

ALLA CORRENTE

Tony Lazzeri

With the continuing exhibit at the Museo ItaloAmericano that closes on November 25, 2012, entitled “Italian-Americans at Bat: From Sand Lots to the Major Leagues,” and with the baseball season in full swing (pun intended!!), I thought it would be fun to devote another “Alla Corrente” article about the first Italian-American star of the New York Yankees from San Francisco: Tony Lazzeri.

Anthony “Tony” Michael Lazzeri was born on December 6, 1903 to an Italian-born boilermaker, Augustine Lazzeri, and Julia (Cheasa) Lazzeri, also born in Italy. San Francisco’s South-of-Mission district was a rough-and-tumble place to grow up in at the turn of the century. Lazzeri often got in fist-fights, remarking once that “the neighborhood wasn’t one in which a boy was likely to grow up a sissy, for it was always fight or get licked, and I never got licked.” It was doubly hard for Lazzeri to survive this atmosphere because he was an epileptic.

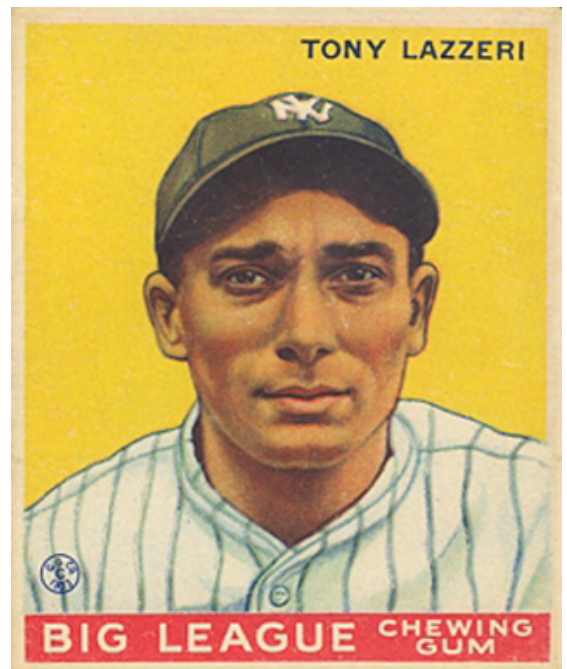
He had no interest in school work at Daniel Webster Grammar School and spent his time boxing and playing baseball on the Jackson Playground at the bottom of the hill at 17th and Kansas Streets. Finally, in 1918 at the age of 15, he was expelled from Galileo High School.

He told his father he wanted to go to work. His father told him to pack a lunch for the next morning, and Lazzeri accompanied his father to the Maine Iron Works, where the elder Lazzeri worked as a boilermaker. Tony started as a helper, heating rivets and tossing them to the riveters. The job gave him extraordinary strength in his shoulders and forearms. He developed into a lean, hard, 5-foot, 11-inch, 160-pounder. Lazzeri was soon earning \$4.50 a day at the iron works.

Lazzeri also made a little money playing shortstop for a semi-professional baseball team. Later, while he was training as a boxer, Lazzeri became the shortstop of the Golden Gate Native Police Department, a good semi-pro team. He continued working at the iron works and playing for the Golden Gate Natives until 1922. At that time, as he was just about to become a full-fledged boilermaker, a friend of his named Tim Harrington convinced Duffy Lewis, manager of the Salt Lake City Bees baseball club of the Pacific Coast League (PCL), to give Lazzeri a tryout.

In 1922, at age 18, Lazzeri joined Salt Lake City as a utility infielder, playing third and first. He was paid \$250 a month. He had difficulty hitting a curve ball and started his professional career poorly, hitting only .192 in 45 games. In 1923 Lazzeri was sent to Peoria, Illinois, of the Three-I League for more experience. Before reporting, he married Maye Janes, whom he had met some six months earlier through her brother-in-law, Paul Pettingill, a teammate of Lazzeri’s on the Golden Gate Natives. (Maye and Tony would have one child—David Anthony Lazzeri—born in 1931.)

Lazzeri reported to Peoria where he had a good first month, but then was benched for three weeks while the manager tried out two other players at second. He finally was called on to pinch hit in the ninth inning of a game against Terre Haute. With two men on base and two runs behind, Lazzeri hit a home run that won the game. After that big hit, he became the regular second baseman on the club, playing in 135 games, hitting 14 home runs, and batting .248.



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He was called up to Salt Lake City again in the spring of 1924, starting at shortstop. Although playing well and hitting around .285 with 16 home runs, Lazzeri was asked by Duffy Lewis, the club's manager, to give Clark Pittinger, who had played for the Boston Red Sox, a chance at shortstop for a couple of days. Pittinger played very well. A few weeks later Lazzeri was farmed out to Lincoln, Nebraska in the Western League, where he played in 82 games, hitting 28 home runs and batting .329.

Back to Salt Lake City in 1925, Lazzeri got his first real chance under the team's new manager, Oscar Vitt. He had a sensational season playing in 192 games (in those days the PCL played a 197-game schedule). He batted .355 with 252 hits, 52 doubles, 14 triples, 222 RBIs, and 60 home runs, the most ever hit up to that point in professional baseball. Lazzeri also scored 202 runs and stole 39 bases.

The New York Yankees began to hear reports and take an interest in him, although the Salt Lake City club had a working arrangement with the Chicago Cubs. Knowing that Lazzeri had epileptic episodes off the field, the Cubs were afraid to buy him. The Cincinnati Reds also passed him up, and Garry Hermann, owner of the Reds, wrote to Yankee owner Jacob Ruppert and told him why his club had not bought Lazzeri.

The Yankees sent Ed Holly to Salt Lake City to look at Lazzeri. Holly reported he was sensational. He also confirmed reports about Lazzeri's medical disorder. Wanting to know more, Holly went on to San Francisco and looked into Lazzeri's family history. The Yankees, meanwhile, sent head scout Paul Krichell to Salt Lake City to watch Lazzeri, and also asked Bob Connery, president of the St. Paul Baseball Club of the American Association to see Lazzeri play.

Holly found that no other members of his family were affected and that Lazzeri's insurance company was willing to increase his policy. Connery reported that Lazzeri was great. Krichell also told the Yankees that the stories about Lazzeri's epileptic episodes occurred only off the field. During his playing years, the public never knew he had epilepsy. Subsequently, Lazzeri signed a contract with the Yankees for \$5,000 on March 30, 1926, and reported to spring training at St. Petersburg, Florida. He was 22 years old.

Although he had played shortstop at Salt Lake City, Yankee manager Miller Huggins wanted him at second base. Huggins worked with him on switching positions and taught him to make the double play. Meanwhile, Huggins played another highly prized rookie, Mark Koenig, at short. With two rookies in the infield, the sportswriters felt that the Yankees could not contend for the pennant in 1926. They predicted that the team would finish the season in the second division for the second straight year.

But Koenig and Lazzeri played well together in the field and helped the Yankees win the pennant that season. Lazzeri played in all 155 games in 1926, hitting .275, with 162 hits, 28 doubles, 14 triples, 18 home runs, and 114 runs batted in. Lazzeri's home run total (18) was third in the league behind Babe Ruth (47) and Al Simmons of the Athletics (19). Lazzeri's runs-batted-in mark (114) tied George Burns of the Indians for second place behind Ruth (146). As a rookie, he also stole 16 bases, sixth best in the league.

The 1926 World Series saw the Yankees play the St. Louis Cardinals. With the series tied at two games apiece, Herb Pennock and Bill Sherdel found themselves in a mound duel in St. Louis. With the score tied at two in the tenth, Lazzeri's sacrifice fly gave the Yankees a 3 to 2 lead, which Pennock held in the bottom of the tenth. The victory gave the Yankees a 3 to 2 lead in the series. After returning to New York for Game Six, Grover Cleveland Alexander won his second game and tied the series at three games apiece, setting the stage for the seventh and final game.

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In the deciding game of the 1926 Series, the Cardinals led by a score of 3 to 2 in the seventh inning. In the bottom of the seventh, however, the Yankees loaded the bases against St. Louis starter Jesse Haines. The knuckleballing Haines, whose 13-4 win-loss record helped the Cardinals capture their first franchise pennant, had already shut out the Yankees in Game Three of the Series; that would not happen again to the Yankees for sixteen years.

With Yankee centerfielder Earle Combs on third base, leftfielder Bob Meusel at second, and first baseman Lou Gehrig on first, Lazzeri came to bat with two outs. A single would give the Yankees two runs and the lead, and with Herb Pennock, the Yankees' best pitcher hurling in relief, the Cardinals knew their prospects of winning would be bleak if the Yankees went ahead. Making matters worse, the blister Haines had developed on his index finger had burst and was bleeding badly. He was unable to continue.

What happened next is the stuff of history, legend, folklore, and fake lore. Cardinal second baseman/manager Rogers Hornsby, after a long conference with Haines and his infielders, summoned Grover Cleveland Alexander from the bullpen. Alex had beaten the Yankees the day before to even up the Series and had celebrated afterward. Depending on the account one chooses to believe, Alexander had been dozing or fast asleep in the bullpen, was still drunk or hungover or stone cold sober (as his wife maintained until the end of her life). Maybe he had a hangover before shuffling out to the mound, or maybe he didn't, but the facts about what happened next speak for themselves.

Coming into the game with the bases loaded, Alexander had nowhere to put Lazzeri. Lazzeri took the first two pitches, a ball followed by a strike. He teed off on the third pitch and sent a shot down the left field line into the seats—ten feet foul. Alexander followed with one of his infamous low-and-away curves. Lazzeri swung and missed by at least eight inches, and the rally was over. Alexander stopped the Yankees in the eighth, surrendered a two-out walk to Babe Ruth in the ninth. Ruth ended the Series being thrown out trying to steal second, and the legend about Alexander was born.

The following season (1927) was an historic year for the Yankees. Known as "Murderers' Row", the '27 Yankees became a legend. Paced by the long-ball heroics of Ruth (60 home runs, 164 RBIs, .356 batting average) and Gehrig (47 home runs, 175 RBIs, .373), the Yankees won 110 and lost 44, winning the American League pennant by 19 games. Recovering from his failing in the 1926 Series, Lazzeri had an outstanding '27 season; he was a major contributor on that historic club with 18 home runs (third in the American League behind Ruth and Gehrig), 102 RBIs, and a batting average of .309. He was also the anchor of the infield. In addition to playing second base, he also filled in at shortstop and third base due to the occasional injuries to other players.

A quiet, modest man, Lazzeri would rarely talk about himself. The sportswriters found him difficult to interview: "Interviewing that guy," one reporter complained, "is like mining coal with a nail file."

He was popular with his teammates and respected by his opponents. As such, he was a team leader, cool under pressure, quick-thinking, and considered by many as one of the smartest men in the game. Even Miller Huggins acknowledged him to be the brains of the Yankee infield. Lazzeri took charge when events called for steady nerves.

He was an excellent fielder, and for a smaller man compared to the likes of Ruth, Gehrig, and Meusel, he could hit the ball exceptionally far. Eventually, he developed the knack of hitting with men on base, becoming one of the best "clutch hitters" in baseball.

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As the first great ballplayer of Italian heritage to play in New York, the Italian-American fans in New York and elsewhere took great pride in Lazzeri. Because of him, thousands of people of Italian descent were introduced to baseball for the first time, and they came back again and again. At Yankee Stadium, their rallying cry was “Poosh-’em up, Tony!” imploring him to hit the ball, preferably out of the ballpark. According to Lazzeri, the nickname, which remained with him always, was given to him while he was playing at Salt Lake City. A fan of Italian descent that wanted him to get a hit and could not express himself well shouted “Poosh-’Em Up, Tony.”

The *New York Times* even compared him to Christopher Columbus at a time when Lazzeri was playing short-stop. “He didn’t discover America,” wrote the *Times*, “but Columbus never went behind third for an overthrow to cut off the tying run in the ninth inning.”

Lazzeri played second base for the Yankees through 1937. He batted a career-high .354 in 1929 and hit two home runs in the 1932 World Series, one a grand slam. (In 1932, the Baseball Writers Association named him the best second baseman in the game.) The next year, Lazzeri played in the first All-Star Game.

On May 24, 1936, Lazzeri set an American League single game record with eleven RBIs by hitting a triple and three home runs (two of the home runs were with the bases loaded), and that same month, he set records for most home runs in three consecutive games (6) and four consecutive games (7).

After his conditional release by the Yankees on October 17, 1937, he signed with the Chicago Cubs as a player-coach, and played for the Chicago Cubs in 1938 and appeared in the World Series against the Yankees. He finished his major league career with the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants in 1939. Lazzeri then managed Toronto of the International League during part of 1939 and 1940. He played and managed Portsmouth, Virginia of the Piedmont League in 1942 and ended his baseball career as a player/manager of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania of the Eastern League in 1943, batting .271 in 58 games.

Returning to California, Lazzeri owned and operated a tavern in San Francisco. Despite an outstanding career with the Yankees, the strikeout against Alexander in the 1926 World Series was never to be forgotten. Baseball fans talked about it for years, and he was always reminded of it. While he was still an active ball player, Grover Cleveland Alexander went into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1938. His plaque read: “He won the 1926 world championship for the Cardinals by striking out Lazzeri with the bases loaded in the final crisis.” For his part, Lazzeri had the distinction of being the only player to have his name on a bronze plaque while not being a member of the Hall of Fame.

In 1945, a year before his death, Lazzeri gave a poignant interview to Bob Considine, the syndicated sports columnist, in the tavern that Lazzeri owned and operated in San Francisco.

“Funny thing, but nobody seems to remember much about my ball playing, except that strikeout,” Lazzeri told Considine. “There isn’t a night goes by but what some guy leans across the bar, or comes up behind me at a table in this joint, and brings up the old question. Never a night.”

After Lazzeri’s death, sports columnist Red Smith wrote, “it was Lazzeri’s misfortune that although he was as great a ball player as ever lived the most vivid memory he left in most minds concerned the day he failed.” Arthur Daley of the *New York Times* wrote: “Tony was never able to live down that incident. Even in death it’s the first thing that comes to mind. His slugging records and home-run achievements invariably are forgotten. No one ever bothered asking him to tell of his sixty homers in the Pacific Coast League the season before he came

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to the Yankees. Few inquired about his achievement of twice slashing three homers in one game or of walloping jackpot homers at crucial moments, including the World Series. No. Always was his one failure. Never was his brilliant successes.”

LEGACY

A fairer assessment of Tony Lazzeri was that he was an extremely gifted ball player; one of the best of his era. A look back at his career with the Yankees showed that he helped the Yankees capture six American League pennants and five World Championships. During his 12 years with the Yankees, Lazzeri batted .293 with 1784 hits, 327 doubles, 115 triples, 169 home runs, and 1154 RBIs.

Playing against the Philadelphia Athletics on May 24, 1936, he became the first major leaguer ever to hit two home runs with the bases loaded in one game. In the same game he set the American League record for most RBIs in a game (11). He holds the major league record of 15 RBIs in consecutive games. He also was the first to hit 6 home runs in 3 consecutive games, and 7 in 4 consecutive games. He continues to share the consecutive-game American League record, but the 3-game record was topped by Shawn Green of the Dodgers (7 in 2002) and the 4-game record was broken by Ralph Kiner of the Pittsburgh Pirates (8 in 1947). Both of these players were in the National League.

He also is the only player in major league baseball to hit a natural cycle (single, double, triple, and home run in that order) with the final home run being a grand slam on June 3, 1932.

Not bad for someone who struck out with the bases loaded in the 1926 World Series!!

Lazzeri always loved being a Yankee. In 1945 he told sportswriter Bob Considine: “Around New York I used to hear that expression, ‘once a Dodger, always a Dodger.’ But how about, ‘Once a Yankee, always a Yankee?’ There never was anything better than that. You never get over it.”

A year later on August 6, 1946, after returning home from a short vacation out of town, Mrs. Lazzeri found her husband slumped on the landing of their home in Millbrae. Sadly, the former Yankee infielder had died alone of a heart attack or, as some believe, as the result of an epileptic seizure, at the age of 42. He is buried at Sunset Mausoleum in El Cerrito.

Ultimately, Tony Lazzeri was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame by the Veterans Committee in 1991. Too bad it had to come posthumously, and he couldn’t enjoy it the way he should!

—James J. Boitano, PhD

Adapted from Fred Glueckstein’s article at Society for American Baseball Research’s Biography Project (<http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/1b3c179c>), which is taken from his book: The ‘27 Yankees, (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2005). Also adapted from articles in Wikipedia and Baseball Almanac (http://www.baseball-almanac.com/deaths/tony_lazzeri_obituary.shtml).