



DiMaggio's Hitting Streak

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On May 15, 1941, no one took much notice of Joe DiMaggio's second inning single off Chicago's Eddie Smith, except for the fact that it scored Phil Rizzuto and accounted for the only Yankee run in a dismal 3 – 1 loss. The New York Yankees were struggling to stay in contention for the American League pennant, and by mid-month they had clawed their way back into striking distance. However, this would be the first of 91 hits between May 15th and July 17th that comprise Joe DiMaggio's remarkable 56-game hitting streak.

Two weeks later, before a paltry crowd of 6,000 in Cleveland on June 2nd, the Yankees lost to the Indians by a score of 7 – 5 in a game that saw DiMaggio extend his streak to 19 games, collecting hit number 26 in the second inning off Bob Feller and hit number 27, a double, in the eighth inning. After the game the team was informed of the death of Lou Gehrig. With the death of their captain and teammate, the Yankees and the baseball world mourned Lou Gehrig and still DiMaggio's streak would remain largely unnoticed.



Instead of being hindered by the pressure of a pennant race and the death of Gehrig, DiMaggio became energized. From June 7th to June 20th he hit at a .468 pace as the Yankees began a stretch in which they would capture 41 of their next 47 games. The press began to take notice.

The American League record for consecutive-game hitting record of 41-games was set in 1922 and was held by George Sisler of the St. Louis Browns. The major league record of 44-games was set in 1897 by Willie

Keeler and had been challenged off and on during the past 44 years, but seemed unassailable. This didn't stop the groundswell of newspaper and radio coverage which grew to a fever pitch almost overnight.

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On June 29th the Yankees faced the Washington Senators in a Sunday double-header in Griffith Stadium. The Yankees had played 40 games in 45 days, not including exhibition games, and DiMaggio had hit safely in 40 consecutive games, collecting a total of 61 hits. Washington knuckleballer Dutch Leonard was particularly effective that day and DiMaggio struggled early on to follow Leonard's stuff. In the second inning of game one he lined out to centerfielder Doc Cramer. In the fourth inning he popped a 3 – 0 pitch to third baseman George Archie. In the sixth inning, with the count at 1 – 1, Leonard tried to slip a fastball past DiMaggio who smashed a double into left-center. The crowd rewarded him with a standing ovation as DiMaggio stood on second base, tied with George Sisler for the American League record. The Yankees would go on to win the first game by the score of 9 - 4.

Between games, the bat that DiMaggio had used since the streak began was stolen from its usual spot in the fourth slot of the bat rack near the box seat railing alongside the visitor's dugout. It would be held for ransom and would not find its way back to DiMaggio until July 5th. As superstitious as all things related to baseball tend to be – DiMaggio himself would always touch second base on his way to and from his position in centerfield – everyone was concerned that the streak would end if DiMaggio did not have his bat. After all, a bat is to a ball player what a sword is to a samurai, and the loss of DiMaggio's bat weighed heavily on the Yankee bench.

Yankee rightfielder Tommy Henrich offered DiMaggio one of his bats, as DiMaggio had done for him earlier in the season. Henrich's bats were heavier and thicker at the handle – not at all to DiMaggio's specifications. But with no time to secure a replacement, DiMaggio accepted the offer.



Tension was high as DiMaggio came to bat in the first inning of game two. He looped a weak fly off righthander Sid Hudson to Buddy Lewis in right. He was unsuccessful in the third inning, lining out to Cecil Travis at short. In the fifth inning he tapped a fly off the end of the bat to Doc Cramer in center. Undeterred, Joe stepped into the box in the seventh inning to face Washington's Red Anderson and promptly laced a 1 – 0 single to left to set a new American League record of 42 consecutive games in which he had hit safely. The Yankees won the second game of the doubleheader, 7 – 5.

The entire country was now caught up in the streak. Radio announcers interrupted regular programming to inform listeners of DiMaggio's latest hit. Even arch-rival Boston relayed radio updates from the scoreboard operator to Ted Williams, who then passed it on to Joe's brother Dominic in centerfield. Newspapers delayed their afternoon editions until they could receive game details and update their readers. Les Brown's hit song *Joltin' Joe DiMaggio* was heard everywhere on the radio almost non-stop.

As the pressure and the spotlight increased, DiMaggio maintained his familiar stoic demeanor. And he kept hitting. The next milestone was Willie Keeler's major league record set in 1894.



On July 2nd, the Yankees squared off at home against the Boston Red Sox in the third game of their series. The Yanks had swept the first two games and were anxious to take the series. After being robbed of an extra-base hit in the first inning on a spectacular diving catch by rightfielder Stan Spence, DiMaggio would ground out to third baseman Jim Tabor in the third inning. However, in the fifth inning DiMaggio would blast a 2 – 0 pitch off right-hander Dick Newsome on a straight line over the left field wall for a home run to break Willie Keeler’s record and establish a new major league record of hitting safely in 45 consecutive games. Teammate Lefty Gomez later quipped that DiMaggio “hit one today where no one ain’t,” to paraphrase Keeler’s famous quote. This was the 67th hit in the streak, the 13th home run of the streak, and *Joltin’ Joe* wasn’t about to let up. The country was delirious. All eyes were on Joe DiMaggio.

Following the All-Star break his favorite bat was returned to him prior to the game on July 5th after his friend James Ceres paid the ransom. DiMaggio promptly stroked a first inning home run deep into left field off Philadelphia’s Phil Marchidon. DiMaggio continued to rap out hit after hit.

On July 16th he collected three hits in a game against the Cleveland Indians – a line-drive single to left field in the first inning off Al Milnar who also yielded a bloop single to centerfield in the third inning. After walking and grounding out in his next two at-bats, DiMaggio capped off the day with a ninth inning double into the left-center gap off Indians’ reliever Joe Krakausas for hit number 91 in the streak. The Yankees beat the Indians, 10 – 3.

Before a sellout crowd of 67,468 at League Park (Cleveland Stadium) on July 17th, DiMaggio stepped to the plate to face Indians’ Al Smith and slashed a 1 – 0 pitch down the third base line which was snagged on the first hop by Ken Keltner who threw DiMaggio out at first. He was walked in the fourth inning. In the seventh inning, in the midst of deafening noise, DiMaggio again smacked a pitch toward third base and was again thwarted by a brilliant play from Kelner.

Cleveland reliever Jim Bagby, Jr. had one out and the bases loaded in the eighth inning when DiMaggio stepped up to the plate, calm and showing no emotion whatsoever. The crowd, on the other hand, was loud and rowdy. With the count at 2 – 1, DiMaggio hit a ground ball to shortstop Lou Boudreau who tossed the ball to second baseman Ray Mack for the force at second, who then pivoted to throw DiMaggio out at first. Double play. Inning over. Streak over.

From May 15th through July 16th, DiMaggio played 56 games in 62 days. He hit safely in 56 consecutive games. He tallied 91 hits altogether – 55 singles, 17 doubles, 4 triples, and 15 home runs. He drove in 54 runs and posted a .408 batting average. For good measure he began a new batting tirade on July 18th, hitting in another 16 consecutive games in a streak which ended on August 3rd.

Joe DiMaggio became the hero of the nation when the nation desperately needed a hero to replace the void left by the death of Lou Gehrig. He would lead the Yankees to the 1941 pennant, finishing 17 games ahead of Boston. He would lead the Yankees to a World Series victory, four games to one, over the cross-town Brooklyn Dodgers, in a series that would be remembered for Tommy Henrich’s dash to first base in the eighth inning of game four after the Dodgers’ Hugh Casey saw his 3 – 2 fastball go past Henrich and past catcher Mickey Owen, allowing the Yankees to come from behind.

The twenty-six year old DiMaggio overshadowed Ted Williams’ .406 season batting average to win the American League Most Valuable Player award for the second time in six years. Along the way he set a new standard of excellence and achievement as the torch was passed to a new



generation of Yankees. And, along with Cy Young's 511 career wins, he established perhaps one of the few records in baseball that may never be broken.

The tables which follow will provide details about consecutive game hitting streaks and about DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak.

Consecutive Game Hitting Streaks

Games	Player	Team	Year
56	Joe DiMaggio	New York (AL)	1941
44	Willie Keeler	Baltimore (AL)	1897
	Pete Rose	Cincinnati (NL)	1978
42	Bill Dahlen	Chicago (NL)	1894
41	George Sisler	St. Louis (AL)	1922
40	Ty Cobb	Detroit (AL)	1911
39	Paul Molitor	Milwaukee (AL)	1987
37	Tommy Holmes	Boston (NL)	1945
36	Billy Hamilton	Philadelphia (NL)	1894
35	Fred Clarke	Louisville (NL)	1895
	Ty Cobb	Detroit (AL)	1917
	Luis Castillo	Florida (NL)	2002
34	George Sisler	St. Louis (AL)	1925
	George McQuinn	St. Louis (AL)	1938
	Dom DiMaggio	Boston (AL)	1949
	Benito Santiago	San Diego (NL)	1987
33	Hal Chase	New York (AL)	1907
	George Davis	New York (NL)	1893
	Rogers Hornsby	St. Louis (NL)	1922
	Heine Manush	Washington (AL)	1933

Source: *Baseball Encyclopedia*

DiMaggio's Streak – By Team

Team	Games	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BA
Chicago	12	45	11	19	1	1	3	7	.422
St. Louis	12	48	14	22	5	0	4	14	.458
Detroit	7	32	6	12	2	1	2	8	.375
Boston	8	30	5	9	1	0	1	9	.300
Washington	5	21	7	8	1	1	2	6	.381
Cleveland	7	26	7	10	5	0	1	2	.385
Philadelphia	5	21	6	11	2	1	2	8	.524
	56	223	56	91	17	4	15	54	.408



DiMaggio's 56-Game Hitting Streak

Date	Opponent	Pitcher	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI
May 15	Chicago	Eddie Smith	4	0	1	0	0	0	1
May 16	Chicago	Thornton Lee	4	2	2	0	1	1	1
May 17	Chicago	Johnny Rigney	3	1	1	0	0	0	0
May 18	St. Louis	Bob Harris – Johnny Niggeling	3	3	3	1	0	0	1
May 19	St. Louis	Denny Galehouse	3	0	1	1	0	0	0
May 20	St. Louis	Elden Auker	5	1	1	0	0	0	1
May 21	Detroit	Schoolboy Rowe – Al Benton	5	0	2	0	0	0	1
May 22	Detroit	Archie McKain	4	0	1	0	0	0	1
May 23	Boston	Dick Newsome	5	0	1	0	0	0	2
May 24	Boston	Earl Johnson	4	2	1	0	0	0	2
May 25	Boston	Lefty Grove	4	0	1	0	0	0	0
May 27	Washington	Ken Chase – Red Anderson – Alex Carrasquel	5	3	4	0	0	1	3
May 28	Washington	Sid Hudson	4	1	1	0	1	0	0
May 29	Washington	Steve Sundra	3	1	1	0	0	0	0
May 30	Boston	Earl Johnson	2	1	1	0	0	0	0
May 30	Boston	Mickey Harris	3	0	1	1	0	0	0
June 1	Cleveland	Al Milnar	4	1	1	0	0	0	0
June 1	Cleveland	Mel Harder	4	0	1	1	0	0	0
June 2	Cleveland	Bob Feller	4	2	2	1	0	0	0
June 3	Detroit	Dizzy Trout	4	1	1	0	0	1	1
June 5	Detroit	Hal Newhouser	5	1	1	0	1	0	1
June 7	St. Louis	Bob Muncrief – Johnny Allen – George Caster	5	2	3	0	0	0	1
June 8	St. Louis	Elden Auker	4	3	2	0	0	2	4
June 8	St. Louis	George Caster – Jack Kramer	4	1	2	1	0	1	3
June 10	Chicago	Johnny Rigney	5	1	1	0	0	0	0
June 12	Chicago	Thornton Lee	4	1	2	0	0	1	1
June 14	Cleveland	Bob Feller	2	0	1	1	0	0	1
June 15	Cleveland	Jim Bagby	3	1	1	0	0	1	1
June 16	Cleveland	Al Milnar	5	0	1	1	0	0	0
June 17	Chicago	Johnny Rigney	4	1	1	0	0	0	0
June 18	Chicago	Thornton Lee	3	0	1	0	0	0	0
June 19	Chicago	Eddie Smith – Buck Ross	3	2	3	0	0	1	2
June 20	Detroit	Bobo Newsom – Archie McKain	5	3	4	1	0	0	1
June 21	Detroit	Dizzy Trout	4	0	1	0	0	0	1
June 22	Detroit	Hal Newhouser – Bobo Newsom	5	1	2	1	0	1	2
June 24	St. Louis	Bob Muncrief	4	1	1	0	0	0	0
June 25	St. Louis	Denny Galehouse	4	1	1	0	0	0	0
June 26	St. Louis	Elden Auker	4	0	1	1	0	0	1
June 27	Philadelphia	Chubby Dean	3	1	2	0	0	1	2
June 28	Philadelphia	Johnny Babich – Lum Harris	5	1	2	1	0	0	0
June 29	Washington	Dutch Leonard	4	1	1	1	0	0	0
June 29	Washington	Red Anderson	5	1	1	0	0	1	3
July 1	Boston	Mickey Harris – Mike Ryba	4	0	2	0	0	0	1
July 1	Boston	Jack Wilson	3	1	1	0	0	0	1
July 2	Boston	Dick Newsome	5	1	1	0	0	1	3
July 5	Philadelphia	Johnny Babich – Bump Hadley	4	2	1	0	0	1	2
July 6	Philadelphia	Jack Knott	5	2	4	1	0	0	2
July 10	St. Louis	Johnny Niggeling	2	0	1	0	0	0	0
July 11	St. Louis	Bob Harris – Jack Kramer	5	1	4	0	0	1	2
July 12	St. Louis	Elden Auker – Bob Muncrief	5	1	2	1	0	0	1
July 13	Chicago	Ted Lyons – Jack Hallett	4	2	3	0	0	0	0
July 13	Chicago	Thornton Lee	4	0	1	0	0	0	0
July 14	Chicago	Johnny Rigney	3	0	1	0	0	0	0
July 15	Chicago	Eddie Smith	4	1	2	1	0	0	2
July 16	Cleveland	Al Milnar – Joe Krakauskas	4	3	3	1	0	0	0

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Postscript

There are many baseball pundits who have tried to diminish DiMaggio's streak by claiming that he was given preferential treatment by the scorers. They may point to the June 17th game against Chicago when DiMaggio's grounder to Chicago shortstop Luke Appling in the seventh inning took a freak hop and bounced off Appling's shoulder. No throw ensued. Official scorer Dan Daniel credited DiMaggio with a hit. This kept the streak alive at 30. The next day DiMaggio hit a streamer in the gap that a diving Appling got a glove on to knock it down, but once again could not make the throw to first. DiMaggio was again credited with a hit. There were close calls in four or five games. However, there is no proof of collusion on the part of Daniels.

To try to denigrate DiMaggio's achievement by claiming he was the beneficiary of a prejudiced scorer is like saying he was the recipient of favorable field position from an outfielder who played him too deep, or that he received favorable pitching because a pitcher who didn't have his fastball on a given day, or that he received favorable scheduling because the Yankees played the White Sox and the Browns twelve times but only played Boston eight times. And it ignores the central point entirely.

It's not even the mathematical improbability of a 56-game hitting streak that is so astounding. After all, DiMaggio also carved out a 61-game streak in 1933 when he was with the San Francisco Seals in the Pacific Coast League. Other critics will point to Ted Williams' performance during the 1941 season and will note, quite correctly by the way, that Williams had outperformed DiMaggio over similar 56-game spans. So did many other hitters. The difference is that these players did not have the eyes of the entire country on them during every waking moment of every game. These players only had to face the dreadful heat in the summer of 1941, perhaps the occasional heat of a sportswriter.

DiMaggio lived with the reality and the pressure of the streak every day, with the public's expectation of another hit each and every day. He was front-page news in every newspaper across America. In the miserable heat of the summer of 1941, baseball and DiMaggio kept a fretful nation's mind off of the war in Europe. And, as I mentioned earlier, he had to fill the void in the Yankee dugout left by the death of Lou Gehrig. All of this was laid on Joe DiMaggio's shoulders. He was gracious in victory and in defeat. And he accepted the torch as it was passed.