

This Morning

With Shirley Povich

'Say It Ain't So, Joe'

Greensboro, N. C., April 10.—I met a poor old rich man yesterday. In his garage he has a Packard and a Buick, and he owns the finest mansion in Greenville, S. C., but he's busted, broke—broken-hearted. He's sick, and he's afraid he's going to die in what for 20 years has been his disgrace.

I sat with Shoeless Joe Jackson in the rickety grandstand as the Nats played the Tigers in Greenville. In disguised curiosity, players of the Detroit and Washington teams sauntered past to glimpse the man when his presence in the park was whispered about. They wanted a gander at the fellow their fathers had told them about. They stared at the man who, their dads had told them, could do more things better on a baseball field than any player who ever lived.



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They saw a stout, florid-faced, powerful-looking man of 53. I found him sitting with his doctor. Without his physician, he could not go to the ball game. The latest of his heart attacks occurred only two weeks ago. "It was only a little jolt," he said, "but it's got me scared." He smiled when he said it, and he didn't look scared. Neither was there a scare only resignation, to his tone when he continued, "I don't think I'll last long, now."

How to begin, how to ask a man like that about the tragedy in his life—the fixed World Series of 1919 that brought his banishment from baseball.

He saved me the trouble. He was anticipating me. He said, "I know what you're going to ask me. It's what they all ask me when they get their nerve up. Well, Sonny, I'm as innocent as you are. I had no part in that fix in 1919."

How now to draw him out? Was he bitter toward baseball, I asked. Did he have any resentment toward the game that had thrown him out?

"No," he said, curtly. "Not bitter toward baseball. I don't care for Judge Landis."

He didn't like Judge Landis?

"No, he didn't keep his bargain with me. He said if the courts declared me not guilty, he'd stand by me. That word wasn't kept when the court acquitted me in the Black Sox trial. How can I like Judge Landis?"

Now he was talking more freely about the Black Sox scandal. "The evidence in court showed that Buck Weaver and I were innocent. Even the fellows who were in on the fix testified that we had no part in it. My God, Sonny, did you ever look up the records of that World Series?"

What about the records, Joe, I asked.

"I can take you home and show them to you," he said. "The only three games the White Sox won in the series, Buck Weaver and I won for 'em. Did you know that I made more hits—Twelve—than anybody in that series. And that it stood as a World Series record for total hits until 1930 when Pepper Martin got 13. Does that sound like I was laying down. My God, Sonny, all you have to do is look at the records."

Hoped Name Would Be Cleared

Some day, perhaps, they'd reinstate him, I said.

"I've lost hope, Sonny. That would be a happy day, but it won't come. It's hard to take, but what can a fellow do, specially when he's not going to be around much longer. They cut me off at my prime, I was only 32. But I don't mind that so much as the black mark I'll be taking along with me. I used to hope that they'd clear my name, but I guess they never will. My God, Sonny, that's the hard part."

He was born and raised in these parts, we remembered.

"That's right, Sonny, and they've fine people down here. They've always believed that Shoeless Joe Jackson never did anything wrong. They were so proud of me that this thing is hard on them, too. A few years ago the mayor of Greenville and 5,000 citizens signed a petition asking Judge Landis to clear my name, they wanted to show me they believed in me and that was wonderful. I only felt sadder when Landis turned them down."

One of the shoddy tricks against him he says, was the story about his "confession" of guilt in throwing the World Series to the Reds.

"There never was any confession by me. That was trumped up by the court lawyers. They couldn't produce it in court. They said it was stolen from the vaults. Does that sound right?"

I looked at him again and tried to visualize the superb athlete who could run and throw and field and hit so well that he was pressing Ty Cobb for ancient American League batting championships. I asked him how much he weighed in those days.

"In 1908 when I broke in, I weighed 175. When I got out in '20 it was 185. Today it's 235, and the doctor says some of it has to come off. I feel it when I'm in my garden."

What sort of a garden did he have?

"Hundreds of tulips, and white Scuppernon vines—I guess you call them white grapes. My wife and I have put in peach and cherry trees, that's where I spend most of my time. I only go to my business—I'm in the liquor business—for about an hour a day."

Scarcely true I thought could be those stories about the illiterate Joe Jackson who came out of the Carolina back country as a bare-

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foot boy, hardly able to sign his name, I asked him about the shoeless business.

"I guess I was quite a dunce when I broke into baseball. I was playing barefoot in the old South Atlantic Association when the Athletics bought me. I guess a lot of people thought I was quite a fool when I was in the big leagues, but I saved my money. And now I read about a lot of those smart fellows of my time in baseball working on the WPA. I guess I wasn't so foolish, because I'm well fixed with those two big cars in my garage and a big new house and a pretty nice liquor business."

But he wasn't enthusiastic as he spoke. He sounded as if he'd trade it all for word from Chicago that baseball's ban on Shoeless Joe Jackson had been lifted.

Down in Greenville, they like to tell the story about Shoeless Joe playing the outfield barefoot in the old South Atlantic Association. They like to tell about the day, they say, when Shoeless Joe came in from the outfield and complained to his manager:

"You better clean up some of that old broken glass that's out in centerfield, or all of your balls are going to get cut up."

Joe Shows Same Keeness

Out there yesterday, watching the Nats and Tigers, seeing a big league team for the first time in years, he demonstrated the keeness that had helped to make him a great ball player. As Charley Gehringer followed Barney McCosky to bat, Jackson remarked:

"Am I seeing double, or are those two hitters twins?"

Watching McCosky and Gehringer at the plate for the first time in his life, he had noted that in every detail their stance and batting strokes were identical. He had noted something that had probably escaped folks who saw the two players in action every day.

There used to be a story that Walter Johnson eased up on Jackson in those days when Jackson and Ty Cobb were fighting for the batting title.

"That may be true," said Jackson. "I know Johnson never liked Cobb. But if Walter was easing up against me, I never knew it. Some days I couldn't see his fast ball at all. I only heard it. The only way I could ever get a hit off him was to choke my bat and slap at the ball.

"We don't like to bear down on the tremulo stuff, but when he talked of those old days, Shoeless Joe seemed real enthused . . . and he seemed very happy, too, when he recalled that his was the batting style that Babe Ruth had picked out among all others to copy . . . But when there was a lull in the old time baseball talk, he seemed real sad.