



Brother Eppa Rixey: Hall of Fame Southpaw Pitcher ©

by **Dr. Ivan M. Tribe**, KCT, KYCH, 33°

The most winning, left-handed pitcher in National League baseball history is Warren Spahn, who toiled for many years for the Boston and Milwaukee Braves prior to ending his career with the New York Mets. In the American League, Sir Knight "Gettysburg" Eddie Plank, who spent most of his playing days with Connie Mack's old Philadelphia Athletics, holds the honor. Both Spahn and Plank won more than three hundred games.

In between these two individuals, another southpaw hurler chalked up enough wins to make the Hall of Fame, while often taking the mound with second division clubs. Until the advent of Spahn, Eppa Rixey held the National League record for victories by lefthanders. This is his story.

Eppa Rixey was, also, the first Virginia native to earn Hall of Fame honors. Born in Culpepper on May 3, 1891, Eppa Rixey, Jr., was the son of a local banker. The Rixey family had originally come from Italy where their name had been spelled "Riccia." But by the time of Eppa's birth, it had long been Anglicized. He was the fourth child in a family of six. Eppa's parents moved to Charlottesville when he was ten. After completing high school, he entered the University of Virginia from whence he was graduated in 1912 with a major in chemistry.

Growing to the impressive height of six feet five inches, the lanky lefty became the mainstay of the Cavaliers' baseball pitching staff and also proved to be a standout in the then relatively new sport of basketball. Charles Rigler, a major league umpire who worked as a coach at Virginia, thought Rixey had a promising career in the majors and arranged for a contract for the young lefty with the Philadelphia Phillies. The whole incident led to a ban on umpires

scouting for professional teams, but it launched Eppa's career although neither he nor Rigler ever received the promised \$2,000 cash bonus for signing.

Rixey had initially not wanted a baseball career, preferring to pursue work as a chemist, but fearing an economic downturn and wanting to help his brother with college expenses, he journeyed to the City of Brotherly Love.

Eppa Rixey became one of the first baseball players to go directly from the college campus to the majors. He made his major league debut on June 21, 1912, and pitching for a fifth place team in his rookie year, had a respectable if unspectacular 10-10 record with a 2.50 earned run average.

In the off seasons, the young pitcher completed a master's degree in chemistry back in Charlottesville. One winter he taught Latin at Episcopal High School in Washington, D.C. Atypically well educated for a major league ballplayer, he proved to be something of a "Renaissance man," who enjoyed writing poetry in his spare moments.

In his second year with the Phils, Rixey had a 9-5 record, but his third year proved to be a disaster, going 2-11 while his ERA climbed to 4.37. However, 1915 showed improvement for both Eppa (2.39 ERA) and the Phils, who took their first ever pennant. Scholars of the game credit his comeback to new team manager, Patrick Moran, who had a reputation as a skillful handler of young pitchers.

Still the Virginia lefty had a losing record (11-12), and his performance lagged behind that of Phillie ace, Grover Cleveland Alexander (31-10, 1.22 ERA); Erskine Mayer (21-15); and Al Demaree (14-11). In the World Series, Rixey relieved Mayer in the third inning of the fifth game and took the loss, giving up an uncharacteristic two home runs in the eighth inning. Doing better at the plate, he actually went one for two. Sadly, this was his only opportunity to play in the Fall Classic.

Under Moran's tutelage, Eppa came onto his own in 1916 with a 22-10 season and a 1.85 ERA. The team actually won more games that year than in 1915 but lost out to Brooklyn in the pennant race. Rixey propelled his team into first by winning the first game of a doubleheader over the Brooklyn Robins on September 30, but Alex lost the second game and that was close as Philadelphia got. The Phils fell back into the second division in 1917, and Eppa led the league in losses with 21, despite a good earned run average.

The following year saw Rixey in military service with the Chemical Warfare Division. This unit-in retrospect - seems to have been a haven for Masonic ball players including Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson, and Branch Rickey, although Rixey was not yet a member of the Craft.

Back with the Phillies, Eppa seemed to have lost his touch experiencing two consecutive poor seasons with a team that sank into the league cellar both times. It has been reported that the tall Virginian did not hit it off well with Manager Gavvy Cravath. In fact, after eight seasons in Philadelphia, Rixey had an 86-103 won-lost record, not exactly one that could be considered Hall of Fame material.

As a result, he was happy to be traded to Cincinnati on January 22, 1921, where he could again be guided by Pat Moran.

Eppa Rixey not only found his niche in the Queen City, but it became his home for the rest of his life. Over the next five years, the tall southpaw blossomed into one of the league's premier hurlers winning 100 games over the next five years including three twenty-win seasons and never less than fifteen. Only once did his ERA go over 3.00 and that was in 1922, the year that he experienced a career high twenty-five wins. Perhaps his keenest achievement - in 1921 - was allowing only one home run in 301 innings pitched. Known as something of a playboy during his early years in town, he soon settled down and as Jan Finkel, who wrote in an authoritative sketch on him, said "enriched his community."

Perhaps his settling down was related to his petitioning Kilwinning Lodge No. 356 in 1922 where he received his Entered Apprentice degree on August 30, 1922. His other two degrees took place that winter as he was passed a Fellowcraft on December 27, 1922, and raised a Master Mason on January 31, 1923. Fellow lodge members included his longtime roommate Raymond "Rube" Bressler and Ex-President, Chief Justice William Howard Taft. He remained a member of Kilwinning Lodge for twenty-five years.

Another factor in Rixey's change was his October 29, 1924 marriage to Dorothy Meyers in suburban Terrace Park's St. Thomas Church. The Rixeys subsequently had two children, Eppa II and Ann.

Following the death of his favorite manager, Pat Moran, in March 1924, Rixey had an off-year that season going only 15-14 but bounced back to win 21 in 1925.

Although his best days were behind, he still managed to turn in credible pitching for the rest of the decade although as the Reds fell into the second division, his effectiveness also declined.
In 1930

In the off season, Eppa worked for his father-in-law's insurance business of which he ultimately became the owner. In more recent years, this has been operated by Eppa Rixey IV as the Eppa Rixey Insurance Agency.

As a pitcher, Rixey was apparently a master at fooling hitters. His roomie Bressler later related to baseball historian, Lawrence Ritter, that Rixey had once told him that when he was behind on hitters, they invariably expected him to throw a fastball, but that he never did. Rixey, it was said, struck out few batters and walked even fewer.

Known as a mild mannered gentleman most of the time, he could really get angry at himself when he made costly mistakes on the mound and would take it out in the clubhouse afterwards on the furniture. He took the good-natured and not so good-natured kidding from teammates and rival players about his southern background with grace. Nicknamed "Jeptha" by sportswriters because it rhymed with Eppa, he learned to accept it, but never really liked it. He went 9-13 and had a 5.10 ERA, the worst of his career. With the Reds mired in the league cellar in his last three years, Eppa became a spot starter and accumulated fifteen wins and the

same number of losses. He closed with 266 wins and 251 losses often playing for mediocre and weak teams in the second division that scored few runs.

A better examination of Rixey's quality pitching might be his career ERA of 3.15 which compares favorably with contemporary Hall of Fame hurlers; Jess Haines, Ted Lyons, Herb Pennock, and Red Ruffing, all of whom had better won-lost percentages.

After his 6-3 record in 1933, Eppa Rixey hung up his glove and spikes announcing his retirement just prior to spring training on February 16, 1934. Concentrating on the family insurance business, he prospered and eventually passed it on to his descendants.

Some years after his retirement, he visited the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown and humorously wrote postcards back to Cincinnati saying "I finally made it!"

When Warren Spahn broke his record on September 26, 1959, for the most wins by a National League lefthander, Eppa told the press that he was glad his record had been broken because people had forgotten that he had earlier set it. That recollection may have got him into the Reds Hall of Fame that same year.

He still holds the post-1900 record for the most wins by a Cincinnati pitcher with 179. Four years later on January 27, 1963, he was selected for the bigger Hall of Fame in upstate New York. With characteristic modesty, he told reporters, "They're really scraping the bottom of the barrel, aren't they?" Sadly, he suffered a fatal heart attack a month and a day later on February 28, before his induction. He was buried in Greenlawn Cemetery in suburban Milford, Ohio. The bad news for Eppa Rixey, as John B. Holway and Bob Carroll stated in the second edition of *Total Baseball* (1991), was "he seldom pitched for teams that were likely to make him a household name at World Series time." The good news for the tall Virginia gentleman was that he made it into the Baseball Hall of Fame anyway.



NOTE: The principal sources for the life of Eppa Rixey are the sketch by Jan Finkel on the SABR website and the uncredited sketch on Baseballlibrary.com, plus various histories of the Cincinnati Reds. His baseball records are in Total Baseball (1991); Masonic Records were furnished by George O. Braatz, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Ohio. The portraits came from my Rio Grande colleague, Prof. Samuel Wilson.

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