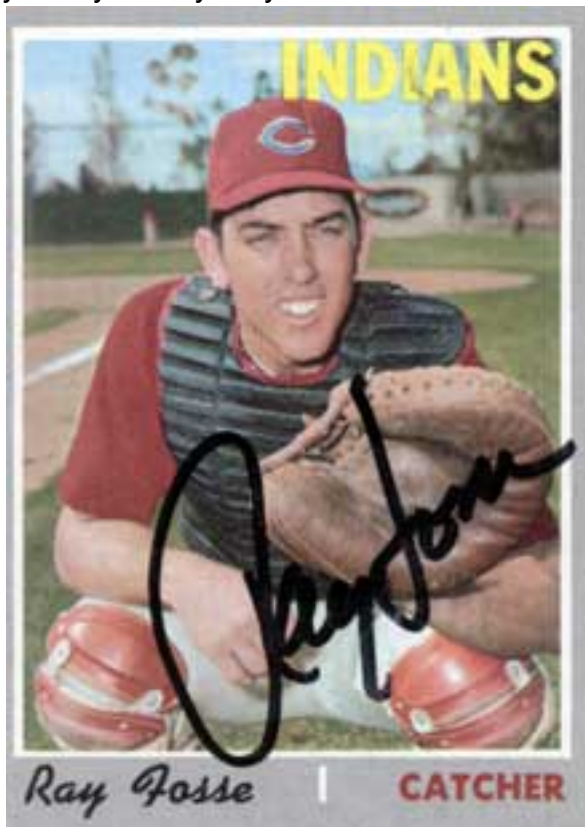


For all the Indians' countless failures in developing and assessing talent over the decades, it's pretty hard to give them any grief over the catching position. Believe it or not, Victor Martinez is the ninth All-Star catcher the Indians have produced since 1940, with at least one representing the club in every decade. Unfortunately, outside of Cleveland, very few people remember Jim Hegan's five All-Star appearances, or even Sandy Alomar's MVP performance at the 1997 game at Jacobs Field. Instead, the idea of an Indians catcher at the All-Star game will seemingly always be synonymous with one man: this week's Ghost of Prospects Past, Ray Fosse.



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Just the utterance of the name brings one image to mind: Fosse, the Tribe's supremely talented 22 year-old catcher, getting his clock cleaned at home plate by a human torpedo named Pete Rose. The infamous play took place at the 1970 All-Star Game in Cincinnati, and it gave the National League a 5-4, extra inning victory over the AL. Far more importantly, though, it became the quintessential

highlight in the legendary and controversial career of Rose- thus casting Fosse as the Joe Theismann to Rose's Lawrence Taylor, an all-star turned sacrificial lamb.

Rather than doing yet another CSI investigation of that one play, however, this little piece is more concerned with Fosse the prospect, the stud catcher that was primed to be a part of Cleveland's core throughout the 1970s.

Making its first pick in Major League Baseball's first ever amateur draft, the Tribe took an 18 year-old Fosse with the seventh overall selection in 1965. Just two seasons later, he got his first cup of coffee in Cleveland (7 games, 1 hit in 16 Abs), but the majority of his time was spent honing his craft with the club's old AAA affiliate in Portland, Oregon, where he hit .301 in 103 games in 1968. Finally, in 1969, Fosse earned a more consistent gig with the big club, backing up Duke Sims behind the plate and appearing in 37 games. By the following season, the job was officially Fosse's, and at just 22 years of age, he was ready to establish himself as one of the best catchers the AL had to offer.

As a virtual rookie in 1970, Fosse was selected to the All-Star team on the strength of an outstanding first half: .312 AVG, 16 HRs, 44 RBIs, and a 23 game hitting streak to boot. He appeared to be the rarest of combinations-a Gold Glove caliber catcher who could also hit for average and power. By this point, the Indians brass had to be smiling. They were out of the pennant race as usual, but the future was starting to take shape. Fosse, in particular, was the brightest of a batch of promising young hitters that also included first baseman Tony Horton, third baseman Graig Nettles, and left fielder Roy Foster.

Of course, Pete Rose and the baseball gods had other plans for the Indians and Fosse. The car wreck-like collision at the All-Star game fractured Fosse's shoulder and certainly helped change the course of his season and career. However, the immediate consequences of the play have routinely been exaggerated a bit over the years, to the point where a lot of fans might assume Fosse was carted off the field in a stretcher or spent the remainder of 1970 in a coma.

In reality, Rose's tackle didn't even put Ray on the disabled list. He actually played through the injury the second half of the season, as early tests weren't able to locate the fracture underneath the swelling in the shoulder. The injury did show itself in Fosse's play, however. He managed only 2 home-runs in the second half, and couldn't drive the ball with any authority. Amusingly, it took a second, less dramatic injury-a broken finger-to finally bring Fosse's deflated 1970 season to its

merciful end in early September. Even despite the fall-off, though, Fosse managed to finish the year with a .307 average, 18 HRs, and 61 RBIs. Those numbers, combined with a Gold Glove, earned him enough votes to finish 23rd in AL MVP voting, despite playing in only 120 games.

Another thing that tends to get lost in the lore of Fosse's tragic demise is the fact that his following season, 1971, was also quite productive. Recovered at least partially from the shoulder injury, he made the All-Star team again (though he was kindly left on the bench this time), earned his second Gold Glove, and finished with comparable stats to the previous year: 12 HRs, 62 RBIs, .276 AVG. Still, there was no denying that what had once come easy for Ray now required a considerable struggle. From 1972 on, he never hit more than 10 homers again, and he eventually devolved into a career .256 hitter.

The Indians traded Fosse to Oakland in 1973 for Dave Duncan and George Hendrick. It proved to be a good deal for both sides, as Hendrick added some pop and personality to the Tribe line-up, while Fosse helped handle an A's pitching staff that would win a pair of championships in his time there. For the 1976 season, the Indians reacquired Fosse-coming off two seasons hitting under .200-in a classic case of nostalgic Tribe trading. Surprisingly, the move revitalized Ray a bit, as he hit .301 in his return to the lakefront.

Just two years later, though, Fosse had reached the end of the line. Still just 32, he served some limited duty with Seattle and Milwaukee before hanging it up at the end of the '79 season. Now a long-time broadcaster for the Athletics, Fosse has regularly admitted that the Rose play had a lasting impact, forcing him to alter his swing and greatly reducing his power in the years that followed. Might he have become the Indians' own Johnny Bench? It's fun to ponder. But at the very least, he's assured of legendary status, even amongst a crowded field of All-Star Tribe catchers.

Bonus Trivia: Who batted after Fosse in his last at-bat of the 1970 All-Star Game? Appropriately enough, it was Sandy Alomar (Senior, that is).