

HOW FAITH AND THE FADEAWAY CHANGED THE GAME

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Christopher wanted badly to play baseball with the big boys. He loved the game, and he loved pitching. He would rather play ball than eat. But the older boys didn't want him on their team.

Until they saw how he could throw. Then they invited him to join them. But they stuck him in the outfield. The outfield positions were important, but Christopher wanted to pitch.

Determined to prove that he could help his team win by pitching, Christy practiced secretly behind his house day after day. He threw a baseball at a knothole in the barn wall, and he got better and better with his aim. So good was his control that when he went hunting as a child, he never carried a gun but took round stones instead.

Soon, he showed the older boys what he could do, and they let him pitch for them. He never again had to play the outfield. He went on to become arguably the greatest pitcher in baseball history and was among the first five players to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Christopher (Christy or Matty) Mathewson was born August 12, 1880, in Factoryville, Pennsylvania. He was the oldest of the six Mathewson children. His parents were Christians and tried to teach him properly to love God and to treat others with respect.

When Mathewson was 10, he helped Factoryville's men's baseball team by chasing foul balls and getting water for the players to drink. Four years later, after seeing him pitch, they let him try out for the team. The tryout lasted two hours. Finally, they agreed to let him pitch for them—that day against Mill City.

Mathewson was so tired from the grueling tryout that he did not do well in the game. He gave up 17 hits. But he won the game 19–17 when he hit a two-run homer.

The pastor of Christy's church was also the president of Bucknell University. Through his encouragement, Christy enrolled in Bucknell for his college studies and played on Bucknell's baseball and football teams. But every summer he played baseball for local teams. Soon, regional teams began to offer him contracts to play for them. One offered \$1 a game. Another time, a team offered him \$20 a month plus room and board (food and lodging). After a team in the New England League saw what he did on the Bucknell baseball team, they offered him \$90 a month. That was big money in those days, when the average worker was making barely 20 cents an hour. Christy called it "getting paid to have fun."

Mathewson eventually signed a major league contract with the New York Giants, managed by rough, tough John McGraw. Matty appeared in his first major league game as a relief pitcher on July 10, 1900. With the Giants trailing in the fifth inning, Mathewson came into the game. His debut was not pretty. In four innings, he hit three batters, walked two others, and gave up six runs. When he came up to bat, he struck out on three straight pitches.

It didn't get any better later. In the first game in which Mathewson was the starting pitcher, he faced the Cardinals and lost. He ended the season with three losses and no wins.

But Mathewson knew that he was a better pitcher than his record showed. He refused to give up. He kept practicing. And he developed a pitch that he called his fadeaway. (Today, it is called a screwball.) The next season, he returned to the Giants and won 20 games, pitching five shutouts and a no-hitter.

People began to take notice. The League officials said that Mathewson's pitching brought in \$100,000 in extra gate receipts. Fans adored Mathewson. But why? Was it only because he now had a winning record, or was there more to it than that?

In those days, baseball had a bad reputation. Players fought a lot, used dirty tricks to win or keep opponents from winning, and argued fiercely with the umpire. Fans threw bottles and rocks at opposing players and the umpire. Baseball players were a rough-playing, foul-mouthed lot. Respectable people just did not play baseball. And women and children did not attend the games because of the bad atmosphere there.

But with the arrival of Mathewson, that began to change. His Christian principles would not allow him to curse or fight. He refused to argue with umpires. He did not smoke or drink or go to bars with even his teammates. He carried his Bible

with him and read it every day. When his teammates went to wild parties, Mathewson visited libraries, concerts, and museums. He even refused to play baseball on Sundays, reserving that day for rest and worshipping in church.

At first, even his teammates disliked Mathewson. They made fun of him. They refused to talk to him.

But then they saw how well he played. They watched his life both on and off the field and saw consistency. They saw a positive difference in his life. Before long, they embraced him.

Christy Mathewson became the most dominant pitcher of the “dead-ball era,” the first two decades of the 1900s. During his 17-year career, he won 373 games, all but the last one with the Giants. He pitched in four World Series. In the 1905 Series, he pitched three shutouts in six days against the Philadelphia Athletics. Between 1907 and 1911, his earned run average (ERA) was under 2.00; in fifteen seasons, his ERA was over 3.00 only once.

Mathewson won 20 games or more 13 times. He won 30 or more games four times. In his best season, 1908, he won 37 games and pitched 20 shutouts.

Opposing batters feared Mathewson. Many of them disagreed with his religious views. Yet they respected him because he was a phenomenal baseball player and because he “walked the talk.” He lived the Christian faith that he professed.

Mathewson had control. He put his pitches right where he wanted them. His favorite catcher, John “Chief” Meyers, said that Matty could pitch into a tin cup and that he could catch for Matty sitting in a rocking chair. But Mathewson also controlled himself—his emotions and temptations. And self-control is the best control.

Mathewson was consistent. Whenever he pitched, teammates and opponents alike knew what to expect. And in life, Christy was consistent. What he was on the baseball diamond he was off the field. What he said he believed, he practiced. He was polite, respectful, and courteous both on and off the field. He always practiced the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Christy was committed and loyal to his team. In his final season with the Giants, he began to lose the sharpness of his physical skills because he was getting old. He ended that season with a dismal 8–14 record, the only time he never won at least

20 games, and had an ERA of 3.58, the worst ERA he ever had. But McGraw helped him land a job as player-manager with the Cincinnati Reds. He won his final game with the Reds and built that organization into a contender. But his loyalty was always with the Giants. He was just as committed to his faith and to practicing it in his life.

And Matty was a man of firm convictions. He believed that he should do his best in playing baseball, so he practiced and played hard and studied the batters he faced. He noted which pitches they could hit and which ones got them out. He always pitched to their weaknesses in his best efforts to win the game.

But, more importantly, Mathewson knew what he believed as a Christian, and he was determined to live those beliefs consistently. But he was human. He failed to be consistent once, but he learned from the mistake.

Mathewson had promised his mother that he would not play baseball on Sunday. Only once did he violate that promise, not by playing on Sunday but by going duck hunting rather than going to church. The press found out and blasted him for his hypocrisy. Fans were dismayed. Mathewson was ashamed. He apologized and never again broke his pledge. He knew that his fans were watching, and he didn't want to disappoint them again. Rather, he wanted to set a good example for them.

Christy Mathewson, Hall of Famer and Christian gentleman, was a fantastic baseball player. He set a high standard for the game and helped to clean it up, making it a respectable sport. Women and children were even able to attend baseball games without fear of what they might hear or witness from rowdy fans or players.

We could use a lot of Christy Mathewsons in athletics today. Could *you* be one of them?