

Death on the Diamond: The Tragedy of Ray Chapman



Last week, I talked about the victims of Triangle Shirt and the other martyrs of work safety. Opening day of the baseball season is a perfect time to reflect on Ray Chapman, the only major leaguer to suffer a workplace fatality.

It happened on August 16, 1920. The Cleveland Indians had travelled to the Polo Grounds in New York to take on an upstart team called the Yankees.

On the mound for the Yankees was Carl Mays, a right-handed submariner with a nasty reputation (**Note:** For you non-baseball fans, a submariner is a pitcher who hurls side armed, their knuckles almost scraping the ground, as opposed to over the shoulder). Mays considered home plate his personal territory and wasn't afraid to pitch high and tight to batters who "crowded the plate."

The Cleveland shortstop, 29-year-old Ray Chapman, was one of those who liked to crowd the plate. He came to bat leading off the fifth inning with Cleveland ahead 3-0. Mays's first pitch sailed inside and struck Chapman on the temple, fracturing his skull. The "crack" sounded so much like a batted ball that Yankee third baseman Aaron Ward actually charged the ricochet thinking that Chapman had hit it. But Chapman was down and unconscious. Blood poured from his ears, nose and mouth.

Chapman was removed from the field by stretcher and rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery. But it was to no avail.

Chapman was pronounced dead at 4:30 A.M.

The incident shocked and horrified not just baseball but the entire country. Mays appeared before the district attorney's homicide bureau but was cleared of any wrongdoing.

Although Mays was vilified in the press, the incident didn't affect his pitching. He'd go on to win 26 games for the Yankees that year and was later elected to the Hall of Fame.

Baseball's response to the tragedy was to ban the use of dirtied and weathered balls from play. Mandatory use of the batting helmet remained more than 4 decades away. There have been at least half a dozen notorious "bean ball" injuries since the death of Ray Chapman. However, Chapman remains the only person ever killed in a Major League Baseball game.