

This is one installment in a team effort by The Cleveland Fan, highlighting the top local sports figures by jersey number. Please weigh in with your thoughts, in the Boards. As David Letterman would say, "For entertainment purposes only; please, no wagering."



Herb Score's selection as this town's best ever #27 should serve as evidence that greatness is not measured in years. Score's star burned white-hot for two seasons as a Cleveland Indian, earning him favorable comparisons with his legendary teammate Bob Feller, and widespread predictions that he would become one of the greatest left-handed pitchers ever to play the game.

Score set a rookie record for strikeouts on his way to the Rookie of the Year award in 1955. He overshadowed another rookie pitcher who came into the league that same year...a Dodger lefty named Sandy Koufax. He was a 20-game winner by the age of 23. Leo Durocher called him "the fastest pitcher I've seen in 20 years". That his career was brief made it no less brilliant.

Few Cleveland fans today are even aware that Score wore #27, because they know Herb Score mostly as a man without a uniform...as the radio voice of the Tribe, from their earliest recollection up until his retirement after the 1997 World Series. But perhaps the best known fact of all about Score is that his highly promising baseball career was started on its tragic downward trajectory when he was struck in the face by a line drive off the bat of the Yankees' Gil McDougald early in the 1957 season.

Within moments of the ball striking Score in the eye, his career, if not his life, was in dire jeopardy. McDougald was disconsolate afterwards, saying he would quit the game if Score lost his eye. Fans from all over the country sent their best wishes. People everywhere felt sorry for the young Tribe lefty.

Herb Score was never one of them.

Tell Me About It

You can't roll out of bed these days without being confronted with another story of an athlete who has "overcome adversity" on his way to success. Often this amounts to little more than putting a stop to his own selfish substance abuses, or maturing his way out of youthful lapses in judgment. All well and good of course, but some of these kids might do well to learn the story of Herb Score, for whom a devastating line drive to the head was not even the hardest thing to overcome.



Score was born in Queens, NY, and the story of his early years is a litany of lousy luck. At the age of 3, he was struck by a bakery truck, severely injuring both legs above the knees. For a time, doctors questioned whether he would ever walk normally, but he made a full recovery. (Incredibly, it was not to be the last time he was hit and grievously injured by a truck.)

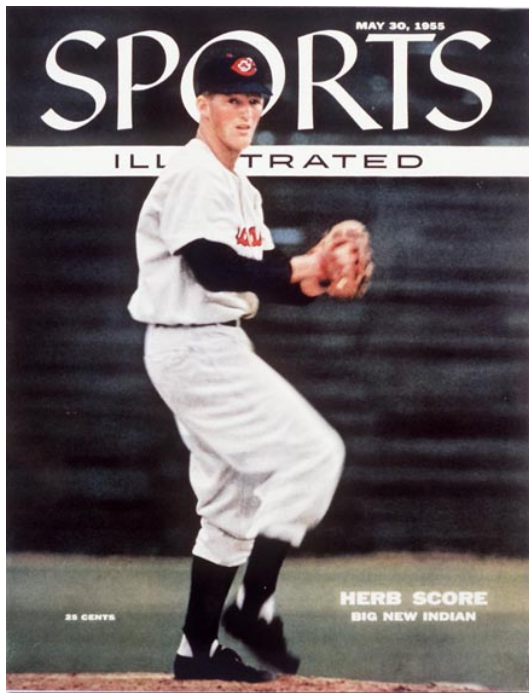
As a young child he missed an entire year of school with rheumatic fever. He survived severe cases of pneumonia and appendicitis when he was still a schoolboy. Later, as a young ballplayer in the minors, Score's broken ankle from a fall in the shower, and his separated collarbone from a fall on wet outfield grass seemed minor by comparison.

All that helps to explain his constant upbeat attitude, and his refusal to ever allow self-pity to infect him. Even as he lay on the ground on that May evening at Cleveland Stadium, bleeding from the eye, with a broken nose, facial lacerations and internal hemorrhaging, he was joking with friend and teammate Mike Garcia, quipping, “Well, Bear...you can’t say I didn’t keep my eye on the ball”.

That was Herb Score...never afraid to make a joke at his own expense. Grateful for his many opportunities....to play baseball, to have a family, and to remain in the game when his playing days were over. To never look back in regret...only in appreciation.

Score never blamed either his eye injury, or the arm problems that beset him while he was trying to come back, for ending his career prematurely. His explanation: “I lost my job because I quit pitching well”. No excuses. No regrets.

But back to that white-hot start...



[Herb Score](#) was signed right out of high school by Tribe super-scout Cy Slapnicka, and by the summer of 1954, when he turned 21, he would go 22-5 for Indianapolis of the American Association (AAA), with an astounding 330 strikeouts, and complete games in two-thirds of his starts. The kid was wild too, walking 140 batters in 251 innings, but he still earned a spot on the Indians big league roster the following year.

He was joining an Indians pitching staff fresh off a World Series, and one that still boasted Bob Feller and Bob Lemon among other standouts, but Score secured a spot in the rotation fairly early, and unlike his fellow-rookie Koufax in Los Angeles, he was able to get regular starts throughout the season. Still 21 when he made his first start, he pitched a complete game win

over Detroit, striking out nine and walking nine.

Score pitched back-to-back one run complete games in his fourth and fifth starts, with 26 strikeouts, including a 16-strikeout game. By the end of May of his rookie year, Score was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, with the sub-heading "Big New Indian".

He struggled a bit in mid-season, but came on strong toward the end, winning seven of his last eight decisions to finish 16-10, with a 2.45 ERA and 245 strikeouts, 35 more than anyone else in the major leagues. The strikeout total was a rookie record that would stand for 29 years, until Dwight Gooden broke it in 1984, and it still stands as the American League mark.

On that Rookie of the Year resume in 1955 for Score was a 1-hitter, a 2-hitter, and three 3-hitters to go with the record for strikeouts. The only down side was the wildness, as Score averaged six walks per nine innings. That was forgivable, because as his close friend and teammate Rocky Colavito observed, "They didn't have a radar gun then to measure speed. But I think he threw 100 miles an hour."

By his second season, at the tender age of 23, Score was already established as the best left-hander in baseball. He finished the season on a roll once again, with five straight complete game wins down the stretch to end the 1956 campaign at 20-9, with an ERA of 2.53.

The sky was the limit for Herb Score. *The Sporting News* ran a feature after the season titled "Will Herb Score be the Greatest Lefthander?" In a day when entire franchises sold for \$3-4 million, Boston's Joe Cronin offered the Indians a million dollars for Herb Score. Tribe G.M. Hank Greenberg said he wouldn't sell Score for twice that much.

The Beginning of the End



It was May 7, 1957. Score was off to an excellent start for the season, despite having lost a tough 11-inning complete game to the White Sox in his first start. He was 2-1 with a 2.00 ERA when he took the mound against the Yankees that night. He retired the first batter of the game before McDougald's liner off a low fastball came screaming back at the mound.

