

# They Changed the Game

By Jay M. Remer

Since the beginning of time, sports has played an integral role in the evolution of mankind. Ancient sports like jousting or chariot racing may have involved into physical combat or auto racing—but they still offer the same thrills.

Remember when ping pong was a leisurely sport with players standing close to the table and gently hitting the ball over the net? Today's table tennis professionals stand several feet from the table and smash the little white ball at speeds approaching 60 miles per hour.



And, remember when badminton was a game played on the lawn by ladies in their flowing skirts? Today's Olympians are conditioned athletes who smash the shuttlecock at speeds in excess of 150 mph. The actual speed record for a shuttlecock is 162 miles per hour.

When I realize how the modern day major sports have changed—I think of the super star athletes who innovated the changes. Surely, the most dramatic change in football was in 1895 when a North Carolina University punter mishandled the ball and could not kick it—he spotted a teammate down field and tossed him the ball—which resulted in a touchdown. Knute Rockne, Notre Dame's legendary coach is credited with popularizing the forward pass. On the defensive side of the game—no player terrorized the opposing team more than Lawrence Taylor of the N.Y. Giants. "L.T." forced other teams to design plays that would stay clear of his side of the field..

Surely, Babe Ruth single handedly changed the nature of professional baseball with his ability to hit home runs. No matter the sport, the synonym for success is hitting a "grand slam." At the other end of the spectrum, Pete Rose was the most

prolific hitter in the history of baseball, amassing 4,256 hits in his 24 years career (a record that likely will never be equaled)—but he hit only 162 home runs in his career—an average of less than seven per year. On the basketball court, "big men" were usually slow and cumbersome. Many were considered a liability on offense. Then along came Ervin 'Magic' Johnson, who was 6'9" and flowed around the court like a gazelle. And following Johnson was Michael Jordan—who proved to the sports world that men could actually fly. Today, even mere six footers swoop over the rim and drop balls down into the basket.

As a youngster I remember going to Madison Square Garden in New York on a Sunday evening to watch the N.Y. Rangers play hockey. There were only six teams in the league and four of them played for the Stanley Cup. Unfortunately, my

Rangers were rarely one of the four finalists. One momentous occasion that involved the Rangers—and dramatically changed the face of the game occurred on November 1, 1959, in a game between the Rangers and super power Montreal Canadiens. Montreal goaltender Jacques Plante was struck in the face with the puck. Plante had previously worn a mask in practice, but his coach refused to permit him to wear it in a game, fearing it would inhibit his vision. After being stitched up, Plante gave the coach an ultimatum, refusing to go back out onto the ice without the mask, to which the coach obliged, not wanting to forfeit the game since NHL teams did not carry back-up goaltenders. Today, all goal tenders wear extravagant masks—and all other players wear protective helmets—most of whom also wear fiberglass shields to protect their faces. Somehow, the shields do not prevent most players from losing several of their front teeth.



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