

## “A Great Yankee’s Indian Summer: Did Lou Gehrig Experience a Temporary ALS Reversal While Playing in August 1938?”

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### ABSTRACT

Nineteen thirty-eight was the last full season played by baseball slugger Lou Gehrig before amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) forced him to retire. He struggled to hit and field well for much of the season, and his final statistics—a .295 batting average, 29 home runs, 114 runs batted in—were unusually low for him. But in mid-season, Gehrig enjoyed a streak in which he seemed to regain his previous power. This three-week stretch, not studied closely by neurologists or baseball historians until now, suggests that the “Iron Horse” may have experienced a temporary ALS reversal, which can be instructive for researchers and those coping with the disease.

**Keywords:** *Gehrig, ALS.*

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) is often referred to as “relentlessly progressive,”<sup>1</sup> but this is not always true. For at least 40 years, it has been known that some people with ALS can experience periods of clinical stability (“plateaus”) or improvement (“reversals”).<sup>2,3</sup> ALS reversals are most often small in magnitude and temporary,<sup>4</sup> but can on rare occasions be large and persistent.<sup>5</sup> Here, in the interest of raising awareness about the non-linear progression of ALS, we analyze the last full baseball season of Lou Gehrig in greater detail than ever before. We argue that Gehrig experienced a temporary ALS reversal in August of 1938. We explain why we think awareness of such reversals is important.

In early 1938, Lou Gehrig experienced the first symptoms of the disease that would eventually bear his name and take his life.<sup>6</sup> In spring training, sportswriters noticed he was not hitting the ball as hard as usual, and Gehrig himself said his hits lacked “the proper zoom.”<sup>7</sup> He opened the regular season in a deep slump, and by early August, his batting average, home run total and overall run production were well below his career norms.<sup>8</sup> Several sportswriters said the “Iron Horse” should end his renowned consecutive games streak, which by then stretched for more than two thousand games over 13 years.<sup>9</sup>

Then, for three weeks beginning August 7th, Gehrig’s power somehow returned. His batting average and slugging percentage rose dramatically (see Table 1) and he resumed smacking the long drives he was renowned for. During one especially good ten-game stretch he piled up six doubles, six home runs and 22 runs batted in.<sup>10</sup> One homer sailed out of Philadelphia’s Shibe Park and bounced on the porch of a house across the street. Sportswriter Rud Rennie of the *New York Herald Tribune* declared: “He is the menace of old. The fans sense it. They greeted him yesterday with those bursts of hurrahs which they reserve for strong men whom they expect to do big things.”<sup>11</sup>

Gehrig’s “Indian summer” did not last; by season’s end he was hitting mostly singles. His batting average fell and his slugging percentage plummeted (Table 1). Poor play forced him to retire early in the 1939 season. He was diagnosed with ALS that June and lived only another two years.

There is certainly more than one possible explanation for Gehrig’s remarkable but temporary surge in August 1938. He was apparently injury-free during the period in question, after playing with a fractured thumb during the latter part of July.<sup>12</sup> A few sportswriters noted that “Larrupin’ Lou,” as he was known, had begun using a lighter bat during the surge,<sup>13</sup> which in theory would enable to him to swing faster and generate more power when he hit the ball,

Table 1. Gehrig’s batting average and slugging percentages at different times. Batting average = hits divided by at-bats. Slugging percentage = total bases divided by at-bats.

	Batting Average	Slugging Percentage
Career	.340	.632
April 18-August 6, 1938	.274	.486
August 7-August 26, 1938	.352	.743
August 27-October 2, 1938	.308	.436

compensating for the weakening of his muscles. Other writers reported that after experimenting with different batting stances during the 1938 season, he went back to his traditional stance, with both feet pointed toward home plate. "He returned the style of hitting that made him famous," Rennie wrote.<sup>14</sup> He may have simply enjoyed a hot streak, like all good hitters do. And of course, he could have faced a run of below-average pitchers, throwing fastballs that were too slow and curveballs that failed to curve.

However, all of these possible explanations have some caveats. Regarding injuries, it should be noted that for most of the '38 season, and in fact for most of his 2,130-game consecutive game streak, Gehrig was in good orthopedic health, with no ACL tears, major bone breaks or any of the other ailments that normally sideline athletes. The times when he did play through injuries—like the famous occasion in 1934 when he batted once, then left the game so he could rest his aching lower back—were the exception, not the rule. Regarding equipment and technique, it was hardly unusual for Gehrig (or other players) to start using lighter bats or adjust their stances as the six-month season wore on. In 1930, for example, Gehrig tapered the weight of his bats from 38 ounces to 36½.<sup>15</sup>

Regarding hot streaks, they were commonplace for Gehrig, even as he moved into his mid-thirties. In August 1937, for example, he hit .357 with eleven home runs; in June 1936, he batted .453 and his homers numbered an even dozen. What makes his three-week surge in August 1938 stand out is that it was the only time that season he consistently hit the ball with power. In just 24 games, he racked up one nearly one-third of his home run and RBI (runs batted in) totals for the entire season. The rest of the season, his big hits were much more sporadic.

The most telling figure regarding the surge is the sudden spike in Gehrig's slugging percentage. Slugging percentage is a player's total bases divided by his at bats; the more extra-base hits he gets, the higher his slugging percentage. For the first four months of the '38 season, Gehrig was hitting relatively few doubles, triples and home runs, and in 95 games through August 7, his slugging percentage stood at .486, a low mark for him. Then, his August surge, the big hits returned, and his slugging percentage for that period was a strong .743. After the surge, between August 26 and the end of the season, Gehrig's slugging percentage fell back to .436. Even though his batting average stayed around the .300 mark, he was hitting mostly singles, a sign of his diminishing power.

Did Gehrig face weaker than normal pitching during his streak? In a word, no. We were not able to compile a cumulative ERA (earned run average) for all the pitchers Gehrig faced before, during and after his August surge. Even if we could, the numbers might be misleading, because the American League in the 1930s was dominated by hitting, not pitching, and even good AL pitchers had ERAs that were historically high. We can say that during his 20-day surge, Gehrig faced several very good pitchers, in addition to an assortment of average and mediocre ones. His first home run during the surge was off Mel Harder, a career 223-game winner having a good season (17-10 record, 3.83 ERA). His last home run during the surge was off Hall of Famer Bob Feller, who also had a good season (17-11, 4.08 ERA, league-leading 260 strikeouts.) His game-winning double on August 18<sup>th</sup> came against the Washington Senators' best pitcher, Dutch Leonard (12-15, 3.43 ERA). A game-winning homer he hit on August 23 was off a good young White Sox pitcher, Johnny Rigney (9-9, 3.56 ERA). He also had multiple-hit games during the streak against Johnny Allen (14-8, 4.19) and Thornton Lee (13-12, 3.49). All of these pitchers had relatively long, successful careers, and all had better-than-league average ERAs in 1938.

Not all of the competition Gehrig faced was so good. His six-RBI day on August 20th came against a punching bag of a pitcher named Buck Ross (9-16, 5.32 ERA). The five RBIs he racked up on August 16th came off two mediocre Senators pitchers, Ken Chase (9-10, 5.58) and Chief Hogsett (5-6, 6.03). But overall, it cannot be said that Gehrig faced unusually weak pitching during his turnaround.

A final possible explanation is that Gehrig experienced a temporary ALS reversal. In ALS, progression of weakness occurs when the processes causing death of motor neurons (denervation) overwhelm the body's ability to compensate via collateral sprouting (reinnervation).<sup>16</sup> In ALS models, the progression of weakness can be affected either by slowing denervation<sup>17</sup> or by promoting re-ennervation.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps one or the other or both somehow occurred naturally in Gehrig that summer. Gehrig never explicitly said he felt better or stronger during the three-week period in question. However, there is evidence beyond his batting performance that he was feeling robust and energetic. Between August 12 and August 27, the Yankees played ten doubleheaders in sixteen days, all of them during the day in hot summer conditions. (Only two major league stadiums had lights in 1938.) Gehrig played every inning of every game except for one where, after getting four hits, he sat out the final two

innings.<sup>19</sup> During his lone off-day during a week of double-headers, he was reported to be fishing off the coast of Brielle, New Jersey.<sup>20</sup>

This is all perfectly consistent with Gehrig's reputation as the iron man of baseball. It is not consistent with the profile of a man who, at that moment, was feeling the symptoms of ALS.

In contrast, during the last two weeks of the season Gehrig removed himself early from three games and was described in one newspaper story as looking fidgety and "far off stride" at bat.

"These are the same symptoms he showed early in the year," said the report.<sup>21</sup> When Gehrig took part in a September 18<sup>th</sup> home run contest, to see which player could hit the ball the farthest, he finished last among six participants,<sup>22</sup> one of whom hit just 10 home runs in his entire major league career. Clearly, any ALS reversal experienced by Gehrig had faded away.

There are important takeaways from the Indian Summer of Lou Gehrig's 1938 season. It can be referenced when educating newly diagnosed patients about the non-linear progression of ALS and about the extraordinary things that are possible in spite of the disease. It should be kept in mind when trying to interpret anecdotal reports of improved muscle strength in people with ALS. These improvements are not necessarily the result of some associated treatment. They can be part of the natural history of the disease. And finally, temporary and especially dramatic and sustained ALS reversals may be worth studying; if we can understand why these occur, we may someday be able to make them happen more often.

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## References

Most of the baseball-related quotes and facts in this article stem from *Last Ride of the Iron Horse: How Lou Gehrig Fought ALS to Play One Final Championship Season*, written by Dan Joseph, published in 2019 by Sunbury Press.

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<sup>7</sup> *Last Ride*, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100, 104

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61, 98-99

<sup>10</sup> [www.baseball-reference.com/players/gl.fcgi?id=gehri1o1&t=b&year=1938](http://www.baseball-reference.com/players/gl.fcgi?id=gehri1o1&t=b&year=1938). All of Gehrig's statistics cited in this article are drawn from his pages on [baseball-reference.com](http://baseball-reference.com).

<sup>11</sup> *Last Ride*, p. 106.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Jensen I, Jorgensen L, Bech R, Frandsen U, Schroder H. Skeletal muscle remodeling as a function of disease progression in amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. *Biomed Res Int* 2016; 1-12. doi: 10.1155/2016/5930621.

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<sup>20</sup> *Last Ride*, p. 111.

<sup>21</sup> *New York Daily News*, Oct. 4, 1938.

<sup>22</sup> *Last Ride*, p. 114.