



Mark Koenig, the PCL and Ruth's Called Shot

One of the San Francisco Missions infielders in 1932 was a well-known local figure who only five years before had been the starting shortstop of one of baseball's greatest teams, the 1927 New York Yankees.

Mark Koenig was pushing thirty years of age when he joined the PCL, and his career seemed about over. Originally discovered at Lowell High School in San Francisco by Nick Williams, Koenig began his professional career in Canada until his team folded, at which point he was offered a spot with St. Paul in the American Association. The Yankees in turn purchased his contract from St. Paul.

In September 1925, Koenig found himself in New York, with Wally Pipp and Joe Dugan treating him to dinner on his first night in town. The young shortstop started the rest of the season for the Yankees, drawing raves for his hustle and aggressive play.¹ Koenig proved a solid player for the great Yankees teams of the late 1920s and was party to many historic moments, including his scoring ahead of Babe Ruth's 60th home run in 1927.²

A slow start in 1930, and the arrival of Lyn Lary from Oakland, made Koenig expendable and he was traded by the Yankees with pitcher Waite Hoyt to Detroit for three players.³ Although Koenig had his moments for the Tigers, including one game against Boston in which he homered, singled twice and made a leaping snare of a line drive to start a triple play, he was basically a utility player by 1931 and was unconditionally released to Toronto of the International League a week into the 1932 season without having appeared in a game.⁴ From there, he was sent back to his hometown to play for the Missions.⁵

Koenig's decline was blamed on his eyes and it was thought the problem stemmed from a sinus infection. Years later, Koenig offered another explanation:

"When I went over to Detroit I thought my eyes were bothering me," explained Koenig, "and I wore glasses for awhile. I don't know—it wasn't my eyes, it was in my head. I got down in the mouth. The Yankees were my first love, you know? I always think of the Yankees. It was never the same on other ball clubs."⁶

Koenig underwent surgery, ditched the glasses, and was playing well for the lowly Missions, but there seemed no chance he would return to the majors. Then fate stepped in.

On July 6, a cabaret girl named Violet Valli entered the room of Chicago Cubs shortstop Billy Jurgens at the Hotel Carlos in Chicago, intending to end his life and then turn the gun on herself. There was a struggle and Jurgens was shot in the ribs and left wrist. Miss Valli was wounded in her left hand.⁷

It was expected that Jurgens would miss only two to three weeks, but his loss highlighted the Cubs' lack of infield depth. With the team having underperformed to that point, club president Bill Veeck decided to shake things up, firing manager Rogers Hornsby and purchasing Koenig from the Missions—leading directly to one of the most famous moments in baseball history.⁸

Koenig started like a house afire in Chicago. In his second game with the Cubs he slammed a game-winning, three-run pinch-hit home run with two out in the ninth inning.⁹ Koenig played excellent defense and was hitting .405 during the month of August as the Cubs began winning. When the veteran shortstop joined the team, the Cubs were in second place behind Pittsburgh, with a record of 54-47. Thanks in part to Koenig's performance, Chicago won thirty-six of its last fifty-three games to capture the National League pennant by four games, crowning P.K. Wrigley's first season in charge of the team left to him by his famous father.

Prior to the World Series between the Cubs and New York Yankees, Chicago players voted on the split of the post-season pot. Koenig, who had been instrumental down the stretch, was voted only a half-share.¹⁰ The Yankees got wind of this and started branding the Cubs as cheapskates.

This led to real bitterness between the teams, feelings that reached their height in the third game of the World Series after Babe Ruth, a close friend of Koenig, and Lou Gehrig hit back-to-back home runs off Charlie Root in the first inning.

The Cubs tied the game at the end of the fourth inning and the Wrigley Field crowd booed when Ruth came to bat in the fifth. From somewhere, a lemon came rolling in Ruth's direction. He took the first two pitches from Root, signaling to both the crowd and the Cubs bench that each had been but a single strike and that the at bat was not over.

On the third pitch, Ruth hit a mammoth shot past the flagpole to the right of the centerfield scoreboard. The ball caromed off the ticket booth at Waveland and Sheffield Avenues.

Ruth started yelling at the now silent Cubs bench as soon as he dropped his bat, and he did not stop until he had finished rounding the bases. Lou Gehrig followed up with a home run against the shaken Root, the second time that game the two Yankees had hit back-to-back home runs. The Cubs lost, falling behind in the Series three games to none.¹¹ The Yankees completed the Series sweep the next day. Koenig was proud that his old teammates had stood up for him, proving the adage, "Once a Yankee, Always a Yankee."

"I figured that we were gonna get the hell beat out of us," Koenig said. "I was glad to see the Yankees win it. Sure, after they gave me half a share I didn't give a damn anymore. They were a bunch of cheapskates. And I blame that damn [P.K.] Wrigley. He should have made it up with all his money."¹²

Ruth's home run was especially dramatic and would go down in history as a subject of both awe and controversy. It would be the last World Series home run of Ruth's career and there were differing opinions as to whether he had actually pointed to the bleachers after holding up fingers following the first two pitches to indicate the number of strikes. Koenig gave Ruth the benefit of the doubt while Frank Crosetti called it nonsense, pointing out that if Ruth had indeed pointed before hitting the home run, he would have been talking about it to reporters after the game. Crosetti insisted that Ruth had held up one finger to the Cubs bench, warning them that he still had one strike left.¹³

Nevertheless, the event would be forever remembered as "Ruth's Called Shot." And it all started because the Cubs needed some infield insurance and plucked Mark Koenig out of the Pacific Coast League in early August 1932.

¹ Koenig considered himself the goat of the 1926 World Series, hitting only .125 and making four errors, including one on an easy double-play grounder in the fourth inning of the seventh game that opened the door for the winning runs for the St. Louis. The Cardinals walked Babe Ruth four times in the game and Grover Cleveland Alexander

struck out Tony Lazzeri with the bases loaded in one of the most famous moments in baseball history. Koenig bounced back to hit .500 in the 1927 World Series against Pittsburgh and also played in the 1928 Series when the Yankees got revenge against the Cardinals. Koenig later portrayed himself in two classic baseball movies, *Pride of the Yankees*, the story of Lou Gehrig, starring Gary Cooper, and *The Babe Ruth Story*, starring William Bendix. (Mark Koenig, interview with the author, October 21, 1991.)

² *New York Times*, October 1, 1927.

³ *New York Times*, May 31, 1930. Koenig and pitcher Waite Hoyt were traded to the Tigers for three players, Ownie Carroll, George Wuestling and Harry Rice.

⁴ *New York Times*, July 19, 1930; *Chicago Tribune*, April 22, 1932.

⁵ The Tigers tried Koenig in a few games at pitcher—he was thought to have the strongest throwing arm in baseball. During spring training in 1932, Detroit toyed with making Koenig a pitcher full-time, but released him instead. The Missions used Koenig as a pitcher in four games during late May and early June 1932. He lost three times and had a no-decision. He pitched creditably in his first two starts, both complete games, but was battered in his last two appearances, allowing nine runs in four innings. Overall he pitched twenty-one innings, allowing twenty runs, seventeen earned, while walking seventeen batters and striking out eight. He also threw three wild pitches and committed a balk. One story about Koenig's throwing arm that still circulates once in awhile is that he was clocked by a machine at West Point as throwing somewhere in the neighborhood of 127 miles per hour. The day of the test, Koenig warmed up but it was discovered the machine was broken and he had to come back later that afternoon. "I think I threw a ball 96 miles an hour," he said later. "But some book has me throwing 127 miles an hour! Can you imagine 127 miles an hour? Gosh, you wouldn't be able to see it." Ironically, Koenig said his best pitch was a knuckleball, but for some reason he never tried using it. (Mark Koenig, interview with the author, October 21, 1991; *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, June 3, June 6 and June 9, 1932.)

⁶ *The Sporting News*, September 8, 1932; Mark Koenig, interview with the author, October 21, 1991.

⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 1932. Miss Valli and Jurgens had been seeing each other for about a year and apparently had a fight in New York a couple of weeks earlier. It was said that Jurgens' teammate Kiki Cuyler was trying to convince the infielder to stop seeing Valli. Before the fateful day, Valli had returned to Chicago, where she and Jurgens were living in separate rooms at the same hotel at 3834 Sheffield Avenue, a block and a half from Wrigley Field. She composed a note explaining that life would not be worth living without Jurgens, then ominously added, "...but why should I leave this earth alone? I'm going to take Billy with me." Valli then went to Jurgens's room, armed with a .25 caliber pistol. The two struggled over the gun, both sustaining wounds. Jurgens refused to press charges and Violet Valli was released. In dismissing the case, the judge said, "Then the case is dismissed for want of prosecution. And I hope no more Cubs get shot." Jurgens was back at shortstop a couple of weeks later. Another twist in the story came a couple of weeks later when a con man named Lucius Barnett was arrested for trying to blackmail Jurgens by threatening to publish love letters the player had written that Barnett had acquired from Valli. She had supposedly met Barnett shortly after the shooting, when she was charged with attempted murder and he had arranged her bail in exchange for the letters. Barnett tried to extort twenty thousand dollars out of Jurgens. Seventeen years later, former Los Angeles Angels first baseman Eddie Waitkus would be shot, also in Chicago, under similar

circumstances by a woman fixated on him. The Waitkus incident became the inspiration for the novel, *The Natural*. (*Chicago Tribune*, July 16 and August 6, 1932; *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, June 19 and July 1, 1949.)

⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, August 6, 1932.

⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, August 21, 1932.

¹⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, October 2, 1932. Even though he had been their manager for most of the season, the Cubs cut out Rogers Hornsby completely, not giving him even a partial share.

¹¹ *Chicago Tribune*, October 2, 1932; *New York Times*, October 2, 1932.

¹² Mark Koenig, interview with the author, October 21, 1991.

¹³ Frank Crosetti, interview with the author, September 3, 1991; Mark Koenig, interview with the author, October 21, 1991. Crosetti also said that Ruth told him the day after the “Called Shot,” “If those writers want to say I pointed, let ‘em. It doesn’t matter to me.” For his part, when Charlie Root was at Hollywood in the 1940s, he told reporter Bob Hunter, “That Babe Ruth pointing over the fence when he hit a home run off me in the World Series? Never happened. If he’d done that, I’d have buried him at home plate.” (Bob Hunter, interview with the author, November 9, 1991.)

--Dennis Snelling