMaggio, Yogi Berra, and Phil Rizzuto who brought Italian Americans into the mainstream of American culture. And, in doing so, they put the lie to the vicious bigotry of anti-immigrant activists like Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr., Prescott Hall, Madison Grant, and Lothrop Stoddard – all of whom you’ll meet in Part III of “Sports and the Immigrant’s Quest for Inclusion.”

In Part III, as we continue the story, we’ll learn about the triumph of Jewish boxers; we’ll learn about eastern European immigrants who triumphed in baseball and football; we’ll learn how the Immigration Act of 1924 slammed the door shut on those eastern Europeans and we’ll learn how the Immigration Act of 1965 once again opened the door to another immigrant-driven era of American transformation.

For the next two weeks, however, we’ll be “noting” books and articles written by some of this year’s Jefferson Global Summit XV presenters. Next week, the spotlight will be on Peter Baker on “U.S. Foreign Policy, Russia-Ukraine ...” and *The Atlantic’s* Tom Nichols, who will discuss “Insights on the Decline of Democracy and the Rise of Illiberalism.” The following week Richard Reeves’ book *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It* will be featured.



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“Lou Bierbauer, Philadelphia Athletics, baseball card portrait *LCCN2008675105.tif*” at **Wikimedia Commons** available [here](#) accessed October 3, 2023.

“*Wong Kim Ark.gif*” at **Wikimedia Commons** available [here](#) accessed October 3, 2023.

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"DiMaggio brothers reunion, 1956.jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available [here](#) accessed October 3, 2023.

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End Notes

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