

The Original Louisville Slugger: The Life and Times of Forgotten Baseball Legend Pete Browning

Tim Newby

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Tim Newby's biography of forgotten baseball great Pete Browning, whose Louisville Slugger nickname inspired the bat brand, recounts his athletic feats and troubled life.

The repeat batting champion was one of the greatest hitters during Major League Baseball's fledgling and still-gloveless days in the 1880s. An ear infection during Browning's childhood left him deaf, unable to participate in common pastimes like swimming in the Ohio River, and hampered him for life. But he demonstrated an early aptitude at baseball in his West End neighborhood, debuted for the Eclipse when he was fifteen, and established himself as the leading batter for a team rivals feared as "invincible." Some consider him one of the Hall of Fame's biggest omissions. Called the Gladiator, his accomplished career was with his hometown Louisville Eclipse (later the Colonels). Meanwhile, he struggled with alcoholism, health problems, and trouble fielding.

Details, as of Browning listing his occupation in a city directory as "Base-Ballist" while he was a semiprofessional playing on the weekends, illuminate the work, as do period specifics, as of players batting with wagon tongues. Steeped in period slang, the book explains MLB's early days and shows how the game evolved. Media used lofty, hyperbolic prose in discussing Browning, too, as with an obituary that claimed he was "in Elysium with the other demigods and heroes, communing with Hercules and Spartacus." Indeed, he was legendary and racked up multiple nicknames, and his story straddled the line between myth and truth. Not in dispute is the fact that Browning paved the way for future rulebreakers like Dock Ellis.

A joyous biography of an oft-overlooked sports legend, *The Original Louisville Slugger* pays deserved but tempered tribute to an all-time great, capturing the player and his era.

JOSEPH S. PETE (September / October 2024)

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