



President Taft throwing out the first ball to open the baseball season in 1912.

Harris & Ewing Photo.

The Season's Opener Is the Game for Presidents

By BURTON HAWKINS

FOR PITCHING PERFECTION, no local opening day baseball game ever has matched the performance unleashed by the late Walter Johnson in the presence of William Howard Taft in 1910, the first time the President of the United States threw out a ball to launch the major league season. There have been more dramatic opening day episodes here, but Johnson's one-hit pitching against the Philadelphia Athletics on that occasion hasn't been equaled for artistry.

On that brisk April day Johnson's bid for a no-hit game was spoiled when Washington's right fielder, Doc Gessler, stumbled over a spectator sprawled on the grass while chasing an easy looper off the bat of Home Run Baker in the seventh inning. The ball fell safely for a double.

Johnson and Taft exchanged thrills that day, for in beating the Athletics, 3-0, the Nats' big right-hander

displayed pitching wizardry to the President, and in return received a baseball autographed by him.

In 36 opening day games since President Taft bestowed his blessing on baseball, 13 have been shutouts and five of those were 1-0 contests. The Nats won eight of the shutouts, due chiefly to the presence of Johnson, who was the winning pitcher in six of them. Bobo Newsom and Al Crowder were other Nat pitchers with shutouts.

Johnson, who won nine opening day games, dominates any discussion of baseball inaugurals here. In addition to his one-hit game he registered a two-hitter, a three-hitter and a four-hitter. Other pitchers who have sparkled on opening day are Lefty Grove, who pitched a two-hit game; Red Ruffing and Marius Russo, who tossed three-hitters, and Newsom, who hurled a four-hitter.

Johnson's most dramatic opening day victory was

achieved in 1926, when he locked with Philadelphia's Ed Rommel in a pitching duel that traveled 15 innings before the Nats won, 1-0, on Bucky Harris' single, Goose Goslin's double and Joe Harris' single.

Probably the most pulsating performance by a Nat, however, was the 1936 opening day pitching of Newsom, when he beat the New York Yankees, 1-0, on four hits.

Near-tragedy struck Newsom in the fifth inning of that game. The Yankees' Ben Chapman bunted down the third-base line, and Ossie Bluege pounced on the ball like a cat. The play called for a hard, lightning throw, almost blind, and Newsom, standing directly in the path of Bluege's throw, forgot to duck. The ball thudded against Bobo's jaw, just below the ear.

President Roosevelt dropped his bag of peanuts and sat transfixed as Newsom, semidelirious in pain, staggered

about the infield. Bobo returned to the mound and was rewarded for his brilliant pitching when Cecil Travis' single and Carl Reynolds' double in the ninth inning defeated Lefty Gomez.

The Nats do very well in the presidential presence. Twenty-five times in 37 years, the Chief Executive has tossed out the first ball, and Washington has won 15 of those 25 games. Seven times Vice Presidents have thrown out the first ball, while the assignment has been given lesser dignitaries on other occasions.

From the Nats' standpoint, President Wilson was the champion. He flipped the first ball three times, and three times the Nats won. Taft also had a perfect record in two appearances. With President Coolidge in the flag-draped box the Nats won three of four games, and they won two of the three times President Harding officiated. President Roosevelt had a 4-4

record in opening day assignments, while Hoover jinxed the Nats three out of four times, and President Truman saw the Nats lose last year.

The widespread belief that Clark Griffith inaugurated the custom of inviting the President to throw out the first ball on opening day is erroneous. President Taft started the now established procedure two years before Griffith became affiliated with the Washington club.

President Wilson was the most enthusiastic baseball fan among White House residents, frequently attending during the regular season. President Coolidge was the least interested, once leaving an opening day game after the first inning.

And to those who play hunches this may have significance: The Nats have won three pennants—in 1924, 1925 and 1933—and on opening day in each of those years Washington won its first game.