

**BASEBALL**  **SUPERSTARS**

# **MICKEY MANTLE**



**RONALD A. REIS**



**BASEBALL  
SUPERSTARS**

# **Mickey Mantle**





**Hank Aaron**

**Ty Cobb**

**Johnny Damon**

**Lou Gehrig**

**Rickey Henderson**

**Derek Jeter**

**Randy Johnson**

**Andruw Jones**

**Mickey Mantle**

**Roger Maris**

**Mike Piazza**

**Kirby Puckett**

**Albert Pujols**

**Mariano Rivera**

**Jackie Robinson**

**Babe Ruth**

**Curt Schilling**

**Ichiro Suzuki**

**Bernie Williams**

**Ted Williams**





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SUPERSTARS**

**Mickey  
Mantle**

Ronald A. Reis



**CHELSEA HOUSE  
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## MICKEY MANTLE

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# Father Knows Best

It was a brisk October day, one that saw Commerce High School sophomore Mickey Mantle charging hard, playing his second-favorite sport—football. Cradling the ball low, the darting 14-year-old halfback never saw him coming, the tackler who accidentally kicked Mickey on the left shin. What followed soon after almost ended Mickey Mantle’s future professional career—as a baseball player.

Helping the obviously pained Mickey off the field, the coach assured his star competitor that it was only a sprain. By the next morning, though, the boy’s temperature had soared to 104 degrees. His ankle had ballooned to twice its normal size. Taken to American Hospital in nearby Picher, Oklahoma, the local doctor, D. L. Connell, lanced Mickey’s ankle. Days later, the infection remained. In a desperate measure, squirming



maggots were “sprinkled” directly on the inflamed area in the hope they would devour the invading toxic bacteria. With no improvement, Connell gathered Mickey’s parents. “The bone is badly abscessed,” he told them, as reported in *The Mick*, Mantle’s 1985 autobiography. “I’m afraid it is osteomyelitis. We may have to amputate the leg.”

“You ain’t taking his leg off,” Lovell, Mickey’s mother, cried, as quoted in *Mickey Mantle: Before the Glory*.

“There isn’t any place in the world for a one-legged man,” Mickey’s father, Mutt, echoed. Rushing their desperately ill son out of Picher, the Mantles headed straight to Children’s Hospital, 175 miles (282 kilometers) away in Oklahoma City.

For 19 days, every three hours, around the clock, a frightened and alone Mickey Mantle was injected with a new wonder drug, penicillin, released for wide distribution only a year before, in 1945. Boils, 15 to 20, covered his body. The sickly, runt-looking Mantle fell to 110 pounds (50 kilograms) from a weight of a little more than 130 pounds (59 kilograms).

Then, after an agonizing few weeks, the turnaround began. Mickey’s appetite improved. His weight increased dramatically. And the boils that were all over his legs, arms, and even his eyes, disappeared.

Osteomyelitis, however, would remain with Mickey Mantle all his life. The inflammatory bone disease could be temporarily arrested but never completely cured. The affliction would be but one of many debilitating conditions that dogged the future Yankee All-Star throughout his 18 years in the majors.

Upon release from the hospital, Mickey headed home to rural Ottawa County, Oklahoma, crutches under his arms. There would be a few basketball games to play between flare-ups and even a return to football. The course, though, was clear. From now on, the one true sport in Mickey Mantle’s future would be the one he loved most of all—baseball.

## A FATHER'S OBSESSION

According to Mickey's mother, within 12 hours of his birth, on October 20, 1931, in Spavinaw, Oklahoma, a baseball was placed in his hands while he lay in his crib. In the days to come, the ball was followed by a mitt, all the better for the baby to chew on. Dad, it is said, insisted that his first son, named after Mickey Cochrane, a major-league player with the Philadelphia Athletics, be taught the positions on the baseball field before the ABCs. Mickey Mantle was born to be a baseball player.

Mom and Dad formed an odd couple. Lovell Thomas, Mickey's mother, ran off, at the age of 17, to marry William Theodore Davis. She would have two children by this first marriage before the inevitable divorce.

Mickey's father, Elvin Clark Mantle (known as Mutt from birth), was 10 years younger than Lovell when he began to court her. Having quit school to help out his financially strapped family, Mutt was only 17 and grading country roads when he asked the grown woman, Lovell, to marry him. "He had been tall, handsome, and a real gentleman under the rough exterior," Mickey's mother was to have reported decades later, as recorded in *Mickey Mantle: America's Prodigal Son*, written by Tony Castro. Strange as the union seemed, the marriage worked.

Despite some differences, Mickey's parents shared a love of baseball. Mutt, no matter how tired he was from working on the roads and in the zinc mines of northeastern Oklahoma, found time to play semipro baseball on the weekends. That was as far as it would go, however; no professional scouts ever saw Mutt swing a bat. Had they, he, rather than his son, might have been the Mantle to make it to the majors.

Mom, an avid fan with an eye (actually an ear) for detail, followed the game closely on the radio. "While my mother washed and ironed clothes, she always had a yellow writing



**Elvin "Mutt" Mantle sits with his toddler son, Mickey, on the porch of their home in Oklahoma. Mutt Mantle was an avid baseball fan and reportedly made sure that Mickey knew the positions on the baseball field before his ABCs. Mickey was named after Mickey Cochrane, a star player with the Philadelphia Athletics whom Mutt admired.**

tablet near the ironing board,” Mickey recalled in his book *All My Octobers*. “When my dad came home from the mines, close to nightfall, she could tell him everything he missed.”

Poor but hardworking, the Mantles, in the Great Depression of the 1930s, still found time to take in America’s pastime—baseball. For Mickey, however, it would involve far more than listening to games on the radio or an occasional road trip to St. Louis to see a Cardinals contest. It would include play, play, play, all the better to prepare for the day when baseball would become his life’s work.

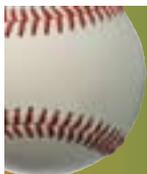
### “SCREEN APE”

The Great Depression, which saw as many as one in four adult Americans out of work, was a national economic disaster. For those living in the Midwest, particularly in states like Oklahoma, there was the added devastation of the Dust Bowl. Caused by the misuse of the land and years of drought, the Southern Plains region saw soil literally stripped away, with farming all but impossible. Nothing would grow. Those who could, left, to be forever referred to as “Okies.”

“As a five- or six-year-old, I would stand in the front yard watching the cars and trucks go by with people jammed in and water jugs banging against the sides,” Mantle recalled in *All My Octobers*. “They were all heading the same way—west. In the summer, nights following the days, we slept with a wet washrag over our faces to filter out the dust.”

Mickey’s family, however, did not join in the Okie migration. Mutt insisted that they stay put, the better to eke out a living in the region’s lead and zinc mines. Doing so was hard and dangerous work. If a cave-in did not end your days, “miner’s disease” often would. Being underground eight hours a day, breathing in the dust and dampness, and coughing up gobs of phlegm were bound to take their toll.

Later, in the summers of his teenage years, Mickey would often work with his father's crew, dropping 400 feet (122 meters) into the earth, deep into Oklahoma. At other times, he would work as a "screen ape," smashing large rocks into small stones with a sledgehammer. Clearly, all that pounding was responsible for the incredibly strong wrists,



## **BLOWN IN THE WIND: AMERICA'S DUST BOWL OF THE 1930s**

The cyclic winds rolled up two miles (3.2 kilometers) high and spread 100 miles (161 kilometers) wide. They roared ahead at more than 60 miles per hour (97 kilometers per hour), engulfing fleeing birds in their way. Many believed the world was coming to an end.

On April 14, 1935, which is known as Black Sunday, the worst Dust Bowl cloud had turned day into night. The storm destroyed vast areas of Great Plains farmland, from Denver to Oklahoma City and beyond. Witnesses reported that they could not see five feet in front of them.

A year earlier, on May 11, 1934, a similar storm blew all the way to Chicago, dumping 12 million pounds of powdered soil, the equivalent of four pounds of dirt per person, on the Windy City. Remnants of the same storm actually reached the East Coast—New York and Washington, D.C.—and even a ship at sea, 300 miles (483 kilometers) off the Atlantic Coast. That year, red snow fell in New England.

In an attempt to survive the onrushing dust-filled winds, men, women, and children sealed themselves indoors, tying water-soaked handkerchiefs around their noses and mouths and hanging damp sheets over their beds. If people dared to leave their houses, they wore goggles to protect their eyes.

shoulders, arms, and forearms for which Mickey would become famous.

Yet the way forward, out of the mines, with their threat of disease and injury, would not be via hefting a sledgehammer. For Mickey Mantle, it would be through swinging a bat.



**Caused by poor soil management and extensive drought, the American Dust Bowl lasted from 1931 to 1939. The accompanying dry spell was the worst in U.S. history, covering more than 75 percent of the country and affecting 27 states. In one year alone, 1934, more than 100 million acres in crops were lost because of soil erosion. In the following year, it is estimated that 850 million tons of topsoil were blown off the Southern Plains of the United States. In some parts of the country, “dirt days,” as they had come to be called, occurred more than 50 percent of the year.**

**Oklahoma, where Mickey Mantle was living at the time, suffered severely. About 15 percent of the state’s 2.3 million residents, 300,000 to 400,000, packed up and left. Known as Okies, they headed west, desperately looking for work and new land. They were not always welcomed as they trekked onward, dragging all they owned with them. In February 1936, Los Angeles Police Chief James E. Davis sent 125 policemen to patrol the state’s borders, all the better to keep the oncoming “undesirables” out. Mercifully, the rains came in 1939, ending the “Dirty Thirties” nightmare.**

**Today, with modern soil-conservation methods in place, there is little likelihood of a renewed Dust Bowl era. Though when it comes to nature, one can never be sure.**

### BAXTER SPRINGS WHIZ KIDS

If Mutt Mantle could not become a professional baseball player, he was determined that his eldest son would. To that end, both parents encouraged young Mickey to take off whenever time permitted to just play the game. “There were days when I left home with nothing more than a Thermos jug of water, to play ball from breakfast until dark, without even a break for food, and my parents sent me off with their blessing,” Mantle recalled in his 1967 autobiography, *Mickey Mantle: The Education of a Baseball Player*. For days on end, Mickey would play the “Alkali” fields near his home, where bases were often made of cow dung and the outfield went on and on, unbroken to the backyards of Commerce.

Mickey believed that in his early years there was no special skill that made him the baseball standout he was. Rather, it was his love of the game, plus his desire and need to please his father, that gave him his success.

A key factor in Mickey’s baseball accomplishments, as a kid and later as a professional, was the ability to switch-hit—bat left or right. For hours, Mutt, a left-hander, would pitch to Mickey, a natural right-hander. Then Grandpa Charlie, a right-hander, would take over and pitch to Mickey, as he stood at the plate as a left-handed hitter. “For a long time it was awkward and difficult for me to bat left-handed, but my father would not let me quit,” Mantle remembered in *Mickey Mantle: The Education of a Baseball Player*. Mutt calculated that switch-hitters were a valuable commodity in professional baseball and would get more turns at bat. Father was right. Father knew best.

By the time Mickey turned 11, he was playing in organized baseball in the local Gabby Street League. Hundreds would show up on a lazy afternoon to see the youngsters play in what was then the equivalent of today’s Little League.

On into high school, Mickey played many sports, notably football. Though Mickey played some baseball for Commerce High, it was as a Baxter Springs Whiz Kid, in the Ban Johnson



**Mickey Mantle is seen in a picture from around 1945 when he played for a team in Miami, Oklahoma. As a teenager, his speed and his ability as a power hitter began to attract the attention of professional scouts.**

League, that the now 16-year-old came into his own as a power player.

The Whiz Kids were a highly competitive semipro team consisting of the best players from Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri. Having recovered from his bout with osteomyelitis, Mickey had grown strong, with an upper-body strength that saw him smacking balls way into the outfield, some 400 feet (122 meters) or more. And he was fast, mighty fast. Some say Mickey developed such speed by running home at dark, along spooky dirt roads, afraid of what might jump out at him. Later, as a rookie with the New York Yankees, Mickey would be timed in an incredible 3.00 seconds sprinting from home plate to first base.

Though a bit of a fumbler in the field (whether playing second base or shortstop), as high school graduation approached, Mickey Mantle, now dubbed “The Commerce Comet,” had become a forceful hitter with speed to match. Professional scouts had taken notice.

### **A CONTRACT IS SIGNED**

On Friday, May 27, 1949, Mickey Mantle received his high school diploma. He did not, however, attend the evening’s graduation ceremonies. Having obtained permission from Bentley Baker, the Commerce High School principal, Mickey was off playing baseball with the Baxter Springs Whiz Kids against the Coffeyville Refiners, in nearby Coffeyville, Kansas. Knowing that Tom Greenwade, a local Yankee scout, would be in the stands, Mickey did not want to miss the chance to impress. Batting right-handed against a left-handed pitcher, he went four for five with two singles, a double, and a home run. Baxter Springs won the game, 13-7.

Greenwade had been waiting until Mickey actually graduated before officially “looking” at him. According to the rules of organized baseball at the time, a scout was forbidden to approach an athlete still in high school. By all accounts,

Greenwade liked what he saw of Mickey that Friday night. But when he buttonholed Mutt and his son after the game, Greenwade played it coy. "I'm afraid Mickey may never reach the Yankees," he said, as quoted in *The Mick*. "Right now, I'd have to rate him a lousy shortstop. Sloppy. Erratic arm. And he's small. Get him in front of some really strong pitching. . . ."

Was Greenwade telling the truth, though? Later, after a contract was signed, he told the press that Mantle would probably set records with the Yankees, equaling Babe Ruth's and Joe DiMaggio's marks. Greenwade, it would seem, was out to lowball Mickey and his dad.

On Sunday, May 29, 1949, after another game that Greenwade observed, Mickey, Mutt, and Greenwade huddled in the scout's car, rain pounding the roof. In 15 minutes, a provisional contract was signed. The Yankees organization picked up Mickey Mantle, *the* Mickey Mantle, for all of \$1,500. It was a simple breakdown: \$400 for playing out the rest of the summer in Class D ball with the Independence Yankees of Independence, Kansas, in the K-O-M League, and a \$1,100 signing bonus.

Mickey felt that he and his father had been "outslicked," as Mickey said in his 1967 autobiography. Greenwade, as far as father and son saw it, had engineered one of the greatest signing coups in sports history.

The Yankee scout, however, had a different perspective. Years later, Greenwade said (as published in *Our Mickey: Cherished Memories of an American Icon*), "I always told the press he was the greatest I ever saw. It really wasn't so. I was always concerned about whether or not the Yankees could find a position for him. It was a good thing they moved him to the outfield."

That aside, Mickey Mantle was now ready to play professional baseball. And although it would be for a Class D team (the lowest rung on the minor-league ladder), it was for the Yankees organization. From the Independence Yankees to the "real" Yankees, how far could that be?



# Country Bumpkin

**O**n June 13, 1949, Mickey Mantle arrived in Independence, Kansas, to play Class D ball for the Independence Yankees, the “Baby Yanks,” of the K-O-M (Kansas-Oklahoma-Missouri) League. “I’ve done all I can for Mickey,” Mutt told Harry Craft, the team manager, as reported in *The Mick*. “I believe he’s a good ballplayer, and I’m turning him over to you now.” As Mutt moved to leave, he added, “This is your chance, son. Take care of yourself and give ’em hell.”

The next day, Mickey played his first professional baseball game. “Up to then, I’d outdistanced the other kids by a mile,” Mantle recalled in his second autobiography, *The Mick*. “But now I was a pro, and the competition got a lot stiffer. . . . I had to learn that I was going to make seven outs for every 10 times at bat.”



Though universally recognized to be a poor, if not downright lousy, shortstop, Mantle finished his first pro season with a .313 batting average in 89 games. He led the league in hitting.

The next year, Mantle was moved up a notch to play Class C ball with the Joplin Miners of the Western Association. Before regular-season play, the “Commerce Comet” got a lucky break. Mantle was sent to spring training in St. Petersburg, Florida, to hit and catch with the major-league Yankees.

Virtually unknown to the New York management, Mantle, nonetheless, was impressive at the plate. Hitting from both sides, his shots were going out farther than anyone could remember seeing balls fly in spring training. After a particularly mighty blast, manager Casey Stengel was said to have yelled, as reported in *Mickey Mantle: America’s Prodigal Son*, “What’s his name? Mantle?”

Back in Joplin, Missouri, for the regular season, Mantle had an unbelievable year. Playing in 137 games, he batted .383, with 26 home runs and 136 RBIs. Then, when the minor-league season ended, the 18-year-old was called up to join the New York Yankees for a series against the Browns in St. Louis, on their final two-week road trip.

Though he was a non-roster player and saw no action in any game, Mantle was now in earshot and full view of his pro idol, Joe DiMaggio. They did not speak. “With Joe DiMaggio I couldn’t even mumble hello,” Mantle recalled in *The Mick*. “He had this aura. It was as if you needed an appointment just to approach him.”

It was late in the year, yet Mantle was getting a taste of the majors. And the big leaguers were getting an eyeful of him.

## **MAKING AN IMPRESSION**

Mantle had become a prospect, and a hot one at that. Yet what to do with him? To bring a Class C player up to the majors,