

= Neal Ball =

Cornelius " Neal " Ball ( April 22 , 1881 ? October 15 , 1957 ) was an American baseball shortstop who played seven seasons in Major League Baseball ( MLB ) . He played for the New York Highlanders , Cleveland Naps and Boston Red Sox from 1907 to 1913 . Although his primary position was shortstop , Ball played at second base , third base and in the outfield as well . He is most famous for being the first player to turn an unassisted triple play in Major League Baseball history on July 19 , 1909 .

Ball played minor league baseball for the Montgomery Senators of the Southern League until 1907 , when he signed for the New York Highlanders . After spending less than three seasons with the organization , Ball was sold to the Cleveland Naps , where he spent the next two seasons . In the middle of the 1912 season , his contract was then purchased by the Boston Red Sox , with whom he played his last game on June 30 , 1913 . He died on October 15 , 1957 in Bridgeport , Connecticut .

= = Personal life = =

Ball was born on April 22 , 1881 in Grand Haven , Michigan . After his Major League career ended , he went on to coach the Baltimore Orioles ( who were a minor league team at the time ) . It was there that he was assigned to train Babe Ruth , who had just come out of St. Mary 's Industrial School for Boys . Ball described Ruth as " the dumbest and yet the strongest player " he had ever coached . The two remained good friends after Ruth broke into the Majors and even played a friendly game of bowling against one another in 1923 ( with Ball edging out Ruth , winning four out of the seven games played ) . Ruth held Ball in great respect , and because of their close friendship in baseball , he eventually became a fan of the New York Yankees . In the 1950s , an annual bowling tournament held at the Newfield Alleys near Bridgeport , Connecticut was named after Ball in order to honor the city 's famous inhabitant . On February 12 , 1952 , at the age of 71 , his health severely deteriorated due to a heart ailment and he was rushed to Bridgeport Hospital , where he was placed on the danger list and visitors were prohibited from seeing him . Five years later , he died on October 15 , 1957 and was interred at Mountain Grove Cemetery , Bridgeport .

= = Professional career = =

= = = Minor leagues = = =

Ball first started playing organized baseball on the semi @-@ pro team in Three Rivers , Michigan , where he played in a game against Hall of Fame Negro League star Rube Foster of the Otsego Independents during the 1902 season . He then proceeded to play for Montgomery Senators , a minor league baseball team that competed in the Southern League . He played for the team until 1907 , when he signed for the New York Highlanders . He made his major league debut for the Highlanders on September 12 , 1907 , at the age of 26 , in a 2 ? 0 loss against the Washington Senators .

= = = New York Highlanders ( 1907 ? 09 ) = = =

During his 1908 rookie season , Ball posted a batting average of .247 and led the Majors in strikeouts with 91 . Defensively , he committed the most errors among all fielders in the American League with 81 and most errors by a shortstop with 80 , both of which are Yankee rookie records that still stand today . However , he also set the team record for most assists by a rookie with 438 ( this record has since been broken by Derek Jeter , who had 444 assists in 1996 ) . On May 18 , 1909 , in the middle of the season , Ball was bought by the Cleveland Naps for approximately \$ 5000 .

== = Cleveland Naps ( 1909 ? 12 ) == =

Ball was brought in to serve as the temporary replacement for Cleveland 's injured starting shortstop Terry Turner , who suffered from a recurring arm injury that needed treatment . In his first season with the Indians , Ball batted .256 with one home run and 25 runs batted in . Although he was never famous for his defensive skills , he achieved baseball history when he executed the first unassisted triple play in the MLB on July 19 , 1909 , doing so against the Boston Red Sox at League Park . In the second inning of the game , Ball , playing shortstop , caught Amby McConnell 's line drive , stepped on second base to retire Heinie Wagner , and then tagged outfielder Jake Stahl as he was advancing towards second . Because the play was unprecedented and turned so swiftly , the ballplayers on the field did not know the inning was over and the crowd of 11 @, @ 000 were unsure of how to react . Cy Young , the game 's starting pitcher , was puzzled and asked Ball why he was leaving the field . Once the fans in attendance realized what had happened , they gave him an ovation , while his teammates applauded him as he returned to the dugout . In the following inning , with the crowd still cheering , he hit an inside @-@ the @-@ park home run into center field ( the only home run he hit that season ) . After the game , he was questioned in a post @-@ game interview , a rare occurrence at the time . He remained humble about the feat and reminded the reporters that " anyone could have made the play " . The glove that he used to make the unassisted triple play is on exhibit at the Baseball Hall of Fame .

At the end of the 1910 season , after playing just 54 games with the team , Ball was sent down and released to the Portland Beavers . He refused to play for the minor league team and this , coupled with the underperformance of the infielders brought in to replace him , resulted in the Naps repurchasing his contract .

The 1911 season turned out to be Ball 's best statistical year , resulting in several career high numbers being set . He batted .296 and amassed 122 hits , 9 triples , 45 RBI and hit 3 home runs , though he also recorded the third highest number of strikeouts in the AL with 93 . Although his defense was never stellar , he executed two noted plays that season . He made a one @-@ handed stop against the Chicago White Sox that was described as " marvelous " by the New York Times and held the Yankees ( his former team ) to a 3 ? 3 draw when Ball , serving as the cut @-@ off man , successfully relayed the ball thrown from right fielder Shoeless Joe Jackson to catcher Gus Fisher . In doing so , he nailed Birdie Cree ( who represented the Yankees ' winning run ) at home plate and the game was immediately suspended due to darkness . However , in a rematch against the White Sox on May 5 , 1912 , Ball suffered a momentary defensive lapse that ultimately cost his team the game . In the sixth inning , he was unable to catch Shano Collins stealing second base and then inexplicably held onto the ball . This allowed Ping Bodie to advance to home plate and score the winning run . On June 25 , the Boston Red Sox purchased Ball 's contract from the Naps for \$ 2500 .

== = Boston Red Sox ( 1912 ? 13 ) == =

Ball 's final major league team was ironically the one he turned his unassisted triple play against . The player who was final out of that play , Jake Stahl , became his manager and teammate . The Red Sox signed Ball with the intention of using him only as a utility player who would be a competent substitute to any injured players on the team . As a result , he rarely started a game for the Red Sox . The team advanced to the World Series at the end of that season , where they defeated the New York Giants 4 ? 3 . Although he struck out in his only plate appearance of the series , he still received the prize money of \$ 4025 rewarded to players on the winning team . This prompted the Ottawa Citizen to label him " the luckiest man in baseball . "

== = Post @-@ playing career == =

After playing his final major league season in 1913 , Ball returned to minor league baseball and played for several teams until 1924 . Most notably , in May 1916 , he was traded by the Toronto

Maple Leafs to his hometown team , the Bridgeport Hustlers of the Eastern League , and became both their manager and second baseman . The Hustlers were struggling at the time and the addition of Ball did nothing to change the team 's fortunes . By July , the Hustlers were still languishing in last place and , as a result , he was dismissed from the team .