Home, at the Other House That Ruth Built

By Peter Keramosis
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ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — The woman pressed her eyes shut to see what only she can see. Macular degeneration has left her legally blind. Still, her vision of a bygone era, and of baseball’s most famous figure, remains focused.

“Daddy loved it here,” she said, sitting in a wheelchair in the restaurant of the Renaissance Vinoy Resort, once known as the Vinoy Park Hotel, where her father ate and drank and often stayed.

She is 97, yet she still calls that famous sports figure Daddy.

Daddy is Babe Ruth.

Julia Ruth Stevens did not need a wheelchair five years ago when she threw out the first pitch at the last game at the old Yankee Stadium, fondly referred to as the house that her daddy built. It had been her last public appearance.

But when organizers here asked her to help commemorate the city’s 100th anniversary as the birthplace of spring training in Florida, as well as Ruth’s history there — the Yankees called St. Petersburg their spring home from 1925 to 1961 — she made the trip from her Las Vegas and Conway homes.

It was her first visit to St. Petersburg since 1943, but she was able to recall addresses and landmarks, all while mining anecdotes rich in detail.

St. Petersburg is where Ruth hit a legendary home run. It came on March 29, 1939, in a game between the Yankees and the Boston Braves at Waterfront Park. According to a Boston Herald report, Ruth sent a pitch from Hucks Betts “10,000 leagues to right field,” carrying “far over the canvas and almost into the West Coast Inn.”

Those who have researched and studied the blast have suggested the ball traveled upward of 600 feet in the air, hard as it might be to believe, before bouncing once and hitting the hotel.

In the spring of 1948, when Ruth was dying, he came to St. Petersburg on what was clearly a farewell visit. Red Smith wrote about that visit in a 1973 New York Times Magazine article. Chronicling an exchange between Ruth and the Washington Star sportswriter Francis Stann — as Ruth stood at Al Lang Field, which had replaced Waterfront Park and came to be known as The Other House That Ruth Built — Smith wrote:

“What do you remember best about this place?”

“Babe gestured toward the West Coast Inn, an old frame building a city block beyond the right-field fence. “The day I hit that adjectival ball against that adjectival frame building a city block beyond the right-field fence. The voice was a harse stage whisper; the adjective was one often printed these days; but not here. “Wow!” Francis Stann said. “Pretty good belt.”

“But don’t forget,” Babe said, “the adjectival park was a block back this way then.”

Ruth was not noted for his good memory. In fact, the inability to remember names is part of his legend. Yet he needed no record books to remind him of his own special feats.

But Stevens said a profound sadness overtook Ruth in his later years, particularly after his retirement in 1935, as one element of the game had eluded him.

“Daddy really wanted to manage,” she said. She has a theory different from the commonly held belief as to why her father never had that opportunity. It was believed that Ruth’s once-unrestrained lifestyle scared owners. But, after his marriage to Claire seemed to calm him, the Yankees owner Jacob Ruppert said: “I think Ruth will make a splendid manager. He’s settled down and he’s very serious about his future.”

Stevens said that what truly prevented Ruth from a shot at managing was the fear that he would have brought in black players, years before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947. “Daddy would have had blacks on his team, definitely,” Stevens said.

Ruth also was known to frequent New York City’s Cotton Club and befriended black athletes and celebrities. He once brought Bill Robinson, a tap-dancer and actor known as Bojangles, into the Yankees’ clubhouse. Robinson also was with Ruth during the 1932 World Series in Chicago, and at the game when Ruth was said to have called his home run. When Ruth died in August 1948, Robinson was an honorary pallbearer.

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Stevens never talked to her father about whether or not he called that home run — “But I do recall him once being asked what would have happened had he not hit that home run, and he replied, I would’ve looked like a fool” — but she is firm in saying that racism kept him from managing.

“I remember him talking about Satchel Paige,” Stevens said of the Hall of Fame pitcher who was not allowed to play in the major leagues until he was 42. “Daddy thought Satchel Paige was great.”

She added: “He really thought he deserved to manage. Daddy knew baseball. He always felt he would be a better manager than Joe McCarthy. He always talked about that.”

It pains Stevens when she reads that her father was unintelligent, or that he was an unrestrained charmer. She said her father was smart, had settled down, and was concerned about social issues. She said he was someone who befriended blacks and Jews when it was not popular. On Christmas in 1942, Ruth joined 49 other prominent Americans of German descent in publicly denouncing Adolf Hitler. Their “Christmas Declaration” appeared in a full-page New York Times advertisement, and in nine other newspapers.

Ruth particularly felt betrayed a year earlier, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

Stevens had accompanied her mother and father on a baseball tour of Japan in 1934. Ruth loved Japan, Stevens said, but he was disturbed by what happened on Dec. 7, 1941.

“To say he was upset would be putting it mildly,” she said. “He was furious. Mother and Daddy had brought back mementos from Japan. But Daddy started throwing things around and he was really crazy. He turned around and said to Mother, ‘Mother, we have to go to St. Petersburg immediately.’ ”

“ ‘Why not?’ ” Stevens asked.

“ ‘I need to see the Yankees and the Blue Jays,’ he said,” Stevens said. “ ‘They are going to get arrested for throwing objects out the window that she began to grab things before Daddy could get to them.’ ”

Years later, Stevens was a young wife and a hostess at a ski lodge that her first husband owned in New Hampshire. One day, she picked up a newspaper and “I saw a picture of Daddy, and he looked just terrible. I called Mother and asked, ‘What on earth is wrong with Daddy?’ She told me, ‘Nobody knows, but he has these terrible, terrible headaches.’ ”

Stevens was with Ruth when he checked into the New York Cancer Hospital, now the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.

Outside Ruth’s hospital window, children held a vigil. “All these children looking up, just to see if they could get a glimpse of Daddy,” she said. “He’d ask us to get slips of paper, write his name on them and ask that they be taken to the kids.”

Weeks before his death, Ruth made his last public appearance. “It was that horrible picture with Bill Bendix,” Stevens said, referring to the movie “The Babe Ruth Story.” “They dragged him out of bed and took him to the theater.” It was at the old Astor Theatre, where the Marriott Marquis now sits in Times Square. Ruth was frail at 150 pounds. “He didn’t stay to watch the picture, and I’m so glad he didn’t. He would’ve been horrified.”

Stevens said she and her mother received a call in the middle of the night on Aug. 16, 1948, telling them, “You better get over here.” Rushing to the hospital, they run into a friend, who told them, “It’s all over.”

Ruth, who was 53 when he died, lay in state two days in an open coffin at Yankee Stadium, that nearly 100,000 people filed past.

It’s another one of those scenes Stevens still sees vividly, even though she wishes she could erase it from her memory. “The whole idea was to give people a last chance to see him, even if he was dead,” she said. “But I could barely look at him, to see him that way. He looked so sad. But Yankee Stadium belonged to him, and he belonged to the people.”

Julia Ruth Stevens (above) was happy to head to Tampa recently for the ceremony. She has fond memories of her dad, Babe Ruth (below).