



BRIEF NOTES

# The Fred Taylor baseball myth: a son goes to bat for his father

294

Shannon G. Taylor  
*Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA, and*  
Arthur G. Bedeian  
*Department of Management, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge,  
Louisiana, USA*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to refute allegations from various sources that, as a pitcher for the Phillips Exeter Academy baseball team, Frederick W. Taylor cheated by using an illegal overhand delivery.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Drawing on archival research, including a recently discovered letter by his son, Robert, this paper dispels the “myth” surrounding Taylor’s alleged cheating as a member of the Phillips Exeter Academy baseball team.

**Findings** – This research suggests that the “myth” of Fred’s purported cheating may be traced to a January 1934 *Esquire Magazine* article by American Novelist John R. Dos Passos.

**Originality/value** – As a consequence, of the information only a son could have provided, this paper sets the record straight concerning Taylor’s alleged cheating, and in doing so, demonstrate how a reliance on “myth” rather than “fact” stands in the way of capturing the elusive past.

**Keywords** Sports, Ball games, Cheating

**Paper type** Research paper

Outside the confines of the shop floor, Frederick Winslow Taylor’s obsession with efficiency carried over into his passion for sports (Taylor and Bedeian, 2007). Even as a youth, he sought to eliminate unnecessary motions when throwing a baseball. Deeming the traditional underhand style used by other pitchers ineffective, Fred imparted a spinning motion to his pitches that caused batters to consistently pop-up, either hitting balls very high that stayed in the infield or fell into foul territory. Various sources have claimed that, in doing so, Fred cheated by using an illegal overhand delivery, but inconsistencies surround this allegation. Based on a recently discovered letter by his son, Robert P. A. Taylor, we dispel the “myth” surrounding Fred’s alleged cheating while a member, and at one point captain, of the Phillips Exeter Academy baseball team. Fred, at 16, entered the “middle class” at Exeter in 1872 and graduated at the head of his class in 1874.

Commonly cited sources referencing Taylor’s captaincy and pitching style while at Phillips Exeter (located in Exeter, New Hampshire) include McGuire (1963) and Karigel (1997). The origin of the myth alleging Fred’s cheating remains unknown and,



Unfortunately, there are no extant contemporary records in the Exeter archives to discern its veracity. According to Exeter archivist Desrochers (2008), the school's yearbook was not published until 1880, and its student newspaper, *The Exonian* – the oldest continuously running secondary school newspaper in the country – did not commence printing until April, 1878. Our research suggests that the “myth” of Fred's purported cheating may be traced to a January 1934 *Esquire Magazine* article by American Novelist John R. Dos Passos. Abridged in *The Big Money* (Dos Passos, 1936a), the third volume of Dos Passos's “U.S.A. trilogy,” the article is a highly stylized sketch of Fred's life.

In the sketch, Dos Passos (1934, p. 56) asserts that Fred, as Exeter's pitcher, was the “first man to pitch overhand” and “when umpires complained that overhand pitching wasn't in the rules of the game, [Fred] answered drily that it got results.” Writing on this same point in his Taylor biography, Copley (1923, p. 72) does, in fact, mention that Fred had “frequent wrangles with umpires” when he “deliver[ed] the ball from above his shoulder,” but makes no reference to Fred pitching the ball “overhanded.” Kanigel (1997, p. 79) provides an important distinction in noting that it was the opposing batters who called Fred's delivery “illegal,” not the umpires, who “sustained” Fred's unorthodox, but effective pitching style.

Dos Passos's account of Fred's life does seem to take various liberties. Whether such liberties were for effect or simply errors in interpretation or reporting is impossible to say with certainty. Notable among these liberties is Dos Passos's (1934, p. 108) claim that:

All his life [Taylor] had the habit of winding his watch every afternoon at four-thirty; on the afternoon of this fifty-ninth birthday, when the nurse went into his room to look at him a little after four-thirty, he was dead with his watch in his hand, wound.

The truth is less dramatic. As reported by Copley (1923, p. 452), Fred actually passed away sometime between 4.30 and 5 on the morning of March 21, 1915, the day after his 59th birthday.

With the publication of Dos Passos's (1934) January, *Esquire* sketch, Copley accused Dos Passos (1936b) of plagiarism. Copley was upset because Dos Passos failed to acknowledge that Copley's biography was the source for the anecdotes contained in Dos Passos's account of Fred's life. In an effort to appease Copley, Dos Passos (n.d.) wrote *Esquire* Editor Arnold Gingrich and asked if he would “mind slipping a little note in somewhere saying that said anecdotes had come from said Copley's biography.” Further, Dos Passos assured Copley that he would receive “some sort of credit” in *The Big Money*. In March, *Esquire* (1934, p. 16) does, in fact, contain the following statement under the heading “Backstage with *Esquire*”:

John Dos Passos hates footnotes and so does *Esquire*. But John Dos Passos is far better known for his hatred of injustice than *Esquire* is. So he asks us to explain that, inadvertently, we did Frank Copley an injustice by failing to mention, in the January issue, that Copley's biography of Frederick W. Taylor was the source of the anecdotes worked into the Dos Passos sketch of Taylor which appeared in our pages under the title, “Man With a Watch in His Hand.”

Despite Dos Passos's assurance, however, the abridged version of the Taylor sketch that appears in *The Big Money* (Dos Passos, 1936a) carries no such credit. In writing to Charles A. Pearce, an Editor at Harcourt, Brace, the book's publisher, Dos Passos (1936b) explained this omission by saying that after an exchange of letters, he “promptly forgot Mr Frank B. Copley, the biographer.” In passing, we would note that,

in Copley's defense, others have since commented on Dos Passos's "strict adherence to biographical sources" and "distortion of historical particulars" (Foley, 1978, p. 92n).

Combined with this second slight, the widespread attention garnered by the release of *The Big Money* was particularly galling to Copley. To mark the book's publication, Dos Passos had been featured on the cover of the August 10, 1936, issue of *Time Magazine*. Copley wrote Harcourt, Brace to further express his displeasure at not being credited as a source, and, additionally, to voice outrage at what he viewed as Dos Passos's defamation of the Taylor family. His anger is likewise evident in a letter he wrote to the *New York Times* in response to van Gelder's (1936) review of *The Big Money*. Copley (1936) was particularly upset by the review's closing line, in which van Gelder urged readers to "give full attention" to Dos Passos's biographical sketch of Taylor, as it was "exceptionally well done."

In 1984, while researching an essay on Fred Taylor's contributions to golf and tennis for the *Biographical Dictionary of American Sports*, noted sports historian Frank V. Phelps ([www.wrhs.org/index.php/library/SportsArchives](http://www.wrhs.org/index.php/library/SportsArchives)) wrote to J. Myron Johnson, Curator of the Taylor Collection at the Stevens Institute of Technology, to inquire into Copley's recounting of Fred's pitching style. Although Phelps (1984a) did not mention Dos Passos by name, he did allude to the claim that Fred was "the first to pitch overhand":

As Mr Copley did not use footnotes or cite sources other than some general acknowledgements, nor, in the text, ascribe the source of the statements in question, verification seems most difficult. Others have picked up Copley's reference and expanded it by claiming Taylor was the first to pitch overhand in games between regularly constituted teams.

After searching through the Stevens archives, Johnson (1984) replied to Phelps:

Dear Mr Phelps:

You will recall that you asked me to look into the question of Frederick Winslow Taylor and the introduction of the overhand pitch in baseball. I discussed the question with his son Robert earlier this week. Robert pointed out that the overhand pitch was illegal in his father's prep school years and that F.W.T. played strictly by the rules. He did not use an overhand pitch. What he did do that was remarkable at the time was to introduce a special spinning motion to his pitch which caused the batters to consistently pop the ball up. Apparently, they challenged the use of that pitch but I believe the umpires declared it to be legal.

After receiving Johnson's letter, Phelps sent a draft of the essay he was preparing to Robert Taylor, because "his in-put and, possibly, further corrections would be invaluable and provide an authenticity otherwise unavailable" (Phelps, 1984b). After reviewing the draft, Robert wrote Phelps, not only resolving the seeming discrepancies that had been reported in various sources, but also recalling fond memories of playing baseball with his father, older brother Kempton, and younger sister Mary at "Red Gate," the family home on School Lane in Germantown, Pennsylvania:

We three children had to learn to ride bikes in order to go to school. Fred Taylor was a true believer in sports. Baseball was early on the agenda. He would take off his suit coat and vest - and then his collar and cuffs. At first he would simply toss the ball under hand when playing both catch and ball. As we grew older, he put more steam on his pitched ball. On his back swing the back of his hand was up, but when he released the ball, the palm was up. A quick twist of the wrist put an underspin on the ball, often resulting in pop-ups by the batter. He abided by the rules in any game. He might have argued with an umpire's

in Copley's defense, others have since commented on Dos Passos's "strict adherence to biographical sources" and "distortion of historical particulars" (Foley, 1978, p. 92n).

Combined with this second slight, the widespread attention garnered by the release of *The Big Money* was particularly galling to Copley. To mark the book's publication, Dos Passos had been featured on the cover of the August 10, 1936, issue of *Time Magazine*. Copley wrote Harcourt, Brace to further express his displeasure at not being credited as a source, and, additionally, to voice outrage at what he viewed as Dos Passos's defamation of the Taylor family. His anger is likewise evident in a letter he wrote to the *New York Times* in response to van Gelder's (1936) review of *The Big Money*. Copley (1936) was particularly upset by the reviewer's closing line, in which van Gelder urged readers to "give full attention" to Dos Passos's biographical sketch of Taylor, as it was "exceptionally well done."

In 1984, while researching an essay on Fred Taylor's contributions to golf and tennis for the *Biographical Dictionary of American Sports*, noted sports historian Frank V. Phelps ([www.wrhs.org/index.php/library/SportsArchives](http://www.wrhs.org/index.php/library/SportsArchives)) wrote to J. Myron Johnson, Curator of the Taylor Collection at the Stevens Institute of Technology, to inquire into Copley's recounting of Fred's pitching style. Although Phelps (1984a) did not mention Dos Passos by name, he did allude to the claim that Fred was "the first to pitch overhand":

As Mr Copley did not use footnotes or cite sources other than some general acknowledgements, nor, in the text, ascribe the source of the statements in question, verification seems most difficult. Others have picked up Copley's reference and expanded it by claiming Taylor was the first to pitch overhand in games between regularly constituted teams.

After searching through the Stevens archives, Johnson (1984) replied to Phelps:

Dear Mr Phelps:

You will recall that you asked me to look into the question of Frederick Winslow Taylor and the introduction of the overhand pitch in baseball. I discussed the question with his son Robert earlier this week. Robert pointed out that the overhand pitch was illegal in his father's prep school years and that F.W.T. played strictly by the rules. He did not use an overhand pitch. What he did do that was remarkable at the time was to introduce a special spinning motion to his pitch which caused the batters to consistently pop the ball up. Apparently, they challenged the use of that pitch but I believe the umpires declared it to be legal.

After receiving Johnson's letter, Phelps sent a draft of the essay he was preparing to Robert Taylor, because "his in-put and, possibly, further corrections would be invaluable and provide an authenticity otherwise unavailable" (Phelps, 1984b). After reviewing the draft, Robert wrote Phelps, not only resolving the seeming discrepancies that had been reported in various sources, but also recalling fond memories of playing baseball with his father, older brother Kempton, and younger sister Mary at "Red Gate," the family home on School Lane in Germantown, Pennsylvania:

We three children had to learn to ride bikes in order to go to school. Fred Taylor was a true believer in sports. Baseball was early on the agenda. He would take off his suit coat and vest - and then his collar and cuffs. At first he would simply toss the ball under hand when playing both catch and ball. As we grew older, he put more steam on his pitched ball. On his back swing the back of his hand was up, but when he released the ball, the palm was up. A quick twist of the wrist put an underspin on the ball, often resulting in pop-ups by the batter. He abided by the rules in any game. He might have argued with an umpire's

interpretation of a rule. Copley says he had "frequent wrangles" with umpires. That was not the same as your saying that he pitched "illegally."

He never used a glove when playing ball with us kids. He said only the catcher did when he was a boy. When we were twelve, he would pitch a ball with a stiff arm which started a bit above his knee and would arrive at the plate at chest height. He would use the pitcher's box from end to end - from the left side to have the ball come into the inside for the batter. Then he might start from [the] right side and throw the ball either inside or outside. He mixed up his delivery. He could throw a hard, fast ball (Taylor, 1984; Bromer *et al.*, 1978).

Robert's letter is a spirited defense of a father as seen through the eyes of his son and is consistent with Copley's (1923, p. 56) depiction of Fred as a stickler for playing by the rules. As a consequence, of the information only Robert could have supplied, Phelps (1984c) wrote Robert back, stating that the draft Robert had reviewed "will now be totally revised" and "any implication Fred Taylor pitched illegally will be removed." The published version of Phelps's (1988, p. 402) essay describes Taylor as an "underhand pitcher" who "imparted a spinning rotation to his fast deliveries by making a 180-degree twist of his hand as he released the ball."

It has been said that the first law in writing history is to know the truth. In this respect, we hope that we have contributed toward this end and, in doing so, demonstrated how a reliance on "myth" rather than "fact" stands in the way of capturing the elusive past. The spirit of critical inquiry embodied in the historian's craft requires more than the unquestioned repetition of unsubstantiated claims.

## References

- Bromer, J.A., Johnson, J.M. and Widdicombe, R.P. (1978), "A conversation with P.A. Robert, F.W. Taylor", unpublished manuscript, F.W. Taylor Collection, Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, NJ.
- Copley, F.B. (1923), *Frederick W. Taylor: Father of Scientific Management*, Vols. 1/2, Harper, New York, NY.
- Copley, F.B. (1936), "Taylor defended: biographical sketch is found unjust in some respects (letter to the editor)", *The New York Times*, October 5, p. E9.
- Desrochers, E.L. (2008), personal communication, January 23.
- Dos Passos, J.R. (1934), "Man with a watch in his hand", *Esquire*, Vol. 1, pp. 55-108.
- Dos Passos, J.R. (1936a), *The Big Money*, Harcourt, New York, NY.
- Dos Passos, J.R. (1936b), "Letter to Charles A. Pearce", October 10, Reprinted in Dos Passos, J.R. (1973), *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos*, Ludington, T. (Eds), Gambit, Boston, MA.
- Dos Passos, J.R. (n.d.), *Letter to Arnold Gingrich, John Dos Passos Archives*, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.
- Esquire* (1934), "Behind the scenes at *Esquire*", *Esquire*, March, p. 16.
- Foley, B. (1978), "From USA to Ragtime: notes on the forms of historical consciousness in modern fiction", *American Literature*, Vol. 50, pp. 85-105.
- Johnson, J.M. (1984), "Letter to Frank V. Phelps", March 3.
- Kanigel, R. (1997), *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency*, Viking, New York, NY.
- McGuire, J.W. (1963), *Business and Society*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.
- Phelps, F.V. (1984a), "Letter to J. Myron Johnson", January 16.

- Phelps, F.V. (1984b), "Letter to J. Myron Johnson", March 8.  
Phelps, F.V. (1984c), "Letter to Robert P.A. Taylor", April 11.  
Phelps, F.V. (1988), "Taylor, Frederick Winslow Fred", in Porter, D.L. (Ed.), *Biographical Dictionary of American Sports: Outdoor Sports*, Greenwood, Westport, CT, pp. 402-3.  
Taylor, R.P.A. (1984), "Letter to Frank V. Phelps", April 2.  
Taylor, S.G. and Bedeian, A.G. (2007), "From boardroom to bunker: how Fred Taylor changed the game of golf forever", *Management & Organizational History*, Vol. 2, pp. 195-218.  
van Gelder, R.H. (1936), "Books of the times", *The New York Times*, August 6, p. E9.

**Corresponding author**

Arthur G. Bedeian can be contacted at: [abede@isu.edu](mailto:abede@isu.edu)

---

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: [reprints@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:reprints@emeraldinsight.com)  
Or visit our web site for further details: [www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints)