



Jackie Jensen had just crushed the baseball, sending it screaming over the infield. Larry Doby's trademark reflexes already had him sprinting in pursuit. In stride, he scaled the chain link fence, leaning and reaching over it.

Doby's bid to rob Jensen came up just a few inches short. The ball bounced on the grass in front of the Cleveland Stadium bleachers with a thud, for a home run.

It would have been a tremendous defensive play. Instead, the Boston Red Sox slugger/future league MVP's homer was a reason the Cleveland Indians lost on that day, in late July of 1954.

Doby's near-miss was only a minor setback in the Indians' season. And it did foreshadow his exploits three days later.

Cleveland Sports Vault: 7/30/54. Larry Doby: More Than Just a Hitter

Written by {ga=googleeph2}

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As an aside, fans interested in Indians history need to know who had Larry Doby's back,



when owner Bill Veeck signed him straight from the Newark Eagles of the Negro leagues back in 1947. The first black player in the American League was supported by manager (and shortstop) Lou Boudreau, of course. While there were a couple players who were openly hostile to Doby, most were indifferent to the plight of the American League's first black player (and those who soon joined him



on the team, such as Satchel Paige). There seemed to be a collective shrug over the pervasive racial segregation enforced on Doby- especially in restaurants and hotels.

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There were four Indians teammates who notably befriended Larry Doby, right from the start. Pitcher Steve Gromek was one (he'd also eventually become famous through a widely published photo of a hug with Doby after a 1948 World Series game victory). Catcher Jim Hegan was another. Bob Lemon, one of the Indians' 'Big Three' starting pitchers, was yet another (he and Hegan were still teammates of Doby's in 1954).

Joe Gordon also must be noted as a true friend of Doby's. Gordon was a well-known star, having won several World Series with the New York Yankees. He'd been the American League MVP in 1942. His Hall of Fame career boasted several All Star seasons. While some tales of Gordon's support of Doby may not be true (it appears that contrary to legend, he did not intentionally strike out, as an empathetic gesture after an early Doby strikeout), it must be emphasized that Larry Doby came to the Indians as a promising second baseman- Gordon's position. This did not deter "Flash" from helping Doby get acclimated in the big leagues. (Soon enough, former Indians Hall of Fame player and manager Tris Speaker would be enlisted to help Doby learn the intricacies of patrolling center field).

Tribe fans know the Cleveland Indians of the 1950s were very good, and that the 1954 edition was a pennant winner. They'd win 111, in a 154 game season. The pitching staff was among the all-time best in the history of baseball- the 'Big Three', so to speak, were Early Wynn, Mike Garcia and Bob Lemon. Their average stats were an eye-popping 22 wins, 9 losses; a 2.70 ERA with 260 innings pitched and 130 strikeouts.

Several Indians earned MVP votes in 1954. Yogi Berra of the New York Yankees won the award, but Cleveland boasted four of the top six vote-getters.

From baseball-reference.com:

| Rank | | Tm | Vote Pts | 1st Place | Share | WAR | G | AB | R | H | HR | RBI | SB | BB | B |
|------|-------------------------------|-----|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|----|----|-----|
| 1 | Yogi Berra | NYN | 230.0 | 7.0 | 68% | 5.32 | 151 | 584 | 88 | 179 | 22 | 125 | 0 | 56 | .30 |
| 2 | Larry Doby | CLE | 210.0 | 5.0 | 62% | 5.67 | 153 | 577 | 94 | 157 | 32 | 126 | 3 | 85 | .21 |
| 3 | Bobby Avila | CLE | 203.0 | 5.0 | 60% | 6.94 | 143 | 555 | 112 | 189 | 15 | 67 | 9 | 59 | .34 |
| 4 | Minnie Minoso | CHW | 186.0 | 2.0 | 55% | 8.30 | 153 | 568 | 119 | 182 | 19 | 116 | 18 | 77 | .33 |
| 5 | Bob Lemon | CLE | 179.0 | 5.0 | 53% | 4.79 | 40 | 98 | 11 | 21 | 2 | 10 | 0 | 6 | .21 |
| 6 | Early Wynn | CLE | 72.0 | 0.0 | 21% | 5.36 | 40 | 93 | 10 | 17 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 7 | .18 |

Larry Doby had an MVP-type of season in 1954. He and teammates Bobby Avila and Lemon split fifteen first place votes. And career-wise, it is understood that he is a deserving Hall of Famer just based on his production with a bat.

It is also accepted that he remains underrated – he played in the shadow of Jackie Robinson, and the story of his playing career mostly takes a back seat to his challenges off the field. As true as that is, his ability as a defensive outfielder is vastly overlooked. That is why we're taking a look at an Indians home game



against the Washington Senators on July 30, 1954- three days after Doby nearly robbed Jackie Jensen of a home run.

The Indians' starting pitcher that day was Art Houtteman (left). He'd been the long-time ace of the Detroit Tigers' staff. Now toward the end of his career, he had begun to start some games in place of Cleveland icon Bob Feller (Gromek had been packaged in the deal acquiring Houtteman). The two veterans were actually used by manager Al Lopez to start both games of scheduled double headers in '54- together, they were 9-1 over the Indians' first five double headers. Houtteman's career would begin to wind down in earnest in 1955, when rookie Herb

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Score won the fourth spot in the loaded Indians rotation. Starting for the visitors was Dean Stone, fresh off an All-Star appearance for the Senators.

The game did not begin well for Houtteman and the Tribe. After Senators third baseman Eddie Yost singled to center, second baseman Wayne Terwilliger singled to right. Right fielder Wally Westlake airmailed his throw to third, and Yost scored. It appeared that Houtteman might wriggle off the hook with minimal damage: first baseman Mickey Vernon moved Terwilliger to third on a groundout before center fielder Jim Busby sent a ground ball to first. Vic Wertz of the Indians picked it up, and gunned the runner down at the plate. Unfortunately, left fielder Roy Sievers then homered.

MIDDLE OF 1st, 3-0 SENATORS

The 17,504 Cleveland fans in attendance knew it was reasonable to anticipate an answer from these powerful Indians. It happened in the bottom of the 2nd inning. Westlake and shortstop Sam Dente each singled. Jim Hegan- a catcher whose defensive and pitchers-handling skills were so highly prized that any offensive production was a bonus – doubled to straightaway center field, clearing the bases. Houtteman aided his own cause by singling to right, plating Hegan. Second baseman Bobby Avila's walk was bookended by two fly outs. Third baseman Al Rosen stepped up with men on first and second, and delivered a double to right, scoring both runners.

END OF 2nd, 5-3 INDIANS

Houtteman found himself in trouble again in the next inning. Busby led off with a ground ball single through the hole between Dente and Rosen. Houtteman's subsequent wild pitch put Busby at second

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