

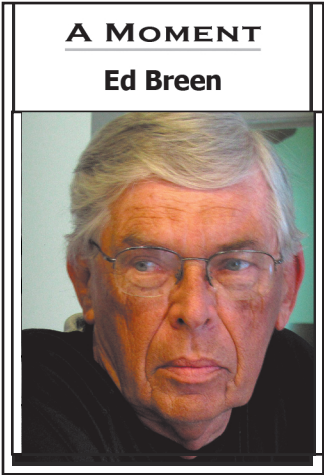
# Many great pitchers have left mound of life in 2020

Baseball season, such as it was in the time of COVID, is over. Dodger fans are happy for first time since '88, which, of course, is so long ago it was before Dan Quayle was vice-president. And now the ChiSox, the Chicago White Sox have hired a senior citizen to sit on the bench next year. Tony La Russa making a comeback at 76. Well, say I, good for him!

But we should have known way back on New Year's Day that this year was going to both one for the books and one to be forgotten by all but Dodger fans, if we can.

Don Larsen died that day, January 1st of 2020, back before COVID. He was a natural born Hoosier from Michigan City, but more importantly, 64 years earlier he had given me one of those childhood thrills that are never lost. When we were kids we called it chicken skin, goose bumps, whatever you want to call it. That tactile sense in the skin that something really special is happening, both good or bad.

I was a 13-year- old



baseball fan. Not really a fan, because at that age I didn't know or have anything else. I was what baseball was and on that afternoon, Monday, Oct. 8, 1956, I sat in front of our black-and-white floor model Zenith TV and watched as Don Larsen went where no pitcher had gone before. He pitched a perfect game in the World Series. No runs. No hits. No errors. No walks. No Brooklyn Dodger got on base and the Yankees won 2-0 and Yogi Berra jumped into his arms like a big Italian teddy bear.

Don Larsen was 90 years old when he died, but he was only the first in a pantheon of baseball pitchers to depart in this

“Nobody did nuthin’ to nobody.”

Yogi Berra

dreadful year. Tom Seaver died on Aug. 31, then Bob Gibson on Oct. 2, and a couple of weeks ago week ago Whitey Ford died at 91. Seaver was 75 and Gibson was 84.

Together, this group, this pitching staff, won 784 major league baseball games, while losing only 483. They won for the Yankees and the Mets and Cardinals and several other major league teams. Only two of them – Gibson and Ford – spent their careers with a single team; 17 seasons with the Cardinals for Gibson and 16 years a Yankee for Ford. Only baseball fans know how rare a lifetime with one team truly is.

But we aren't going to prowl in the deep weeds of statistics and ERAs. More interesting is the toughness of Bob Gibson,

on and off the field. Or the cool excellence of Tom Seaver. “Tom Terrific” they called him at Shea Stadium back in that season of '69 when the Mets came of age and the Cubs collapsed. That was the year of the black cat business.

That was on Sept . 9 in the top of the fourth inning when the black cat appeared on the field at Shea. It walked behind Ron Santo in the on-deck circle, crossed in front of the visitor's dugout, stared down Cub manager Leo Durocher and skedaddled down under the stands.

Obviously the work of the devil, but I digress. Seaver was there that night on the mound for the Mets. Gave up only five hits that night and the Mets won, 7-1.

Whitey Ford wasn't

born Whitey. He was born as Edward Charles Ford in Manhattan, not that far from Yankee Stadium. He came to the Yankees on July 1, 1950, and he was introduced that day in the scorebook as Eddie Ford. It was a former Yankee, Lefty Gomez, who saddled him with the Whitey moniker later on.

Ford did his job day-in and day-out on the mound. Unflappable. But it was in the night hours that he came alive. He, Mickey Mantle and Billy Martin teamed for nights on the town. Manager Casey Stengel called them the Three Musketeers. Ford, once asked about his friendship with Mantle, said they had a lot in common. “We both liked Scotch.” And it was a Ford-Mantle shenanigan that led to a classic Yogi Berra one-liner.

Ford and Mantle were helping Billy Martin celebrate his 29<sup>th</sup> birthday in May of '57. All were at the Copacabana nightclub, where a customer wound up on the floor with a broken nose. No charges were filed, but

the Yankees fined all the players who were there for the embarrassing headline-making episode. It was Berra who explained it all away: “Nobody did nuthin’ to nobody.”

But for integrity, toughness, determination and pure focus, it is Bob Gibson, the rock of the St. Louis Cardinals pitching staff from 1959 through 1975.

He threw high and tight, he threw hard and he was without remorse or sentiment on the baseball diamond. In his off-field life he was beloved, going all the way back to his college basketball days at Creighton in Omaha.

“My thing was winning,” Gibson said in his autobiography. “I didn’t see how being pleasant or amiable had anything to do with winning, so I wasn’t pleasant on the mound and I wasn’t amiable off it.”

He won 251 games, pitched 3,884 innings and along the way 102 batters failed to step back from the plate in time and were hit by a Gibson pitch. Nothing personal.

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