

A View of the Dense Crowd at Cub Park, Chicago, on Opening Day. With All Their Appreciation of a Good Fielding Stunt, There Is No Doubt That the Crowd Prefers Batting from a Spectacular Standpoint

Batting or Fielding—Which?

The Comparative Values of Slugging and Fielding to the Player, to the Club, to Baseball as a Whole

BY F. C. LANE

When gilt edged batting meets equally good fielding, which will win? Is it the case of the irresistible force meeting the immovable body? In other words, is batting more valuable to the individual or the club than fielding or vice versa? Every manager grapples with this problem consciously or unconsciously, for it underlies the whole foundation of baseball.

WHICH is the more important, Batting or Fielding? The secret of the fabled sphinx was easy compared with this. And yet it is a problem which lies at the foundation of baseball, a problem with which every

manager struggles consciously or unconsciously from season's end to season's end. It is a whale of a problem all right, and it may never be answered. But it's good dope, anyway.

To cover such a field in a limited ar-

ticle is like trying to write the history of the world in a few pages. And right at the outset let's not go beyond bounds on our subject. We aren't comparing defensive strength with offensive strength in a club. If we were, there would be but one answer—defensive strength. "The great defensive club is always the superior of the great offensive club. The old Cubs were perhaps the best balanced defensive club in history, but they seldom or never had more than one three hundred hitter in the ranks. The White Sox of 1906 won a world's championship, though the weakest hitting club in the circuits. They were invincible on the defensive. There never was a greater offensive club in history than the Tigers of last season. But they went down to defeat before the invulnerable defense of the Red Sox. Ask any player what he thinks of defensive strength and he will tell you that pitching counts for fifty per cent.. Now pitching is the foundation of defensive strength in a club, and coupled with fielding, renders the possessor the logical favorite every time over an aggressive team weak in elements of defense. Even the famed Athletics, which naturally come to mind as examples of a slugging club, were equally proficient in the field. Their matchless infield was just as strong on the defense as on the offense. They won pennants not alone because they could slug the ball, but because they could prevent others from slugging the ball. They combined the two talents in the highest degree.

Defensive strength is more important to a club than offensive strength, but it by no means follows that fielding, a component part of defensive strength, is greater than batting a component part of offensive strength. In fact, the general consensus of opinion is quite to the contrary, and we may easily detect that strong undercurrent of prejudice in favor of batting on the part of the players themselves. There isn't a ballplayer, even a pitcher, from whom little is expected in the way of safe bingles, who doesn't take more genuine pride in his batting average, if it amounts to anything, than he does in his most cherished feats in the field. The brainiest shortstop in the game had rather make a

double with men on bases than an all but impossible stop that robbed the enemy of a score. And the .300 hitter, whatever his fielding imperfections, feels a conscious superiority to the brilliant fielder with a weak batting average.

There is a psychological explanation for this prejudice, if we may call it such. Fielding, after all, is a passive thing. It accomplishes nothing in itself. It merely prevents the other fellow from accomplishing anything. Fielding alone will never win games. It is a negative thing, and negative values, however great, are commonly given a lesser prominence than positive things. Batting is of this category. Batting is positive and active. The batter accomplishes something. He gets on base and drives in runs. He wins games, whereas the fielder merely saves them.

In short, the problem is but a repetition of that time-honored statement of Benjamin Franklin's: "A penny saved is a penny earned." He was right, no doubt, and yet there is an inborn tendency in human nature which would make the Philadelphia sage a liar. Few people but prefer to earn a dollar rather than to save one. Few ballplayers but prefer to earn a run with the bat rather than to save one for their club by a phenomenal catch.

But the prejudice of the ballplayer is not enough to settle the problem. His opinions may be founded on facts, but after all, he has not analyzed his prejudice, and if you ask him will find that he hasn't any clear idea of just why he prefers batting to fielding. He feels that it is to be preferred, but he can give no convincing reason. And in truth, the problem which he shuns so adroitly is enough to stagger a greater analyst than the average player can ever hope to be.

The problem recalls the two village sages who were debating Woman's Suffrage. When an onlooker asked them if they had settled the question, one of them removed his chew of tobacco long enough to remark: "No, we ain't found any good way to lead up to it yet." Not only is batting vs. fielding a hard problem, but it is hard to find any good way to "lead up to it."

The first way which suggests itself of "leading up" to the question is by an

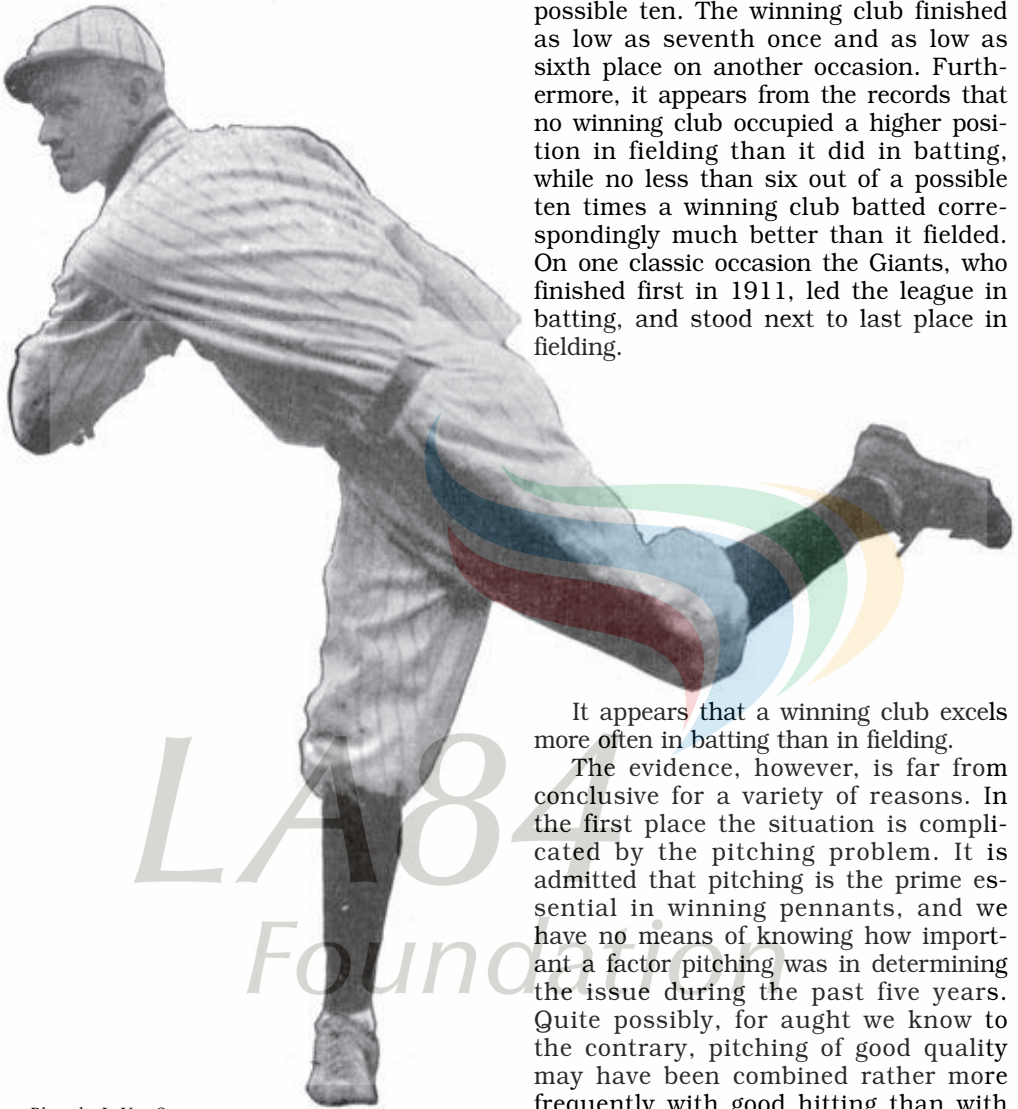


Photo by L. Van Oeyen

Pitcher Coumbe, of Cleveland

examination of the work of the various clubs for a period of years, with an effort to decide what proportionate part batting and fielding bore in their respective failures and successes. As life is short and there are other things to think of perhaps the record of the sixteen major league clubs for the past five years will suffice.

During this period we find that the winning club finished first in batting six out of a possibly ten times. The winning club in either league never finished lower than fifth in batting.

The winning club finished first in fielding, however, but three times out of a possible ten. The winning club finished as low as seventh once and as low as sixth place on another occasion. Furthermore, it appears from the records that no winning club occupied a higher position in fielding than it did in batting, while no less than six out of a possible ten times a winning club batted correspondingly much better than it fielded. On one classic occasion the Giants, who finished first in 1911, led the league in batting, and stood next to last place in fielding.

It appears that a winning club excels more often in batting than in fielding.

The evidence, however, is far from conclusive for a variety of reasons. In the first place the situation is complicated by the pitching problem. It is admitted that pitching is the prime essential in winning pennants, and we have no means of knowing how important a factor pitching was in determining the issue during the past five years. Quite possibly, for aught we know to the contrary, pitching of good quality may have been combined rather more frequently with good hitting than with brilliant fielding. We have no reason to suppose that such is the case, but it might be so for all the records could tell us to the contrary.

Again the cold figures make no provision for that all important club spirit, or team work, and for fighting aggressiveness, commonly called "ginger." These qualities frequently make a winner out of rather indifferent material, while their lack precludes all possibility of success to an otherwise stellar club.

Then, too, there is that intangible something, called the "breaks," which has to be considered, as well as injuries to players, and those fatalities which for

lack of another name, might be denominated sheer luck.

All these things affect the final score to a greater or less degree. All tend to complicate the evidence in favor of either batting or fielding. But, admitting, for the sake of argument, that they affect both equally in the long run, the records seem to tell us that batting power plays a rather more important role in the success of a club than fielding skill. In short, the distinction, though rather finely drawn, appears to indicate a margin in favor of the good hard wallop as against the stop and throw.

Wading through the club records for a period of years offers some food for thought, even if its deductions are a trifle vague. Perhaps the records of the various positions on the diamond, taken separately, instead of collectively, will show greater results.

There are nine positions on the diamond, and it goes without saying, that a player to fill any one of them acceptably in the major leagues, must both field and bat up to at least a respectable standard. If he proves to be wholly deficient in either line, whatever his gifts in the other, he will not do. He is sent back to the minors, either to polish his fielding skill, or to acquire a batting eye, as the case may be. The one exception to this rule is the pitcher. He is not properly a player at all, but a specialist. If he can hit, well and good. So much the better, but he doesn't need to so long as he can pitch. Fielding skill is more in demand in the case of a pitcher than batting, for it is usually conceded from the get-away that the pitcher will strike out at least twice out of five times at the plate. But fielding skill is not essential. As an illustration, Shore lost the first game of the last world's series largely through his failure to field his position. But that didn't prevent Manager Carrigan from sending him in in a later contest, neither did it prevent Shore from winning his second game of the series.

We had best eliminate the pitcher altogether from the count, and see how the other positions shape up on the diamond.

First of all is the pitcher's battery mate, the catcher. There are many com-

petent catchers, and some of them are good hitters. Usually, though not always, the catcher who can hit most readily is preferred to his less competent batting associate.

Giving full credit to any batting talent he may possess, however, it is but fair to admit that the catcher is chiefly reputed for his fielding skill. If he can line the ball to second and nip the ambitious base runner, if he can hold the pitcher at all times, is a dead shot at fielding fouls and can eat up bunts, much will be forgiven him at the bat. If he is deficient at these requirements, even though he possess a tremendous punch with the bat his services are a doubtful asset to a club. With a catcher fielding is supreme. We need only to turn to the figures for last season to emphasize this point. The catchers in the two major leagues made 11,933 put-outs and 3,362 assists. They accepted more chances than the outfielders of both leagues combined, more chances than the players at any other positions save only at first base. The put-outs, to be sure, were made mostly, no doubt, through catching foul flies. But this is an art in itself and frequently necessitates a long and even perilous run to the very grand stand at full feed.

We would say at first blush that fielding was the most important talent of the infield as a whole, but the statement needs considerable revision. No doubt the secondary defense of any ball club lies in the infield, the first reposing in the pitching staff. But it does not follow that infielders are necessarily better fielders than batters, at least, it does not follow at every position. Let us begin with first base, the logical starting point. Jake Daubert, one of the greatest fielding first basemen who ever lived, is authority for the statement that a first baseman is a kind of an outfielder and that the most important thing a first baseman should do is to hit. Jake is something of a hitter on his own account, and we do not believe he has over-rated the demands to be made on the initial sacker.

The first baseman in the two grand circuits last year made 24,128 put-outs and 1,361 assists. Some of their put-outs were difficult tries, but many of

CHANCES ACCEPTED BY PLAYERS AT THE VARIOUS POSITIONS ON
THE DIAMOND DURING THE SEASON OF 1915

	P. O.	A.	c.	
1B.	24,128	1,361	25,529,	27.2%
2B.	5,166	7,033	12,199	13.2%
3B.	2,824	5,037	7,861	8.3%
S.S.	5,140	7,366	12,506	13.3%
O.F.	14,301	910	15,211	16.2%
C.	11,933	3,362	15,295	16.2%
P.	502	4,505	5,007	5.3%
	64,094	29,574	93,658	

them were as mechanical as the act of the catcher in stopping a thrown ball by the pitcher.

Fielding skill looms up at first as well as elsewhere, as witness the phenomenal deeds of Hal Chase. But the prevailing rule for first basemen is hitting—first, last, and all the time.

The sixteen first string first basemen in the two major leagues last year hit for a combined average of .284. This is a substantial figure in a year of lean records. But that is just about what a first baseman ought to hit. The man who can't punish the sphere for at least .280 is likely to be criticised at the number one cushion. With first basemen at least the prime essential is batting.

The sixteen leading second basemen last year, one representative for each club, hit for a combined average of .260. The mark is raised appreciably by such stellar stickers as Doyle, who led the National League at the bat, and Collins, who stood second in the American League. There are wonderful fielding second basemen, such as Lajoie and Collins, who, by the way, are equally proficient with the bat. But the presence of such swatters as Zimmerman and Doyle, men who are great natural hitters without equal gifts as fielders, shows the power of the bat at second. For some years second basemen have in the main been good hitters. And some at least have been kept at that station for their hitting strength, though admittedly indifferent fielders.

Shortstop swings the balance clearly in favor of fielding. Somewhere near second base in the infield, batting becomes less important than fielding. The shortstop has the hardest position on the diamond to field. He accepts more difficult chances than any other man.

He covers a world of ground, backs up third and takes perhaps half of the catcher's throws to second base. A very busy person is the shortstop, and no wonder that he can't find time to fatten his batting average. One grand exception stands out in baseball history. Hans Wagner, whose wonderful batting record has been gained in spite of his position at short field. But in the main shortstops are about the weakest stickers on the diamond, next to pitchers.

The sixteen leading shortstops in the big parade last season hit for a general average of .246. One of the best in the bunch, Chapman of Cleveland, belted the ball for .270. The weakest was McBride of Washington, who, though a grand fielder, hit for but .204.

The shortstop, whatever else he may or may not do, must be a good fielder. There at least grand batting ability is no guarantee of a job, and weak hitting is no bar if combined with brilliant fielding. The shortstop is a fielder first and a batter afterward.

So is the third baseman. The third cushion men last season hit for .253. Stick work is prized in a third baseman, but it isn't essential so long as the said baseman can field. Getting bunts and stopping line drives is counted a more desirable talent in the third-sacker than poling safe bingles. His job is to keep the other fellow quiet and let the first and second basemen and the outfielders dynamite the opposing pitcher.

For the outfield is solidly in favor of hitting. In the outfield, from left to centre to right, hitting is king. Grand fielding is a prize in the case of an outfielder, but room will be made somewhere for the erring brother who is weak on ground covering but who can whale the ball a mile. Tris Speaker is

a wonderful fielder. But he is just as good a batter. So is Milan, and so are most of the other stellar outer gardeners. Occasionally a name appears opposite a weak batting average, but nine times out of ten the inference is that the particular individual has slumped badly over previous season's form.

Joe Jackson isn't a wonderful fielder, and his throwing arm, though strong, isn't always backed up by equally good judgment in direction. But who would keep a player off the outfield squad with a possible .400 average in his bat? Cactus Cravath isn't breaking any speed records on the side, and neither is Sam Crawford. But their names continue to appear on the pay roll of their respective clubs nevertheless.

On the other hand a really brilliant fielding outer gardener who can't hit is usually kept at most for a year to see if his batting average will not improve, and if it doesn't he is given his walking papers or made over into an infielder, as the case may be. In the outfield, fielding pure and simple is a valuable asset, but batting is a prime essential. One is desirable; the other is necessary.

Summing up the situation, then, it appears that batting is supreme by a wide margin in the three positions of the outfield and at first base. Fielding talent has a no less clear-cut supremacy at third base, shortstop, and behind the bat. Fielding is also probably the prime essential at second base, though coupled with strong batting power. The problem is rather closely drawn, one position tending to balance the other. But the same tendency to prefer batting seems evident, though less pronounced than in our former analysis.

An interesting if unconvincing method of approaching the problem is to assume the meeting of a team of great fielders opposed to another team of equally great batters. While admittedly data are lacking for arriving at the results of such a meeting, no live fan will concede that the problem is beyond all argument. Getting the facts down in concrete form, let us see how two such teams would shape up on paper.

Right off the reel the problem is complicated by the fact that several players are as renowned for their fielding as

their stick work and are stars at both. Such players are Eddie Collins, prince of second basemen, but a phenomenal sticker. So, also, is Tris Speaker, greatest of outfielders, and equally great as batter and run getter. To be fair to both we must omit some of these greatest names, for our purpose is to secure great fielding and relatively weak hitting against great batting with equally indifferent defensive strength.

One of the greatest of second basemen in the whole range of baseball history is John Evers. But the Trojan is not an equally proficient batter, at least not in recent years. No better man could possibly be selected for a defensive position on a club than he. Against him might be stationed a man equally proficient as a batter, but an indifferent fielder, Larry Doyle.

At shortstop, Walter Maranville touches the highest plane of defensive skill. Opposed to him Chapman of Cleveland received one of the best batting averages.

At third base Vitt, of Detroit, accepted far more chances than any other performer in either league at the difficult station, and was a stellar man in everything but batting power. For stick work Home Run Baker's name comes to the fore, and as he did not play last year he must perforce be content with his most recent big league record, that for 1914.

At first Luderus of the Phillies led the batters with the stick. Jake Daubert is a beautiful fielder, but, like Collins and Speaker, he is equally renowned at the bat. Let us rather choose Vic Saier, a tolerably heavy slugger, but a fine defensive man.

In right field we can secure no better fielder than Hooper, of the Red Sox, but an indifferent batter. We will certainly find no better slugger than Joe Jackson, whose last season's record does not do him justice, a man whose fielding is not up to his batting skill by a wide margin.

At centre all will acknowledge that Ty Cobb is something of a batter, but, to give Ty due justice, he would never have been a star of the first magnitude as a fielder. He covers much ground, to be sure, but his throwing arm is not particularly good.

Certainly Ty is not in the same class with Clyde Milan as a fielder, to say nothing of Tris Speaker and several others. Milan is nearly a perfect fielder, probably second only to the peerless Tris. He is also a good batter, but his fielding is best.

At left we can think of no prettier fielder than Zach Wheat, of

Brooklyn. Zach has the reputation also of being a grand batter, but he never gained it on his past season's showing, and the records of 1915 are what guide us in the choice. Zach will satisfy all requirements from a fielding standpoint in left. As a slugging left-fielder we will select Veach of Detroit, a man who is by no means a weak fielder, to be sure, but whose heavy stick work was his chief bid to fame last year.

Behind the bat Schalk is universally considered the best catcher in the game. This refers primarily, of course, to his all-round catching talent, which is mainly of a fielding nature. Snyder, of the Cardinals, is a grand catcher also, but he stands out first and foremost as a slugger, just as Chief Meyers used to do on the Giants.

Here we have two teams which satisfy the main requirements of our little hypothesis. Great fielding is squarely contrasted with great hitting. Assume, then, that two such clubs confronted each other on the diamond, each supported by equally efficient pitching. What would the verdict be?

The eight players on the sluggers' team scored 655 runs to 562 for the fielding combine. They made 1,351 hits to 1,012 for the defensive men. They stole 217 bases to 178 for their rivals. And finally they had a batting average of .316, as compared with .256 for the opposing octette.

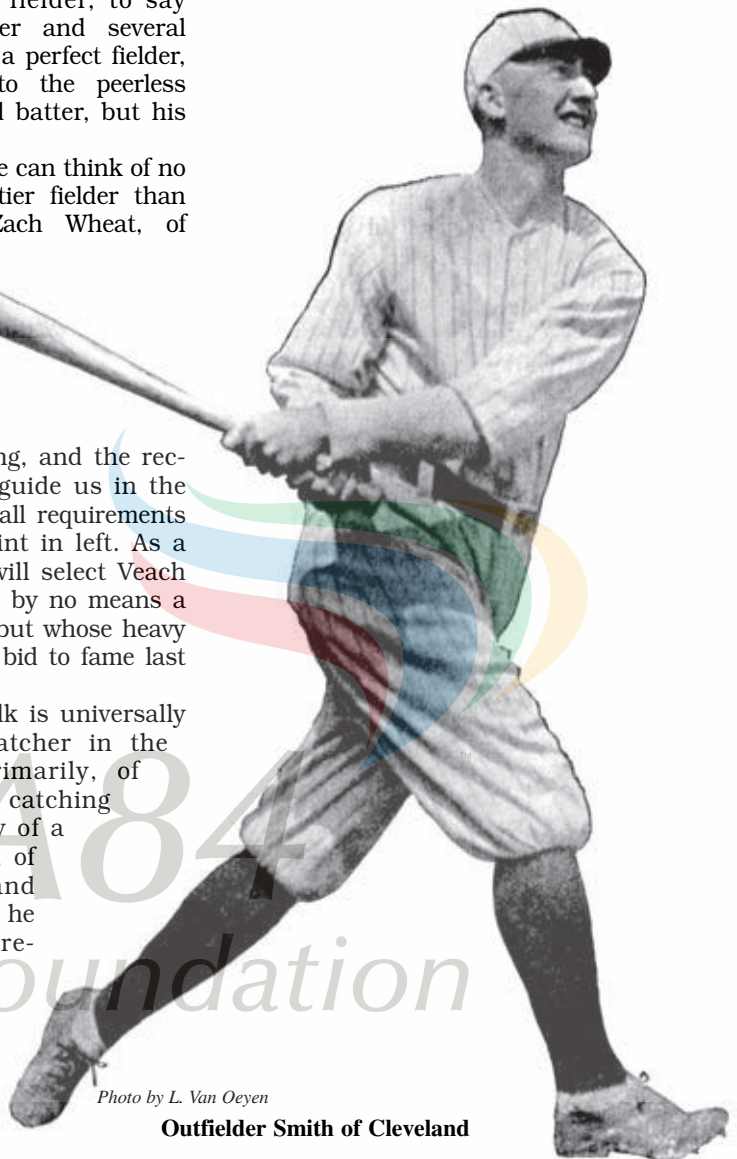


Photo by L. Van Oeyen

Outfielder Smith of Cleveland

There is a clearly marked preponderance of offensive strength in the batting aggregations. The fielding superiority of their rivals is not so marked. But no one will deny this superiority who has ever seen the men in action, even though fielding averages fail to show well defined results.

How would such teams compare? Here the interested reader must leave the beaten track of fact and figure and enter the region of pure speculation. The teams are not ill matched. Great skill in one is marked by great skill,

though of a different type, in the other. The superior fielding of the one aggregation would cut down possibly several hits for their rivals. The relative inferiority of fielding finesse in the batting squad would permit possibly one or two hits to trickle through in some unguarded spot. But our own opinion is that the batting difference of sixty points, assuming equal pitching and also assuming that both teams lived up to their prearranged form, would prove the determining factor in the case. The unfortunate pitcher, whoever he might be, who had to face Luderus and Doyle and Baker and Jackson and Cobb and Veach and Snyder would feel the need for a greater fielding defense than even the renowned glove artists which would support him in the line-up. Before such a fusillade of wallops as would carom off the bats of these slugging worthies, any defense in the world would tremble in the balance, and we believe crumble away before the full nine innings had wound up their adventurous course to a conclusion.

Perhaps gilt-edged fielding by such finished artists as Hooper, Milan and Wheat, aided by the dazzling pivotal defense of Evers and Maranville, would stem that torrent of crushing wallops.

We could look for great deeds in the field as well as great deeds at the bat. Rest assured it would be a royal contest. But in our opinion, for whatever it may be worth, the slugging team would crush their opponents by a decisive margin.

Lastly, as the parsons say, we can approach the problem from a purely theoretical standpoint and arrive at a still more definite conclusion that the bat is mightier than the glove. In geometry, when the mathematicians can't solve a problem at close range, they sometimes push it out to what they call infinity, where they quite readily arrive at conclusions which look sound. Infinity is a tolerable distance, but as it requires nothing but a six-cylinder imagination to carry us there, we might see what the excursion will teach us, if anything. It is possible to imagine absolutely perfect fielding. It is equally possible to imagine absolutely perfect batting. This in-

volves in no case gifts which verge on the supernatural. It merely assumes that a batter will every time hit the ball hard and straight. It means that every time the fielder will cover as much ground as is humanly possible, and catch anything that comes within his reach. Now, assuming that a team of perfect batters met a team of perfect fielders, it by no means follows that such would be the classic spectacle of an irresistible force meeting an immovable body. The best of fielding would not prove an irresistible body. The best of fielding would not suffice to prevent the best of batting from getting runs. For a ball hit hard and true might strike any point on the playing field, and there are patches of territory on any diamond where, if a ball be driven with reasonable speed, no fielder on earth could catch it, assuming that he was playing where he ought to have been playing. A ball can be hit directly over first base that no first baseman could possibly field. It can be dropped just out of reach of the infielders, but too far in for the outfielders. It may be sent in various directions, where no one could possibly be expected to be. And it can be driven over the fence. In brief, the greatest fielding in the world is not an impervious shield. Nine men cannot perfectly cover a playing field in every part. Nine men, whatever their speed and skill, cannot prevent balls from falling on neutral territory. In short, the absolute perfection of fielding cannot prevent hits from being made by great batsmen, and in the long run cannot prevent runs from being scored. Great pitching, coupled with great fielding, could do this, to be sure. But we are not discussing great pitching. The utmost limit of fielding skill cannot prevent scores, and is therefore, in the last analysis, not equal in value to perfect batting. What happens at infinity might and quite probably does happen at closer range. Batting as a class is just as far from perfection as is average fielding. Therefore, batting is superior to fielding.

Perhaps the investigation of all the facts at hand have not satisfied the reader. Probably the problem is one of those indeterminate issues which can never be decided for all time. Obviously

A GOOD BATTING TEAM COMPARED WITH A GOOD FIELDING TEAM									
	Runs	Hits	S.B.	Avg.		Runs	Hits	S.B.	Avg.
Luderus	55	157	9	.315	Saier	74	131	29	.264
Doyle	86	189	22	.320	Evers	38	73	7	.263
Chapman	101	154	36	.270	Maranville	51	124	18	.244
Baker	84	182	19	.319	Vitt	116	140	26	.250
Jackson	63	142	16	.308	Hooper	90	133	22	.235
Cobb	144	208	96	.370	Milan	83	165	40	.288
Veach	81	178	16	.313	Wheat	64	136	21	.258
Snyder	41	141	3	.298	Schalk	46	110	15	.266
	655	1,351	217	.316		562	1,012	178	.256

the balance between the two contending forces is pretty evenly drawn. If it were not so, the problem would not be a difficult one to decide, and it is difficult to the point of impossibility. But every method of approach which offers for attacking the problem seems to show a shadowy but none the less perceptible margin in favor of batting as against

fielding. The facts, as far as we can read them, seem to furnish some basis for the players' preference of the hit over the fielding stunt. Important as the secondary defense of a club may be, there is reason for the popularity of the good old wallop. Fielding is great, but batting is greater. It's the punch that wins !

