

When Lou Gehrig stepped to the plate on July 4, 1939, he was not there to deliver a home run. For the first time in 17 years, Gehrig was there to deliver his heart. In recent weeks Gehrig had lost his job as the Yankees' starting first baseman, surrendered the good health that had made him the team's respected Iron Man, and was facing a veritable death sentence. He had two years to live. Gehrig, nervous and fidgety as he walked to a forest of microphones, collected himself and delivered 13 words that will live forever: "Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth." Indeed, Gehrig *had* been lucky: he had excelled as star slugger for baseball's greatest empire, maintained a squeaky clean image in the shadow of baseball's bad boy, Babe Ruth, married a socialite from the other side of the tracks, and was earning more money than he ever dreamt possible. Lucky? Perhaps. Unlucky? Doubtless. Rather than spend the few moments reciting his own accolades, Gehrig, as he usually did, turned the spotlight away from himself. He thanked his parents for rearing him, his wife for her relentless strength, his best friend (and teammate) for being just that, his fatherly manager, the team's trusted owner, and the general manager who had signed him to his first baseball contract. He even thanked the rival New York Giants, who declined to sign him fresh out of college and who in turn later lost two World Series to Yankees teams led by Gehrig.

Independence Day 1939 was a difficult moment for a man who had slugged a record 24 grand slams, belted four home runs in a single game, twice hit for the cycle and collected an assortment of league-leading statistics over the course of his 17-year career. The speech was, one could argue, Gehrig's epitaph. *Bronx Epitaph*, the first-ever comprehensive look at the slugger's epic speech in book form, is the story of Lou Gehrig's finest hour, a homily of so little consequence when first delivered that few newspapers published more than a quote or two the following day. Indeed, no complete visual recording of the speech exists today. Its import has changed, however. Over time Gehrig's "Luckiest Man" speech has settled into a sphere so timeless and essential that it seems he delivered it only yesterday. To many it portended his death, leaving fans and journalists weeping. To others, it served as a reminder that life is fragile--even for the great. And, as in Gehrig's case, it can be short. To Gehrig, the speech--whose contents changed slightly from long-accepted versions as I uncovered early published accounts--was many things rolled into one. It was a retirement oratory, one that deeply touched the 61,000 fans in attendance. It was a farewell to arms by a man who for 17 years had served as one of the Yankees' chief lieutenants. It was a goodbye to his adoring fans and respectful colleagues. But most of all it was Gehrig's epitaph, one so effusive that more than 80 years later people still study its impact. It was, to be sure, his *Bronx Epitaph*.