Introduction

Ask just about any baseball fan to name five major league players—past or present—and the answer is predictable. Virtually everyone answers with the names of power hitters.

No singles hitters are mentioned. No base stealers or defensive wizards make the list. Seldom, in fact, does anyone name a famous pitcher. Despite their obvious abilities, these kinds of players dimply don't rate on the same level as the big sluggers who hit the ball out of the park.

Home run hitters. They are the players who rank foremost in the minds of most people who follow baseball. They are the ones who provide the excitement, the ones people talk about.

People respond the way they do, of course, with good reason. The home run offers the single most exciting moment in baseball. No other incident that occurs on a regular basis provides even close to the same kind of thrill or admiration as the home run.

It takes no more than a look back to the 1998 and 1999 seasons to confirm that point. Particularly in 1998, while Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa chased the most hallowed record in baseball, a whole world watched, a whole world quivered with excitement, and baseball once again became the most popular game on the planet after a strike had soured the public on it for several years.

It was all because of the home run. All because of those majestic drives coming as they do in various forms that with one swing of the bat can change the whole complexion of a game or even a season.

There is nothing more symbolic of the popularity of the home run than the realization that most people would rather see a 10-8 game filled with homers than a 2-1 pitchers' duel. The chance of seeing a home run is what brings many people these days to the ball park, and it is what gets them jumping out of their seats and cheering.

In cities throughout the National League, ballpark attendance figures swelled dramatically when either McGwire or Sosa came to town in '98 and

'99. An excellent example of this phenomenon was seen in Philadelphia in August 1999. Nearly 50,000 fans—more than double the number the Phillies had been drawing—flocked to Veterans Stadium when McGwire and the St. Louis Cardinals visited for a meaningless series. Much of the crowd arrived early just to watch McGwire take batting practice.

On a historic level, many of the most memorable events in baseball have involved home runs. Naturally, there are some no-hitters, some unassisted triple plays, some great catches, and other spectacular feats that rank among the sport's finest moments. But dramatic home runs dominate the list. In fact, in a survey by *Baseball America*, readers chose home runs as four of the five most memorable moments in baseball history.

How can any compilation of baseball's most memorable occasions not include Bobby Thomson's legendary "Shot Heard 'Round the World"? Or Bill Mazeroski's famous World Series clincher? Or McGwire's 70th homer, Hank Aaron's 715th, or scores of other incomparable four-baggers?

Is it not possible to rate these feats in any place except at the top of baseball's most glorious single accomplishments. Without question, nothing else poses a threat.

In recognition of these heroic feats, I have written *Great Home Runs of the 20th Century* to chronicle the 30 most dramatic homers in the last 100 years. I have also cited the top 10 All-Star Game home runs as well as 60 other noteworthy homers, bring the total to the top 100 homers in baseball history.

The 30 most memorable homers, many hit by Hall of Famers and most by highly prominent players, were selected no only because of their dramatic flavor, but also because they all had a significant impact on the situations in which they were hit and in most cases on the sport of baseball as a whole.

The contents of this book, therefore, do not just include a collection of great home runs. These 30 homers are the biggest ones ever hit.

And each on is unique. There have been no others like them. Each has its own special characteristics and in its own way is vastly different from all the rest.

For that reason, most home run feats that were matches by others are not included in the book.

Not mentioned either are memorable minor league home runs, not the least of which was one that some call the shortest homer in professional

baseball history. Although there is disagreement over whether or not the event ever happened, the homer was a smash that according to some accounts was said to have traveled all of two feet off the bat of Andy Oyler of the Minneapolis Millers during a game in 1900 that was being played in a driving rainstorm. The ball landed in a huge mud puddle in front of the plate, and while opposing players vainly searched for the horsehide Oyler circled the bases. If the claim is true, it was certainly one of the most unusual homers ever hit.

But that's a story for another time. For now, we're going to travel through baseball history to look at the greatest major league home runs of all time and the men who hit them. Each was a truly remarkable feat.

Frank Baker

The Home Run Achieves New Status

October 18, 1911 Shibe Park

The first time a home run attracted substantial attention in baseball it was such a captivating event that the hitter was given a special nickname. From that moment on, he became known as "Home Run."

Frank (Home Run) Baker was the only big league player ever to carry that sobriquet. It was a label that was well deserved.

Baker was not only one of the first home run hitters of note. When he hit home runs on successive days against two future Hall of Fame pitchers in the 1911 World Series, he pioneered a major change in the way baseball people viewed the home run. Thereafter, the home run began to gain wider recognition as a major offensive weapon in a game that had previously focused on moving runners along one base at a time.

Before Baker, there had, of course, been plenty of home runs. But in the dead-ball era, the home run still occurred infrequently, and when it did, it was not considered a major part of a team's arsenal.

Runs were scored by a technique then called the "insider game." Today, it is called "the little man's game." Runs were scratched out one at a time using well-placed singles or doubles, stolen bases, bunts, and whatever else could be employed to move the runner along.

Although it eventually took the prodigious clouting of Babe Ruth to fully change that approach and to end the dead-ball era, Baker's home runs began to push baseball in that direction. No one before the slugging third baseman of the Philadelphia Athletics had done such a thing, even though there were a number of redoubtable sluggers.

One of the main reasons the credit goes to Baker is that his hitting occurred in the spotlight of a World Series. The future Hall of Famer was not the first batter to hit more than one homer in the Series, but the circumstances made his efforts more noticeable.

Baker was already a prominent slugger. After joining the Athletics late in the 1908 season he had begun his rookie campaign with a grand slam in his first at-bat in the first inning of the opening game in 1909. That act only gave the A's a 4-1 victory over Boston, but it was the only grand slam of Baker's career.

As the new hot corner custodian, Baker, an excellent fielder joined an infield that also included Stuffy McInnis at first, Eddie Collins at second, and Jack Barry at shortstop. The group became known as the "$100,000 infield," a tag that would be spoken in awe over the ensuing years.

In 1910, Baker's .409 bating average led the Athletics to their first World Series victory as they stunned the Chicago Cubs in five games. The following year, Philadelphia was back in the Series for the third time since the American League began in 1901. (There was no World Series when the Athletics won their first pennant in 1902.)

Baker had a banner year in 1911. He hit .334 and drove in 115 runs. He also clubbed 11 homers to win what would be his first of four consecutive home run crowns and the seventh four-bagger title for the A's hitter in 11 years (Harry Davis had won four preceded by Nap Lajoie and Socks Seybold, each with one.)

Connie Mack's A's had stormed to the American League pennant with 101 wins, good for a 13½-game lead over the hazed Detroit Tigers. Baker, who after being spiked by Ty Cobb the previous year and attacked the Tigers' star, causing a near riot, was not the A's only big hitter. Collins, McInnis, Danny Murphy, and Bris Lord all hit over .300. On the mound, Jack Coombs won 29 games, Eddie Plank 22, and Chief Bender 17.

As formidable as they were, the A's, who tied for the league lead in home runs with 35, had all they could handle as they faced the National

Frank Baker gave the home run new status with his pair of Series swats.

League winner, the New York Giants. John McGraw's club, led by 26-game winner Christy Mathewson and 240 game winner Rube Marquard, had won 99 games, finishing 7½ games ahead of the second-place Cubs. The Giants led the National League in hitting with a .279 average, but of greater significance, had set a major league record (which still stands) for stolen bases with 347. New York outfielders Fred Snodgrass, Josh Devore, and Red Murray had combined for 150 of these steals.

McGraw outfitted his team in black uniforms for the Series. In the first game, Mathewson outdueled Bender, winning 2-1, at New York's Polo Grounds. Baker had two singles and scored the Athletics' only run.

The Series switched to Philadelphia's Shibe Park for the second game two days later. A crowd of 26,286 overflowed the park to watch Marquard toe the rubber against Plank in the second straight battle of future Hall of Fame pitchers.

Another brilliant duel ensued. The A's got one run in the first inning on a single by Lord, an error, a sacrifice, and a wild pitch. But the Giants tied the count in the second win A's outfielder Rube Oldring misjudged

a drive by Buck Herzog that fell for a double. Herzog then scored on a single by Chief Meyes.

The 1-1 deadlock stood until the sixth inning. With two outs, Collins doubled. Baker was next, and with his huge 52-ounce bat, he drilled a Marquard fastball over the 12-foot-high right-field wall for a two-run homer. The blast held up, and the A's walked off with a 3-1 win to even the Series. But the sparks were just beginning to fly.

A relatively new feature had been applied to the 1911 Series. A number of players on both sides, as well as Mack and McGraw, were having their opinions recorded by ghostwriters in columns in various New York and Philadelphia newspapers.

After Baker's home run, a column bearing Mathewson's byline appeared in a New York newspaper. The giants star berated Marquard for pitching carelessly to the A's third sacker and for disregarding McGraw's pregame clubhouse instructions not to throw a fastball to Baker.

Having said that, Mathewson then went out the next day to face the A's and Coombs back at the Polo Grounds. The Giants took an early 1-0 lead with an unearned run in the third. The margin stood until Baker came to bat with one out in the top of the ninth.

Just two outs away from victory, Mathewson, who had allowed only one run in $44^{1}/_{3}$ previous World Series innings, got ahead in the count 0-2. On the next pitch, Baker crushed Mathewson's delivery into the lower right-field stands. Stunned Giants fans watched in silence as Frank circled the bases.

Two innings later, with one out, Collins singled and Baker beat out an infield hit. Both moved up a base on Herzog's wild throw. An error by Art Fletcher and a single by Davis gave the A's two runs, which more than offset an unearned run by the Giants in the bottom of the 11th.

The A's had a 4-2 victory. Now it was time for Marquard's ghostwriter to go to bat. "Will the great Mathewson tell us exactly what pitch he made to Baker?" the column blared. "I seem to remember that he was present at the same clubhouse meeting at which Mr. McGraw discussed Baker's weakness. Could it be that Matty, too, let go a careless pitch when it meant the ballgame for our side? Or maybe Baker just doesn't have a weakness."

At least McGraw was starting to feel that way. "I don't know what to do about him," the Giants manager said. "We just can't seem to get him out when we have to."

Baker's two home runs made him the toast of the baseball world. He was a national celebrity. Suddenly, he was no longer Frank. He was given a new name of "Home Run." It would stay with him the rest of his life.

The Athletics cleanup hitter belted no more home runs in the Series. But his bat stayed alive. The Series was delayed for six straight days because of rain, and when it resumed the A's won two out of the next three, including a 13-2 rout in the deciding sixth game, to capture the Series. Baker had two hits each in two of the final three games, and finished the Series with a glittering .375 average.

Baker's hitting heroics continued the next year when after getting a raise to $8,500 he blistered American League pitching with a .347 average. He drove in 133, scored 116, and among his 300 hits were 40 doubles, 21 triples, and a league-leading 10 home runs.

In what was surely the A's greatest era—they won four pennants in five years between 1910 and 1914 and six flags overall since 1901—Baker continued his lusty hitting. He homered off Marquard to help the A's to a 6-4 win in the first game of the 1913 World Series while hitting .450 in the five-game set, again won by the A's.

Baker, who sat out both the 1915 and 1920 seasons because of contract disputes, finished his 13-year big league career, which ended in 1921 with the New York Yankees, with a .307 average, 96 home runs, and 1,013 RBI. After his playing days, he became a manager at Easton, Maryland, in the Eastern Shore League. There he discovered a 17-year-old slugger named Jimmie Foxx and convinced Mack that he should be signed by the A's.

Mack knew what he had in Foxx, and he knew what he had in Baker. "If he had played with the livelier ball, he would have rivaled Ruth," Mack said about Frank many years later. "He hit the fence dozens of times, and those shots would have carried over the wall today."

Baker was said to have hit the fence 38 times in 1912 alone. His best shots, though, were the two that carried over the fence in the 1911 World Series, and gave him the name of Home Run Baker.