

*Great Comebacks—Tub Spencer by Dennis Snelling*



One of baseball's great comebacks had its origins in the Pacific Coast League in 1915. Veteran Venice Tigers manager Happy Hogan had a weakness for reclamation projects and Edward "Tub" Spencer was his last and possibly greatest of those projects. Built like a professional wrestler with a constitution to match, Spencer had played in the major leagues off and on from 1905 through 1911. He had a rifle arm and was compared to all-time great Buck Ewing. He also earned his nickname thanks to his ever-expanding girth and drinking habits; by his own admission, Spencer was drunk almost the entire time he was in the major leagues.

Born into a well-to-do family, Spencer never had to work hard and didn't. He took his first drink at age eight and could down a quart of whiskey in one sitting at age eighteen. He passed the entrance exams for Princeton but opted to enroll at Cornell and play football instead; he did not make it past his first couple of classes. Spencer played some pro football before signing with the St. Louis Browns in 1905, where he quickly developed an appreciation for the city with the largest brewery in the world. By 1911, he was playing for the Philadelphia Phillies and getting drunk three times a day on "alcohol split," a nasty concoction of one-half alcohol and

one-half water with sugar added for taste. When that lost its kick, he would drink straight alcohol. By then, Spencer's family had written him off—as did the major leagues. In 1913, he signed with the San Francisco Seals but was too far gone, hitting only .127 in twenty-one games before his release.

Far from disappointed, Spencer decided to quit baseball so he could concentrate on drinking. Moving to Eureka, California, he discovered that each of the sixty-six saloons in town had the generous custom of providing every customer with a complimentary first drink. Spencer made the rounds each day until he passed out on the frozen ground. Spencer spent the entire month of November 1914 drunk and dead to the world. When he finally woke up on December 1, he looked in the mirror and decided he'd had enough. He stopped drinking then and there—taking a job as a bartender at one point to prove to himself he did not need alcohol anymore.

Venice was the only team willing to give Spencer a chance and he made the most of it, hitting .257 and leading PCL catchers in fielding in 1915. Signing a contract that allowed him to request his release should a major league team become interested, Spencer returned to the majors midway through the 1916 season with the Detroit Tigers thanks to a recommendation from San Francisco Seals manager Harry Wolverton, who was friends with Tigers owner Frank Navin, and hit an impressive .370 in a reserve role for Detroit. The only catcher in the majors who played without shin guards, Spencer remained with Detroit through 1918. He then returned to the PCL for several years, finally retiring for good in 1925 after two seasons with the Los Angeles Angels. At age forty-one, he lost his starting job to Gus Sandberg but still had enough in his bat to hit .275 and blast a walk-off pinch-hit home run against Seattle. Spencer died in 1945 in San Francisco. (*Baseball Magazine*, January 1917, pages 106-110, and July 1918, pages 263-266 and 312-313; *Oakland Tribune*, April 1, 1915; *Detroit Free Press*, August 4, 1916; *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 1925.)