The song remains the same

What does a 200-year-old ode to a flag have to do with a ball game? More than you might think.

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Over the past century, "The Star-Spangled Banner" and baseball have become inextricably wed.

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THE FIRST THING to remember is that it's a battle song.

The most memorable lines involve rockets and bombs, and the lesser-known verses conjure "the havoc of war" and "the gloom of the grave."

The second thing to remember? It's a taunt, a lyrical grenade chucked at a defeated opponent. "See that flag still flying, the one you tried to capture?" it famously asks the British. Then it answers: "Scoreboard."

That's why, in a country that loudly lauds actions on the battlefield and the playing field, "The Star-Spangled Banner" and American athletics have a nearly indissoluble marriage. Hatched during one war,
institutionalized during another, this song has become so entrenched in our sports identity that it's almost impossible to think of one without the other.

Our nation honors war. Our nation loves sports. Our nation glorifies winning. Our national anthem strikes all three chords at the same time.

THOSE CHORDS WERE ringing loudly on Sept. 17, 2001, the day Major League Baseball resumed following 9/11. The country was in mourning, hurting in ways it could hardly have imagined a week earlier. And when the nation collectively decided to right itself, to acknowledge tragedy while reclaiming everyday life, it turned to sports -- and to the anthem. Across MLB, teams surrounded the song with tributes to the victims and the country's public servants. In Los Angeles, police officer Rosalind Iams sang the song while members of the Dodgers and Padres helped firefighters and police officers unfurl a colossal stars and stripes that stretched almost entirely across the playing field. That same night in Pittsburgh, two members of the Air Force Reserve were called on to sing the anthem as spectators donned "I Love New York" buttons. And in every ballpark for weeks afterward, tears were shed over what it took Francis Scott Key's lyrics to remind them of: "Our flag was still there."

Of course, in American sports, the flag -- and the anthem -- is always there. At the biggest events, pregame festivities surrounding the song provide as much spectacle as the games themselves. The anthem is a show, and a show of force. Every year, the Pentagon approves several hundred requests for military flyovers (even if that means five F-18s buzzing the closed roof of Cowboys Stadium, as was the case at this year's Super Bowl). At lesser events, even at the high school level, a color guard is often on hand with the flag as the anthem is played. A game without the anthem is likely one that doesn't matter much.

Despite the spectacle we make of it, the song remains sacred -- for better or worse. Sing it well and you're having a moment. Whitney Houston's rendition before Super Bowl XXV in 1991 has been a top-20 single not once but twice: first in 1991 during the Gulf War and again in 2001 after the 9/11 attacks. Sing it poorly, as Christina Aguilera can attest, and you're a national punch line. Spit and grab your crotch at the ending, as Roseanne Barr did in 1990, and the president himself will declare your performance "disgraceful." Others have protested the idea of the song itself. Goshen College in Indiana,
a Mennonite school that competes in the NAIA, recently decided that the violent lyrics clashed with its mission, which it sums up in the slogan "Healing the world, peace by peace." Goshen will not play the anthem before athletic competitions this academic year, substituting "America the Beautiful."

As the good people of Goshen have noted, the song's wartime roots are unmistakable. Key wrote it to bear witness to a bloody battle during the War of 1812. But its origins as a game-day ritual are murkier. It's not as if every other country in the world plays its anthem before every game. So how did we, the people, get here?

THAT STORY BEGINS, as so many tales in modern American sports do, with Babe Ruth. History records various games in which "The Star-Spangled Banner" was played dating from the mid-1800s, but Ruth's last postseason appearances for the Boston Red Sox coincided with the song's first unbreakable bond with the sports world, in 1918. Game 1 of that year's World Series was notable for many reasons. For starters, the Red Sox and the opposing Cubs were considered champs back then. After 1918, they would serve as symbols of futility; neither won a title for the rest of the century. But at the time, the Cubs were so highly regarded that their World Series home was not Wrigley Field (then Weeghman Park), which seated only 14,000 fans; the National League champs instead rented out the White Sox's Comiskey Park, which accommodated about 30,000. There was also World War I, which blackened everything, including the national pastime. The U.S. had entered the war 17 months earlier, and in that time some 100,000 American soldiers died. Veterans who survived often came home maimed or shell-shocked from encounters with modern warfare's first mechanized mass-killing machines. At home, the public mood was sullen and anxious. The war strained the economy and the workforce, including baseball's. The government began drafting major leaguers for military service that summer and ordered baseball to end the regular season by Labor Day. As a result, the 1918 Series was the lone October Classic played entirely in September.

World War I wasn't the only issue weighing heavily on fans. On Sept. 4, the day before the first game, a bomb ripped through the Chicago Federal Building, killing four people and injuring 30. The Industrial Workers of the World were thought to be behind the attack, a retaliation for the conviction of several IWW members on federal sedition charges in the court of Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis. (Two years later, Landis was appointed commissioner of baseball, a position he held until 1944.) Domestic terrorism didn't exactly generate interest in a lighthearted day at the ball game. For the opener at Comiskey, newspapers optimistically estimated that a sellout crowd would drop anywhere from 50 cents for a bleacher ticket to $3 for a box seat. When only 19,000 and change showed, a Chicago Herald-Examiner headline proclaimed, "Scalpers Are Making No Money."

Although the Cubs festooned the park in as much red, white and blue as possible, the glum crowd in the stands for Game 1 remained nearly silent through most of Ruth's 1-0 shutout victory over Chicago's Hippo Vaughn. Not even the Cubs Claws, the forerunners to Wrigley's Bleacher Bums, could gin up enthusiasm. "For a baseball game in a world's Championship series," the Chicago Tribune wrote, "yesterday's combat between the Cubs and Red Sox was perhaps the quietest on record."
The Red Sox beat the Cubs in the 1918 World Series -- and wouldn't win another title for 86 years. The "Star-Spangled Banner" would have a better run.

With one exception: the seventh-inning stretch. As was common during sporting events, a military band was on hand to play, and while the fans were on their feet, the musicians fired up "The Star-Spangled Banner." They weren't the only active-duty servicemen on the field, though. Red Sox third baseman Fred Thomas was playing the Series while on furlough from the Navy, where he'd been learning seamanship at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station in Chicago. But Thomas' months of military training had hardly dulled his diamond skills. According to the Society of American Baseball Research, the station's commander, Capt. William Moffett, was a baseball fanatic who actively recruited athletes for the training center's team. Thomas, who started playing professionally right out of high school in Wisconsin, later said he "had it made at Great Lakes. All [I] had to do was play baseball." So after the Red Sox went through nine third basemen during the season, they took a shot and asked the Navy whether he could join them as they took on the Cubs. The military said yes, and Thomas stood at his usual position on the diamond during Game 1's seventh-inning stretch, present at the creation of a tradition.

Upon hearing the opening notes of Key's song from the military band, Thomas immediately faced the flag and snapped to attention with a military salute. The other players on the field followed suit, in "civilian" fashion, meaning they stood and put their right hands over their hearts. The crowd, already standing, showed its first real signs of life all day, joining in a spontaneous sing-along, haltingly at first, then finishing with flair. The scene made such an impression that The New York Times opened its recap of the game not with a description of the action on the field but with an account of the impromptu singing: "First the song was taken up by a few, then others joined, and when the final notes came, a great volume of melody rolled across the field. It was at the very end that the onlookers exploded into thunderous applause and rent the air with a cheer that marked the highest point of the day's enthusiasm."

The Cubs front office realized it had witnessed something unique. For the next two games, it had the band play "The Star-Spangled Banner" during the seventh-inning stretch, to similarly enthusiastic
crowds. By Game 3, a bigger crowd of 27,000 was in attendance. Not to be outdone, the Red Sox ratcheted up the pageantry when the Series relocated to Boston for the next three games. At Fenway Park, "The Star-Spangled Banner" moved from the seventh-inning stretch to the pregame festivities, and the team coupled the playing of the song with the introduction of wounded soldiers who had received free tickets.

Like the Chicago fans, the normally reserved Boston crowd erupted for the pregame anthem and the hobbled heroes. As the Tribune wrote of the wounded soldiers at Game 6, "[T]heir entrance on crutches supported by their comrades evoked louder cheers than anything the athletes did on the diamond."

THE RED SOX ended up winning the Series in six games, their third championship in four years and their last for the next 86. Not for the first time, and not for the last, Ruth etched his name in the record books. He pitched 16 straight scoreless innings in his two wins, which, along with 13 shutout innings in 1916, set a Series mark for consecutive scoreless innings that wouldn't be broken for 43 years. Meanwhile, Thomas typified a near-flawless fielding performance by the Red Sox, making several spectacular plays in the Series-clinching sixth game on Sept. 11. In the seventh inning that night, he snagged a scorcher down the line from Chicago's Fred Merkle, a play The Times called an act of "downright grand larceny." After the game, he had the ball autographed by his Boston mates. A Thomas family member bought it at auction in 2007, and today the old third sacker's descendants keep his memory alive at the Fred Thomas Resort, a fishing camp on Big Lake Chetac in Wisconsin that Thomas started after retiring from baseball in 1924.

Still, the Series' most enduring legacy belongs to a song. Other major league teams noticed the popular reaction to "The Star-Spangled Banner" in 1918, and over the next decade it became standard for World Series and holiday games. In subsequent years, through subsequent wars, it grew into the daily institution we know today.

But with ubiquity comes backlash -- and those, like the folks at Goshen College, who prefer to decouple the anthem from sports. What, after all, does an antagonistic, difficult-to-sing 200-year-old tune about a flag have to do with playing ball?

Quite a bit, actually. Congress didn't officially adopt the "The Star-Spangled Banner" until 1931 -- and by that time it was already a baseball tradition steeped in wartime patriotism. Thanks to a brass band, some fickle fans and a player who snapped to attention on a somber day in September, the old battle ballad was the national pastime's anthem more than a decade before it was the nation's.

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