

The Duke of Milwaukee



**The life and times of
Al Simmons
Baseball's Forgotten Superstar**

By Ted Taylor

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Prologue

Aloysius (or maybe it was Alois, depending on what researcher you quote) Harry Szymanski was born in Milwaukee, WI in May 22, 1902 as the fledgling American League was entering its second season.

The son of poor Russian/Polish immigrant parents, his father, the Pole, was a butcher. Al's mother was Russian. It was clear from early in his life that Al was destined to be a ball player, despite his father's wishes that he follow him in his line of work. Al was determined and his early boyhood coincided with the halcyon days of Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics and they became the young mid-westerner's favorite team.

Despite writing letters to Connie Mack as a teenager, suggesting that the A's send him train fare and offer him a contract, Mr. Mack seemed unaware of him until A's scout Ira Thomas discovered the young man playing for his hometown minor league team the Milwaukee Brewers.

Once with the A's Simmons and Mr. Mack developed a father-son relationship and when Al was inducted in to the Hall of Fame in 1953 he spent little of his acceptance speech on himself and most of it thanking Connie Mack. Priceless letters remain in Al's extended family reflecting the deep affection Mr. Mack had for his Hall of Fame protégé'.

Despite his prodigious numbers and awe-inspiring exploits on the diamond Simmons never really got his due in the news media of the day. Like another Philadelphia centerfielder, Richie Ashburn, Simmons played in the shadows of larger, superstars, like Jimmie Foxx on his own club and Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig of the Yankees. Some would say that he was Gehrig to Jimmie Foxx's Ruth and that would be an accurate description. No pitcher of that day wanted to face either combination.

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In researching this book I learned a lot of things about Al that I never suspected, among them was that he was a private man, more than a little stubborn, a bit cantankerous and seldom a very happy man. Writer Dale Smith described him as “intense, combative, temperamental, tenacious and self confident” and all seem to fit.

His grandson-in-law Patrick Greaber, an Atlanta GA businessman shared priceless anecdotes and family information about “The Duke” and his own father-in-law John Alan “Little Duke” Simmons – and the Little Duke’s family, which included Greaber’s wife Karen Ruth Simmons.

When respected baseball and Philadelphia A’s historian, The Rev. Jerome Romanowski, suggested I write a book about Al Simmons – as a follow up to My *“Ultimate Philadelphia A’s Research book”* I was surprised to learn that the only one ever done before was written in 1979 by Ed “Dutchie” Doyle and is long out of print. Hopefully this remedies that situation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Taylor", with a stylized, cursive script.

Ted Taylor

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***For my wife Cindy,
She always encourages me to do more!***

Chapter 1 – How it all began

There's an oft-told story about a very young Aloysius Szymanski that suggests he came home one day from the fourth grade and announced to his father, a butcher, that he was going to become a professional baseball player. The elder Mr. Szymanski, a hard-working Polish immigrant, wasn't impressed and went on a rant about how his son would not do anything so foolish and to illustrate his concern the old man administered a whipping with a leather strap. The family was poor, times were tough, and Al's father wanted nothing to do with his son playing the game of baseball for a living.

"Now what do you want to do with your life?" the older man said after the whipping, and a defiant boy said, "I still intend to become a baseball player". Seeing that his influence wasn't going to produce another butcher in the family his father said, "By God you'd better be a good one". And Al did.

Al's father passed away while Al was still young, but he supported his beloved mother for the rest of her life.

According to family lore, after high school Al went to college, such as it was, as a football player. This was 1920. The school, now the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point, was then Stevens Point Normal School, a two-year institution for budding teachers. Al didn't graduate, in fact he likely didn't stay long after the end of the football season.

An inquiry to the school turned up no record of him at all. Laura Gehrman Rottier, Director of Alumni Affairs said, "I looked through our database, consulted with Registration and Records on multiple spellings, talked with Athletics and looked through our 1920 and 1921 yearbooks. At this point, we have no record of anyone named Aloysius Syzmanksi or Szymanski or Al Simmons. It is certainly possible he attended here we cannot confirm that with any documentation."

Maybe he went to college, maybe he didn't. It wasn't unusual in those days for athletes to "shop" their talents to institutions of higher learning and really never attend to the mundane things, like showing up for class.

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Al's Grandson-in-law Patrick Greaber (married to Al's son's daughter Karen Ruth Simmons) said, "I'm sure that he went to college to play football, but I'm also sure he really wasn't all that interested in getting an education. He saw his future in sports."

It was also about this time in his life that the very athletic young man also considered becoming a heavyweight fighter. He decided, however, that hitting a baseball could be a more lucrative pastime than punching someone's lights out – or getting yours punched out in return. Greaber said that Al loved boxing and had many friends among members of the sweet science. "We know that Al boxed as an amateur and we have a couple of trophies that he won."

We do know that in 1920 when spring rolled around Al joined the Juneau Millers, a semi-pro club located in the county seat of Dodge County, Wisconsin – about an hour's drive from Milwaukee. He was, after all, a baseball player.

It was probably in 1921 that young Mr. Szymanski actually wrote a letter to Connie Mack offering to come to Philadelphia for the price of a train ticket.



Connie Mack