

On Babe Ruth's Legs
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George Herman "Babe" Ruth (1895-1948), was the biggest baseball star of the 1920s and '30s, and arguably, of all time. He started out as a pitcher for the Boston Red Sox and was as good a pitcher as there was. He changed positions and became a power hitting right fielder. He was traded from the Red Sox to the New York Yankees early in his career and is known as *the* Yankee. In 1927, he hit 60 home runs, a record that stood for over thirty years. His record of 714 home runs in his career lasted over 40 years.

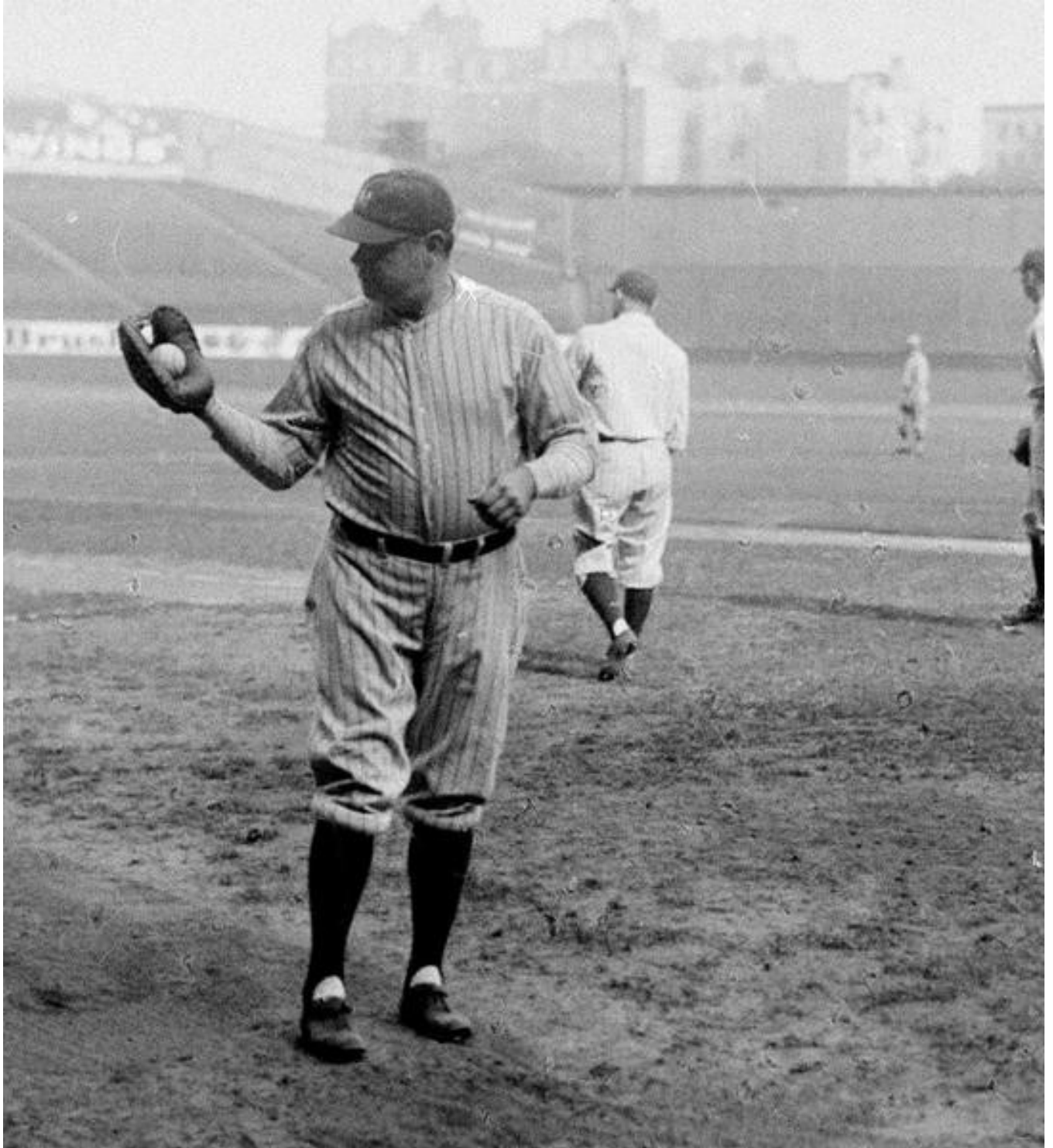
So that's Babe Ruth. Now let's go to the word "spindly." (Bear with me, this will all come together.) Spindly is not a common word. Here's a sample of dictionary definitions of spindly:

- Of a disproportionately tall or long and thin appearance that often suggests physical weakness: spindly legs.
- Frail or flimsy in appearance or structure: [a spindly table](#).
- Long or tall, thin, and usually frail: the colt wobbled on its spindly legs.
- Long or tall and thin and not appearing to be very solid or strong.
- Long and thin and looks as if it would break easily.
- Long or tall and very thin or slender, often to such a degree as to be or seem frail or weak.

You get the idea. A new-born colt has spindly legs. The rickety table has spindly legs. That gangly person has spindly legs.

Now back to Babe Ruth. Here are three pictures of him, the first one from early in his career with the Yankees, the other two from later on with the team. (He's the tall one in the second picture.) Look them over, paying particular attention to Babe's legs. Would

you say that he had spindly legs? Long, thin, frail? What do you think? Make a call: spindly, not spindly.







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I'm going to make a guess. You came down on the side of non-spindly Babe's legs don't look spindly to you, and you're pretty sure about it, right? Assuming I am correct, what do you make of this sample of quotes about the Babe (he was referred to as "the Babe") from books, magazines, and newspapers:

"His moon face, barrel chest, and spindly legs made him an instantly recognizable, beloved figure."

"Babe Ruth had an unusual build, huge in the torso with long spindly legs."

"They [fans] continued to torment him with a growing bloodlust as he strolled to the plate on his spindly legs in the fifth inning."

"Mention of Babe Ruth immediately conjures up jumpy black-and-white film footage of a pudgy powerhouse launching stratospheric homeruns, then clicking around the bases on spindly legs."

"Babe Ruth, his huge upper body looking top-heavy and awkward on spindly legs, waved his hat to the crowd."

"His round belly, spindly legs, twinkling eyes, and impish grin gave him an almost cartoon appearance."

"He was a big man with a booming voice and spindly legs, probably the best baseball player that ever lived."

"That the genes of his ancestors should line up in this one strangely shaped body to create so perfect a baseball player was even more improbable. Eyesight, hearing, depth perception, reaction time and physical strength all far above normal. And all of this within a weird shape: spindly legs supporting some 220 to 270 pounds, much of it trapped within a huge pot belly."

“He was forty, with a pot belly that couldn’t be supported by his spindly legs and a growing realization that his career was over.”

“Babe trotted around the bases on spindly legs.”

“Did kids worship Babe Ruth in the early '60s? It seems likely that the portly, spindly-legged slugger of the '20s and early '30s would have been eclipsed by more current ‘phenoms’ [top players].”

“We've all seen nostalgic black and white footage of ‘The Sultan of Swat’ Babe Ruth clouting one of his 714 career home runs, his spindly legs churning so quickly from his short-stepped gait that the video almost appears to be sped up faster than real time.”

“One can imagine this spindly-legged, pigeon-toed, pear-shaped player in his famous tiptoe trot around the bases with those baby steps.”

“While Ruth’s spindly legs were vulnerable to soreness and injury, especially in his later years as a player, he had enough upper-body strength to keep hitting home runs into the stands until his retirement at age forty.”

“I went to the 25th anniversary of Yankee Stadium as well as Babe Ruth Day and saw and listened to Ruth in his famous speech before dying from cancer. I saw Babe swing the bat and saw his famous spindly legs and could imagine what he might have been like in 1926—on arguably the best Yankee team ever.”

“The Babe was a popular hero of his day. Top heavy, on spindly legs, he hardly fit the role of an athlete. Yet, his keen eye, superb timing, and powerful arms had made him the Home Run King.”

“Ruth had spindly legs and had the conditioning of an elephant.”

“He was a big man with a booming voice and spindly legs, probably the best baseball player that ever lived.”

“He had these spindly legs I used to tease him about.”

“He had a huge belly, spindly little legs, and a peculiar pigeon-toed gait.”

“Babe trotted around the bases on spindly legs.”

“Then out of the Yankee dugout came a waddling figure with spindly legs, a pot belly, and a cookie-round face. We immediately recognized him.”

"I think the last time I saw Babe Ruth was at Fenway [Fenway Park, the home field of the Boston Red Sox], and he hit one. When he got out there he didn't run around the bases very fast. He took his time. He had a big body and spindly legs.”

“Top heavy, on spindly legs, he hardly fit the role of an athlete.”

“He looked odd, because he had an odd shaped body, especially his spindly legs.”

“Babe Ruth played until he was forty. The photographs show an old man with spindly legs and a potbelly, to some extent coasting on his legend.”

What’s going on with all these spindly-legs references? I think it has to do with the capability, and propensity, of human beings to abstract from their experience with concrete reality and then deal with, refer to, that abstraction and leave the reality behind. Abstractions take the form of words, images in our heads, concepts, ideas, theories, memories, interpretations, and narratives or stories. Let’s call any and all of that the idea of something or someone, in

contrast to the actual something or someone. Over time, the idea of whatever, whoever, it is, replaces the actual reality. In the Babe's case, the idea of his legs becomes his legs, to the point that when people look at the Babe, they don't see his flesh-and-bone legs, they "see" the idea of them. When they reminisce about him, write about him, whatever it is, the referent they draw upon to do that is the idea of Babe and not the real Babe, either their idea of him or somebody else's (often using the same language—"spindly," for example).

This phenomenon goes on all the time in our lives and we aren't aware of it. When we think and talk about World War II, we aren't referenced in what actually went on back then, but rather in an idea—gross, undifferentiated--of World War II (most likely as The Good War). The same thing goes on with politics, race, gender, you name it. The same thing goes on with our personal lives—work, relationships, who we are to ourselves, how things are going for us. The same thing goes on with reference to our pasts—the idea of what happened with us back then replaces what actually went on back then, and that idea, that story, may well be more fiction than fact.

Our challenge is to connect with reality: to objectively discern—no filters—Babe Ruth's actual legs, so to speak, in all of the areas of our lives. Freshly, anew, beginning now, we need to rigorously, objectively, look, see, touch, smell, taste, and hear reality, connect with what actually is; we need to rationally, critically, examine and analyze and assess ourselves and our circumstances and their antecedents; and then go forward in our lives based on what we discover. In sum, we need to get real.