

Oh, What Could Have Been

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

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Indians season is underway without an absolute Cleveland institution...Bob Feller, who passed away in December. Feller was known as the greatest living baseball player while he was alive, and it is my contention that he is the second-best right-handed pitcher that ever lived.

First I want to put together a statistical analysis of Feller's career and what could have been had he not spent four of his prime seasons serving his country in the United States Navy. Then I would like to relay a personal story about the man, a man who had the reputation as being surly at times, accommodating at others and always willing to speak his mind.

Feller was extremely dominant, overpowering even, when he broke into the Major Leagues as a 17-year-old phenom out of Van Meter, Iowa. Many that faced Feller claimed he was the hardest thrower they had ever seen, and before the age of radar guns they used all kinds of gimmicks to clock his pitches...including the famous "Feller vs. 90-mph motorcycle" experiment we have seen quite frequently since his death.

People will always debate who the fastest pitcher in Major League Baseball history was. Feller is up there with Nolan Ryan, Steve Dalkowski and Randy Johnson. As of late a number of modern players have been lighting up radar guns all across the country, including the Cincinnati Reds young Cuban sensation Aroldis Chapman, who was clocked at 105.1 mph last season. According to www.efastball.com Feller threw the second-quickest pitch in history behind a Ryan fastball in 1974 that was clocked at over 108 using Doppler Laser Radar. Feller's pitch, at Griffith Stadium in 1946, was timed with a system that clocked the speed of artillery for the United States military. Minnesota owner Clark Griffith borrowed a photo-electric cell device from the Aberdeen, MD ordinance plant so Feller could pitch through it just prior to the game. These

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devices were used to measure the speed of artillery rounds during the war. Feller's offering was recorded at 107.6.

Yes, the speed of his pitches were epic, but the problem for Feller, although he would never say it was a problem, was that he had to spend four years, from when he was 23 until he was 26, in the service and his final career numbers could have been so much better than they actually were. Feller ended up in the Hall of Fame, but looking at what could have been presents us with some statistics that are truly eye-popping.

This is a rudimentary study, quite simplistic actually, that took Feller's three pre-war full seasons and Feller's three post-war full seasons, came up with a per-season average for these six, and multiplied these by four to add to Feller's final career numbers. Basic, I know, but this gives a pretty solid indication of what, barring injury, his final numbers would have looked like had he not missed those four years.

Feller ended his career with 266 wins. In the six years that sandwiched his war years he won 141 games, or an average of 23.5 per season. If you add the extra 94 victories we could logically assume he would have earned during those four seasons he ends up with 360, which would have placed him eighth on the all-time career wins list behind Cy Young (511), Walter Johnson (417), Pete Alexander (373), Christy Mathewson (373), Pud Galvin (365), Warren Spahn (363) and Kid Nichols (361).

Eighth is pretty strong, but if you look at how many losses Feller would have ended up with using this system, 211, would have placed him way down at 35th on the all-time loss list it makes this even that much more impressive. Comparatively, Young was also first on the all-time loss list with 316, Walter Johnson fourth with 279 and Spahn 12th with 245.

The greatest righty of all time, in this writer's opinion, was Mathewson. As pointed out, Mathewson was fourth on the wins list. If you want to find him on the loss list you have to look all the way down to 57th to find his 188 losses. Think about that, 373-188 over a 17-year season, not to mention a 2.17 career earned run average and a career 2.96 strikeout-to-walk ratio. No wonder Mathewson was chosen as a member of the five-player inaugural Hall of Fame class in 1936. But I digress...this is not about Mathewson.

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Feller threw a ton of innings and a ton of pitches within those innings. Before the days of icing arms, ultrasound treatments and strength and conditioning coaches (when they actually put heat on their arms after throwing...exactly the wrong thing to do) Feller was as resilient as you can find. He pitched 3,827 innings during his 18-season career, walking or striking out a lot of batters. He walked 1,764 batters and struck out 2,581. Despite his propensity to throw a lot of pitches to each batter, Feller pitched complete games in an incredible 57.6 percent of his starts (484 starts, 279 complete games). He also tossed 44 career shutouts, and using the formula discussed would have ended his career with 64, placing him sixth on the career list (Walter Johnson holds the record with 110...probably the most unbreakable record in all professional sports).

Feller's 2,581 strikeouts places him 26th on the career list. Again, using the formula Feller would have added an extra 995 strikeouts to his career total. This would move him from 26th on the career list to seventh with 3,576.

Feller meant a lot to the Cleveland Indians during his playing career, and when he came back from his military service it started a three-year march that culminated in the last Cleveland Indians World Series championship in 1948. He was one of the best to ever lace up a pair of spikes, but one of the most interesting things about Feller was that many years after his playing days he became the face of the franchise again.

Feller was a regular in the press box at Progressive Field, where he would sit quietly and take in the game. He was always very approachable, and this leads me to one of the Feller stories I remember fondly.

This was back in 1995, when I went back to college after taking a few years off to figure out I hated manual labor by working in a Ford plant. I was a full-time student, but also was working for a local radio station grabbing post-game interviews for their Indians radio coverage as well as hosting, with a couple of buddies, a sports talk program on our college radio station.

Well, one day Feller was sitting in his usual seat in the press box and I got the wonderful idea to ask him to read a promo for my radio show, something I could record him saying and cut up in the studio. So I approached him after writing out the standard, "Hello, this is Hall of Famer Bob Feller of the Cleveland Indians, and when I am in Such and Such I make sure to catch Mike, John and Chris on Sports SoundBytes."

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Feller motioned for me to sit next to him and asked how he could help me. I took out my recorder and asked him if he could help me out with something. Feller, expecting an interview, agreed. So I whipped out the paper and asked him to read it for me. He glanced at it for a second, then looked up at me and said, "I'm not going to read this crap for you," wrinkled the sheet of paper up in a ball and tossed it on the counter. I wanted to crawl into a hole.

Feller, however, then told me he would answer any questions I had so I spent about 20 minutes asking him about some of the Negro League players he barnstormed against, and how he thought their talents would have translated into today's game. Feller gave me some great stuff, recalling certain players and games and gave me thorough, interesting answers to all my questions. It was an amazing glimpse into baseball history and one of the highlights of my life, and I wish it could have gone on for hours. He didn't read that "crap" for me, but he did blow me away with his memory.

Opening Day this season seemed a little empty. The pre-game ceremony honoring Feller was nice, but knowing Feller is not up in the press box, watching the game and earning a living by just being who he was, left me feeling like there was a void at Progressive Field. Sure, Feller is there in spirit, but the Indians organization just is not the same without the greatest player in its history still around.

Godspeed, Bob.