

Trick Plays and How to Make Them

Daring Feats That Have Made the Tigers Dreaded, and How They Were Thought Out and Executed, as Revealed in an Interview

BY TY COBB

Ty Cobb is the greatest player in the game through his phenomenal batting average. He is the greatest player in the game by virtue of his wonderful baserunning. But the things above all others which have stamped him as the true king of players are those dazzling feats bordering on the miraculous which the cold records cannot express.

THERE is a tense finality in Ty Cobb's conversation which is unique. Other players state opinions, the Georgian gives facts. In the presence of the game's greatest player the listener feels intuitively that here is the one man who knows absolutely what he is talking about. For, if Ty Cobb hasn't seen a particular play, or tried it himself, or seen it tried, it has never been and probably never will be attempted. The Tigers' experience runs the gamut from merely simple plays of every day occurrence to those sheer flights of genius which border on the impossible. He is the last word in baseball achievement. If he confesses that a certain play is beyond him, the outlook is hopeless. It simply can't be done.

The conversation had turned upon

great plays. "I have always thought," said Ty reminiscently, "that the records give a player either more or less credit than he deserves. Certainly they fail to do simple justice to the facts. There are many details of good playing which can't be expressed in terms of base hits or runs scored. On the other hand, a great batting average, for instance, might cover up a whole multitude of deficiencies. You can't express St. Peter's cathedral in terms of stone and mortar. Those things might be used just as aptly to express a warehouse or a brewery. The records themselves do not distinguish the genuine ball player from the fellow who doesn't have it in him to be a star.

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There are many slips between first and home. The runners who get on base and die there don't figure in the final score.

The spectator never stops to consider that there is only a hair's breadth between success and failure in a really good play.

To score from second on an infield out is a play that to my judgment is about the prettiest of the lot.

Offhand, it looks impossible, but there are lots of impossible things that can be done if they are handled right.

I used to figure out dozens of these plays. They are all based on the theory of probabilities.

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important. And yet there are few things that look more foolish than to see a runner try to go to second on a single and get thrown out. On the other hand, nothing demoralizes the opposing fielders more than a play of this type that succeeds.

"To illustrate what I mean, I remember a game at New York. A Detroit player, I don't recall who, was on third base. I sent a slow roller to Maisel. The man on base was prevented, from the nature of the play, from advancing. But I made up my mind as I neared first base that I would advance him if possible. I had the throw beat alright. No one was surprised to see me get to first. But when I rounded first with never a let-up in speed and dashed for second, I suppose there were many in the stands who thought I had gone crazy. And that is just what they would have said had the play I intended to make gone wrong. I kept on at full speed for second base. The play looked like suicide, but that is just what I intended to have it resemble. As I neared second base the fielder was waiting for me with the ball. He was ready to welcome me with open arms. Every member on the team was congratulating himself on getting me to walk into such a stupid trap. I knew they would look at the play in that light. The more they patted themselves on the back the better I liked it. I romped back toward first base, and two or three

more men came in to corner me. Then I ran toward second. In the mean time the Detroit runner on third edged off the bag. No one paid any attention to him. Finally, getting a good lead, he dashed for home. Too late, the fielder who had the ball, saw the play and then threw for home. The runner was safe. In the mean-time, by fast sprinting, I reached third base. That is an illustration of what I mean. There were no errors made in that play save the errors of omission on the part of the defense. For my part, I scored the man I wanted to score and reached third myself. I had no complaint to offer. But suppose something had gone wrong? Every one could have said what an idiotic play!

"Stretching hits is important. It is no less important to have the man already on, stretch a base as well as the batter. Ordinarily a player on second will score on a single. But it requires a nicety of judgment and a good break all round to score from first on a single. Now there are many slips between first and home. The runners who get on base and die there don't figure in the final score. The man who can go from first to home on a single is doing something unusual for his team.

"A peculiar play of this type comes to my mind, peculiar in that I pursued the superstitious bent of the player and followed a 'hunch.'

"It was in a game against the Athletics several years ago. I was on first

base. Someone hit a rather long single to left field. I had taken a big lead. I started with the pitcher's wind-up motion and dashed for second. I was nearly to the bag when the ball was hit. I was half way to third when the outfielder had the ball in his hand. As I neared third I saw Baker standing some half dozen feet away with his back toward me. He knew that he didn't have a chance to get me and was taking things easy. The ball was already on its way to his waiting mitt. When I am going at full speed around the bases my mind usually works faster than my feet. It is natural, so it is no credit to me. But in such cases I always seem to be more clear headed than usual and keener sighted. Possibly, being keyed up for the play and working at fast nervous tension, has something to do with it. And in such cases I always have my eye on the ball. If anything happens to that ball I am ready to take advantage of it. Now there didn't seem to be anything the matter with the ball which was shooting in from left field. Baker would have it in a fraction of a second. It looked impossible to score. And yet as I neared third base I got a hunch to try for home. It came into my mind like a flash, and I operated on it automatically. I remember Jennings, who was coaching at third, held out his arm to stop me, but I brushed by him and dashed for home. It looked like a foolish move, but I followed the hunch and won out. Why? Because Baker dropped the ball. I don't think he saw me at all, so it wasn't a case of being rattled by an unexpected play. I believe he was merely taking things easily, perhaps a bit carelessly. But the main thing is my hunch was right. I scored from first on a single.

"Any player; under normal circumstances, ought to advance two bases on a hit. It takes fast work at both extremes to advance three that is fast head work and fast foot work. But I got to thinking the situation over and decided that it would be possible to help some of the other Tigers pull off these plays once in a while. Bush is a man who gets on base very frequently and is a good natural base-runner and fast on his feet. I cooked up a play with Bush that looked



Photo by Burke E. Atwell

Ty Cobb in Street Clothes

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I take advantage of the psychology of the thing continually.

The infielder can't work so well when he is laboring under a cloud of uncertainty.

He can't work so well when he is hurried.

I try to keep him in the dark as to my intentions and to make him hustle every minute.

The managers have the game by the throat

Their cry is all for machine baseball.

Perhaps the average team can perform better work when directed by one dominant policy.

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good. The play was this: With Bush on first I would try to single to the outfield. Bush would take a very long lead off first. He would start with the wind-up and ought to be near second when the ball was hit. He ought to be so near third when the ball was in the fielder's hands that there would be no chance to get him at third. In the meantime I would round first base and dash for second at full speed. The play then would be to throw to the second baseman. He would have the ball in his hands before I got within twenty feet of the bag. I would come tearing in toward him. He would naturally think I had gone crazy and would have nothing else in mind except to catch me. For the time being all thought of Bush would escape him. I would crash into second and would guarantee to tangle him up in my legs and arms for a while so that he would have no time to think of Bush. Of course, I would be caught—that was part of the plan—but the way I timed the play, Bush ought to score.

"We tried it two or three times, but it didn't work. Something crossed us. Bush's nerve failed him at the last minute, or something happened. The way things went it looked as though I were getting shown up on the base paths. But that is all part of the game. The spectator never stops to consider that there is only a hair's breadth between

success and failure in a truly good play. Perhaps it was the snap of a fielder's wrist, or the least little delay in grasping the ball with his fingers that made a great play possible. Again with those little details absent, the play might have failed and seemed absolutely foolhardy from every angle. There's only a shade of difference between the play that sets the fans aglow and another that makes them yell in derision. Only a shade, but it's the big shade between failure and success.

"Another play that was even more sensational was to score from second on an infield out. That is a play that, to my judgment, is about the prettiest of the lot, when it goes right. Off hand, you would be inclined to think it was impossible. But there are lots of impossible things that can be done if they are handled right. I was called out at the plate on a play of this kind once that was a classic. I was on second. The ball went to the shortstop. I reached home on the play and tagged the plate successfully. But I was out. How? Very simple.

"I had a tremendous lead off second base. When the ball was hit I was nearly to third. When it reached the shortstop's hands I was headed for home. I beat the throw to the plate. And I was out. Why? Because Sam Crawford

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was on third base at the time. He didn't see the possibilities of the play in the light I did. He didn't run home or, in any case, I beat him to the plate. So I was automatically out on the umpire's decision. It was a freak play, all right, but it shows the possibilities of scoring from second on an infield out. And yet many people would criticize a man on

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third for trying to score on such a play to say nothing of trying to score from second.

"I made the same play the other day in Philadelphia. There was no one on third at the time, so I had a clear field. And I crossed the plate ahead of the throw. But as I was in somewhat of a hurry, I neglected to tag the plate. It was a little omission on my part that led the umpire to call me out when the catcher got me. But it showed that the play could be made all right.

"There are various reasons why the play ought to succeed quite frequently. Of course, like all trick plays, it must be unexpected, otherwise it is not nearly so valuable.

"The man on second base must have a long lead. The infielder who gets the ball naturally has his mind set on getting the runner at first. He does not foresee what the man who was on second is going to attempt. Suppose he follows the regulation play and lines the ball to first. The first baseman completing the play then has to line the ball to the catcher. The latter has to catch the ball, hold it and tag the runner with it. Now this demands six separate and distinct operations by three different players. The infielder has to catch the ball and has to throw it to first. The first baseman has to catch it and throw it to the catcher. The latter has to catch it and tag the runner. Now the runner ought to have rounded third base before the infielder got his hands on the ball. If so, that would mean that these six operations had to be performed by three different players in less than the time necessary for a fast man to get from third to home. It needs quick and accurate work on the part of the infield to catch a man on this play where the breaks are right. And quick work that is hurried is seldom perfectly accurate.

"Suppose, however, for the sake of argument, that the infielder saw the runner trying to score and threw home instead of attempting to get the man at first? The play, under such circumstances, is much more difficult, but not

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impossible. It was on such a play that I scored when I passed Crawford and was called out. The infielder in such a case has to reverse his play in the moment of operation. It is not easy to have a certain play in mind and then in the fraction of a second have an entirely different play imperatively called for. It takes almost any infielder a fraction of a second to adapt his motions to the new play, to change his mind, if I may use that term. Furthermore, a play thus changed at the eleventh hour, or rather at the eleventh fraction of a second, is apt to be wild. The infielder is startled momentarily by the unexpected. He is in a tremendous hurry. He tries to make a different play than the one he planned. He is apt to fumble the ball in an effort to pick it up quickly. If he doesn't he is apt to throw wild. Furthermore, the catcher is also taken off his guard. He is more apt to fumble the ball than otherwise. The runner is tearing in from third. There is only the briefest time in which to act and everything has to be done correctly and, above all, without an instant's hesitation. It is the human equation which upsets the defense every time.

"I used to figure out dozens of these plays. They are all based on the so-called science of probabilities. Very often they would fail, but that isn't the point. A certain percentage of them are bound to fail. Those that succeed are the ones that count. And even those which fail have their uses. They show the opposition that they can never know what to expect. You simply cannot prepare for the unexpected. Such a situation leaves a feeling of unrest in the defense. They are momentarily helpless. It is plays such as these which do more to demoralize a defense than a home run with men on bases.

"The German Kaiser is reported to have followed the theory of frightfulness in war. It may be a poor rule for the Sunday school class, but I should say it would be a first rate theory in war. I have worked on a similar theory myself. I have tried to give the opposing infielders no rest when I have been on

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bases. I have wanted them to feel that the lightning was liable to strike anywhere without an instant's hesitation. I have labored to make the name of the Tigers dreaded around the circuits and part of that aggressiveness, that employment of unexpected plays, has shown in the score. The Tigers didn't score more runs than any other team last season on batting and base running alone. They scored part of them through demoralizing the opposing defense. Those things don't show in the records as such, but they show in the final result.

"After all, the offensive play has it on the defense every time. Napoleon nearly won the battle of Waterloo with greatly inferior numbers. Why? Not wholly through superior generalship, but partly because he was in a position where he could take the offensive, could strike where and when he pleased. This was a huge advantage. It is precisely the advantage which the offensive play has over the defense.

"The daring base runner knows what he has in mind. The defense doesn't. He is crafty and plans to take them at a disadvantage. Usually he succeeds. Furthermore, he has a much more accurate basis, in fact, in his calculations than have they. The time it takes him to run from first to second doesn't vary materially, but the time it takes a fielder to catch the ball and make the throw varies tremendously. The offensive player can figure on about the amount of time it will take him to perform a certain play. He can bring the theory of probabilities into the case and gauge the amount of time it will take the opposition to defend itself from that play. He will find that this varies widely. Probabilities tell him that the play will succeed twice out of three times. That is all he needs to know. He tries it and gets thrown out at the plate. Is he discouraged? No. Probabilities already prepared him for that result. It happened that things broke against him that once. But it doesn't follow that the play was improper. Not at all. He tries it again and succeeds. Incidentally he gets

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the opposition up in the air. They make fumbles and wild throws. Perhaps that single play won the game for his team both in itself and in its effects.

"I take advantage of the psychology of the thing continually. The infielder can't work so well when he is laboring under a cloud of uncertainty. He can't work so well when he is hurried. I aim so far as possible to give him a liberal dose of both. I try to keep him in the dark as to my intentions by pulling off unexpected plays from time to time. I aim also to make him hustle every minute. Many times he gets me cornered. That is part of the game. But he has to work for it. He knows he will have to work for it. And that knowledge makes his work less polished and efficient.

"In my opinion, trick plays are passing and it is unfortunate that they are. The managers have the game by the throat. Their cry is all for machine baseball. Perhaps they are right in the main. Perhaps the average team can perform better work when directed by one dominant policy. But in a few years' time unless I am mistaken you will see the men moving about on the field like the pawns on a chessboard at the managers' direction. The trick play is going, and it will be too bad when it does. For it is the soul of the game, the thing above all others that gives spice to baseball.
