

In Honor of Rapid Robert

Recently on ESPN I was watching the black and white coverage of the 7th game of the 1960 World Series between the Pittsburgh Pirates and the New York Yankees. It was one of the all time MLB great games not only because of Mazeroski's 9th inning walk off but because, as most fans from Ohio, I hate the Yankees. While I was watching the ticker tape strip at the bottom of the screen informed viewers that the legendary Bob Feller had passed on at the age of 92.

The next morning, on my daily trip to Panera for coffee, I looked for coverage of Rapid Robert in US Today but found none. Here was possibly the greatest right handed power pitcher of all time lost to the field of dreams deep in the corn of memories past. Could it be he was too outspoken, too loyal to Cleveland, too willing when asked who was the fastest to respond "I was"?

Just a young farm boy from Van Meter, Iowa, Bob was scouted and signed when he was 16 to begin his MLB career at age 17 in 1936. Can you believe that! Only one other was earlier in debut Joe Nuxall of the Cincinnati Reds. By the time he reached his mid twenties Bob was on his way to breaking ALL the records for strike outs and career wins. Then came World War II. He like most patriots of that time recognized nation and country were more important than balls and strikes. So he enlisted in the US Navy and did four years of air craft carrier duty in the Pacific.

Upon returning he picked up where he had left off averaging 20 wins per season and at one point over 300 strikes out in one of them. When he finished his career, factoring in for the four years of military, he would have won more games than anyone except the incredible Cy Young (511). In addition, not only did he pitch 3 no hitters but also an incredible 12 one hitters. That was before Sandy Koufax (3 no hitters one of them a perfect game) and the best power pitcher of all time Nolan Ryan who began his career out of the bull pen of the '69 Miracle Mets v. the Baltimore Orioles (7 no hitters, one of them a perfect game and over 5,000 strikes outs). Yet Nolan wasn't even born when Bob pitched in the 1948 World Series against the Boston Braves—the last baseball championship for the city of Cleveland.

What an incredible year '48 was. I was only five at the time but my father schooled me in it during my youth that went on into the 1954 pennant winning Indians who lost in four straight to the upstart Leo Durocher Giants. Feller was in his waning years at the time but was still able to "bring it" whenever needed from a pitching core that included Bob Lemon, Mike Garcia, Early Wynn and Rapid Robert backed up by a bull pen that included two closers Ray Narleski and Don Mosey. Round this off with Mike Hegan behind the plate, Al Rosen at third, Bobby Avilla at second, Vic Wertz at first, Dale Mitchell in left, Larry Doby in center, Satchel Paige and the incomparable General Manager Bill Veck and you have one of the most memorable season ever for fans from Ohio. Is there a curse on Cleveland? Bob never thought so. He lived in Ohio all of his adult life and that says a lot. You didn't jump ship for fame or money back then you stayed and played.

An aspiring ball player in my teens and early twenties, I patterned my pitching style after Feller's—high leg kick, reared back and ready to fire. It worked. I struck out double digits almost every time I pitch and had the Indians, Pirates and Orioles scouting me before I hurt my arm in pre Tommy John surgery days. What I couldn't do due to injury Bob did maybe because of all the cows milked on his boy hood Iowa farm? Well, now another one's gone but not forgotten at least by me and those "ol' timers" around Ohio. He was my hero at least on the mound. A fitting memorial—I would suggest for opening day next year the Cleveland Indians have Bob throw the first pitch from the jumbo screen and that a representative from Coopers Town be there to follow through. Good by Mr. Feller and thanks.