

This Date in Safety History: August 16, 1920—Major League Baseball's Darkest Day



While injuries are part of the game, only once has a Major League Baseball (MLB) player died as a direct result of an on-field injury.

Who Said There's No Dying in Baseball?

It happened on August 16, 1920. The Cleveland Indians had travelled to the Polo Grounds to take on an upstart team from New York called the Yankees. On the mound for the Yankees that day was Carl Mays, a right-handed submariner with a nasty reputation (**Note:** For 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 Aftermath

The incident shocked and horrified not just baseball fans but the entire country. Mays appeared before the district attorney's homicide bureau but was later cleared of all 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. However, the batting helmet, a piece of PPE that might have saved Ray Chapman's life, was almost never used because most players deemed it uncomfortable and unmanly. It would take another 5 decades, until 1971, for batting helmets to become mandatory for all MLB players. In 1983, the League expanded the rule by requiring that batting helmets be fitted with at least one earflap to protect the front ear of the batter—that is, the right ear for left-handed batters and the left ear for righties.

Regrettably, there have been at least half a dozen notorious "bean ball" injuries since the death of Ray Chapman, including a particularly gruesome incident that ended the career of a promising Red Sox outfielder named Tony Conigliaro in 1967. However, Ray Chapman remains the only player to suffer a fatal injury in a Major League Baseball game.