

## The Bonehead Play

### Chapter 13

*For the interesting facts for **Chapter 13**, we turn now our attention to a baseball player who is considered the greatest 'goat' in causing his team the New York Giants to lose the 1908 pennant. His name was Fred Merkle.*

*The following information is taken from the website [www.baseballlibrary.com](http://www.baseballlibrary.com) which describes Fred Merkle's bonehead play.*

Fred Merkle is forever famous for his bonehead play on September 23, 1908, which cost the Giants a critical victory and made possible the Cubs' pennant-clinching victory when the game was replayed at the end of the season. The play itself was clouded by contradictory affidavits by players, conflicting opinions by various baseball officials, and protests lodged by both teams over the umpires' handling of the incident.

The confusion started when Merkle, the runner on first, failed to touch second after an apparent game-winning base hit. Instead, he turned back toward the dugout, as was customary at the time, when he saw the run cross the plate. As the happy Polo Grounds' crowd filed across the field towards the centerfield gate, second baseman Johnny Evers got the ball and stepped on second, claiming a forceout which negated the winning run. With the fans already crowding the field, the game could not be played to a decision, and had to be replayed.

When the season ended with the two teams tied, a group of Giants, led by Christy Mathewson, went to owner John T. Brush. They claimed they shouldn't have to play another game for something they had already won. The gravely ill Brush expressed disappointment at their attitude, and they played and lost. Whatever the merits of the case, it was one of baseball's most controversial plays and it haunted Merkle not just for the rest of his playing days, but all his life. He bitterly refused requests for interviews in later years because he didn't want to relive the incident.

He was 19 at the time and had played in only 35 games that season; after the loss of the

playoff game, he intended to quit the game, but McGraw persuaded him to come back. He was still affected by the incident in 1909, hitting just .187, but McGraw stayed with him. Merkle cost the Giants \$2,500. The 6'1" 190-lb right-handed first baseman was one of the fastest big men the game had seen. In eight different years he stole 20 or more bases, with a career high of 49 in 1911, when the Giants stole a record 347. He was the cleanup hitter, but not a long-ball threat.

Merkle was involved in another crucial lapse in the last game of the 1912 World Series. After Fred Snodgrass dropped a fly ball in the 10th inning, Tris Speaker popped up foul between home and first. Merkle and catcher Chief Meyers let it drop between them. Speaker then singled in the tying run and the Red Sox went on to win the game and the Series.

Merkle was one of the first to take up bridge and golf, when those games were unknown to most players. In 1913 he fell into two batting slumps. McGraw discovered he had been playing golf with reporters before going to the Polo Grounds. He stopped Merkle's golfing, and golf was taboo on the Giants during the remainder of McGraw's tenure. But Merkle, McGraw, and Mathewson continued to play bridge.

In late 1916 the Dodgers' first baseman, Jake Daubert, injured an ankle. The Dodgers wanted Merkle, and McGraw traded him for catcher Lew McCarty. He would end up in another World Series. Traded to the Cubs in 1917, he got into his fifth World Series the next year; every one of them had been with a losing team. As a coach with the Yankees in 1926 he was again on the losing side in a Series.

