



In memoriam: A 2002 conversation with Billy Pierce

By Mark Liptak

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(Editor's Note: White Sox pitching legend and all around good man Billy Pierce passed away on Friday, July 31st. With his services this week, the Chicago Baseball Museum thought it would be appropriate to republish Mark Liptak's full interview with him from July 2002. Liptak was a friend of Pierce's and wrote his obituary story for the Chicago Baseball Museum last week. In this interview Billy talked about how he actually got started playing baseball, his years in the major leagues and his life after baseball. Billy also remembered many great moments and great players that he faced on the diamond.)



Pierce (center left) mobbed by his Giant teammates after final out in the National League playoff - October 3, 1962. Photo Courtesy of Associated Press.

Billy Pierce...just saying the name evokes memories of another time in Chicago.

On the South Side it was a time when baseball dominated the spring and summer months particularly because of the success of the White Sox. With no video games or cable / satellite television, kids played the game from morning till night. It was a time of the 'neighborhoods' all around the South Side. You could go to the neighborhood corner store and get a package of baseball cards for a nickel. Candy really was a penny. You had the neighborhood church, the neighborhood bar and the neighborhood V.F.W. where usually on Friday or Saturday nights you could watch a B grade science-fiction movie (remember "The Fly" or "The Incredible Shrinking Man"?) for a quarter or 50 cents.

It was a time when baseball really was the national pastime, when the White Sox didn't play second fiddle to anyone, especially in their own city. It was a time when the players

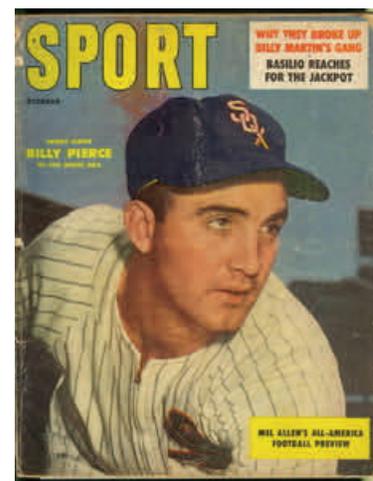
actually cared, especially about winning. When owners actually tried to do their best to win, instead of making excuses about “profit margins” and when kids all over the country could recite the starting lineups of most teams in baseball just as easily as their math tables. It was a time when even the worst teams in the league like Washington and Kansas City, had players of the caliber of Harmon Killebrew, Roy Sievers, Jim Kaat, Bob Allison and Roger Maris.

Billy Pierce was right in the middle of it.

Despite being small in size, “Billy the Kid” proved he was among the best pitchers in baseball and did it consistently for over a decade. The list of his accomplishments could go on forever but we’ll only highlight some of them, especially for fans who never saw him play:

- Won 186 games with the White Sox from 1949 - 1961 (211 overall)
- Had 11 years of double digit wins (12 overall)
- 20 game winner in 1956 and 57
- Threw 35 shutouts (38 overall)
- Had 19 saves (38 overall)
- Led the American League in complete games in 1956, 57 and 58 (Had 193 in his career)
- Led American League in ERA in 1955 (1.97... for his career his ERA was 3.27)
- Led American League in strikeouts in 1953 (186... had 1,999 in his career)
- Threw four one hitters, including losing a perfect game with two outs in the 9th inning (1958)
- Seven time All Star and one of only 13 pitchers to ever start three of those games (1953, 55, 56)
- “Sports Illustrated” cover boy May 13, 1957. He was the first Sox player to ever gain that honor.
- “Sport” Magazine cover boy for October 1957

Pierce was also respected as a genuine “good guy” who always had time for the fans. He treated everyone the same, whether it was then Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley (who had front row season tickets right next to the Sox dugout) or the local grocer. Pierce never embarrassed himself, the White Sox organization or the city of Chicago. His number #19 was retired by the club in 1987. (He would also have a bronze stature erected honoring him in the concourse at U.S. Cellular Field)



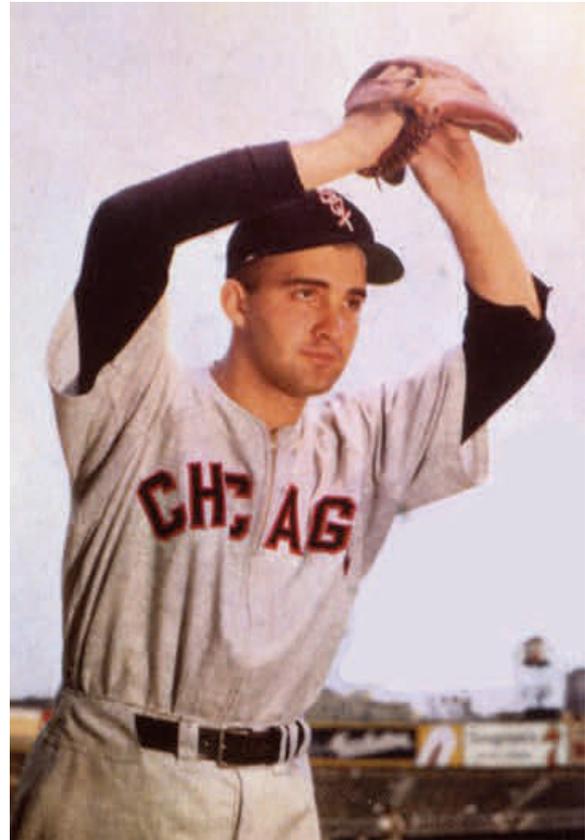
Billy Pierce on the cover of Sport magazine.

Some of his contemporaries had this to say about him...

“Billy was the first guy we ever got in a trade. He was a winning pitcher, a mainstay as we were building a championship club. When he’d pitch against Whitey Ford, you could sell the seats 25 times over. That’s how many fans wanted to see him pitch.” – Former Sox co-owner Chuck Comiskey in 1988.

“That little guy had more courage per ounce than any ballplayer I ever saw. You didn’t need a relief pitcher when he pitched. If he had a one run lead going into the 7th or 8th inning, the ballgame was over.” – Former Sox GM Frank “Trader” Lane the man who brought Billy to the White Sox.

Today Pierce is retired and lives in the Chicago suburbs with his wife of many years. He’s in good health, continues to represent the Sox at public events and devotes a lot of his time to Chicago Baseball Cancer Charities, as well as his five grandchildren. He recently took time out from his very busy schedule to talk with me. It is with tremendous respect and pride that we bring you a conversation with Billy Pierce...



Billy Pierce pitching at Yankee Stadium in 1953

Mark Liptak: Billy you were born and raised in Detroit. How did your involvement with baseball begin?

Billy Pierce: “Like with most kids in those days we played in the schoolyards, played in the alley, played all the time. Nothing was organized, we just played. The old cliché is true, when we broke a bat; we’d nail it back together. When the ball blew apart, we’d wrap tape around it and keep playing, even though the ball looked like a football. We’d play where ever we could. If we couldn’t play baseball, we’d play softball. We just had fun playing. It wasn’t until I was 13 or 14 that I finally played on an organized team.”

ML: When did you realize you were good and could perhaps play at the pro level?

BP: “Playing in the pro’s never entered my mind. I played a lot and was pretty good. You know how when kids get together and play, they choose up sides? I was always one of the first kids picked. I was a first baseman when I was 14, and the kid who was a pitcher on our team left and went to another club because they had better looking uniforms. We were only about a week from starting play in our league and I threw hard, so I became the pitcher. I was wild in those days! When I was in high school the scouts came around to see me but I wanted to be a doctor. My dad was a pharmacist and I

took a lot of classes to get ready for medical school. I had a scholarship but I thought I'd try to play for two or three years and if it didn't work out I'd use the scholarship and go back to school."

ML: You only spent a few years in the minors, and suddenly you were a hometown kid playing for the hometown team. How did it feel the first time you pitched in the big leagues?

BP: "It was very exciting. It was in Boston, I'll never forget it. I was 18 years old. The bullpen in those days was a long way away from the mound and as I walked in our right fielder, center fielder and second baseman were shouting encouragement to me as I passed them. In those days, the veterans weren't that hard on us rookies."

ML: You spent two years with the Tigers, and then on November 10, 1948 you were traded to the Sox for catcher Aaron Robinson. How did you hear about it and how did you feel?

BP: "I was at my girlfriend's house, she's now my wife Gloria, and we heard it over the radio. A DJ came on with a sports bulletin that said I was traded to Chicago. I wasn't very happy about it because it was just in the paper about two weeks before that the Tigers were going to rebuild and give all of us kids a chance to play. I did not want to go to either Chicago or Philadelphia. It's not that I didn't like Chicago, but in those days the stockyards were going full force and when you played in Comiskey Park, especially at night, the smell was unbelievable! It turned out to be a great break for me... the Sox had lost like a hundred games the year before and they were going to give everybody a chance."

ML: In 1951 Paul Richards took over as manager, you had your first winning season and the Sox started to take off. What was it about Richards that helped you personally and the team?

BP: "Paul was the best teaching manager I ever had anywhere, without question. Frank Lane made all the trades and brought the players in, guys like myself, and Nellie Fox,

Billy Pierce took a shower... then he used Vitalis

White Sox lefthander Billy Pierce rarely goes to the shower before the game ends.

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Pierce ad for Vitalis - September 1956. Photo Courtesy of www.blog.modernmechanix.com

but Richards was always working with us. Paul for example, changed the bat that Nellie was using to that “bottle” style and turned him into a great hitter. (Author’s Note: Pierce and Fox were roommates for 11 seasons with the Sox)

ML: Richards left to take over the Baltimore franchise but your career continued to prosper under Marty Marion, an underrated manager. What was it like to play for him?

BP: “Very good. I was surprised when he was left out and the Sox replaced him, because we played well under him. He wasn’t as good a teacher as Paul was, but then nobody was, but he was still very, very good.”

ML: Your career continued to roll along culminating with the pennant year of 1959. For the city and the team it was the pinnacle of success, but for you personally, it wasn’t your best season. You missed six weeks with a hip injury and when it came time for the World Series, manager Al Lopez passed you over for a starting assignment. Older Sox fans still insist, if you start Game #2, instead of Bob Shaw, and win, the Sox take the Series. How difficult was that for you being relegated to only four innings of relief work?

BP: “It was very tough. It was a real hard thing. I appeared in three games and pitched well but it was a disappointment. I still wanted the Sox to win, after all, they were my teammates but I was very glad when it was over. Let’s put it this way, I left town pretty quickly to try to forget about it all.”

ML: Did that affect your relationship with Lopez, and what did you think of him as a manager?

BP: “Al was a real good manager. His record shows that. He was a solid percentage baseball guy. I honestly think the controversy affected Al more than me. I wasn’t the culprit; all I could do was what he told me. He had to listen to the fans who wanted me to pitch but I couldn’t do anything about it.”

ML: Still clinching the pennant had to be exciting.

BP: “It was tremendous, the crowd that we had at Midway Airport! The toughest part about the trip was getting back home because so many people were out. I remember Earl Torgeson and I were in a cab and we were going down Garfield Boulevard, it had to be one or two o’clock in the morning, and fans were everywhere. They had flares lit up on the front lawns, everyone was outside their homes talking and celebrating.”

ML: After the 1961 season you were traded to the Giants for pitchers Eddie Fisher, Dom Zanni and outfielder Bob Farley. As a Chicago baseball “institution” were you shocked by what happened or did you look at it as a fresh start with a good San Francisco team?

BP: “Truthfully the way things were going the last few seasons, I expected it. All I did was ask Ed Short (Author’s Note: Short was then the Sox GM) that if something happened that he please call me first before he told the media. Remember the last time I was traded I heard about it over the radio. Short did call me one day and said he made a deal with San Francisco. I thanked him for letting me know and that was it. I was re-

ally worried about how I was going to tell my son about it. He was nine or 10 at the time and grew up around Luis Aparicio, Nellie Fox and the guys. So my wife and I told him and he looked up and said “great, now I get to meet Willie Mays!” So that was it, we got his “seal of approval” and moved on.”

ML: You at least finally got a chance to start in the 62’ World Series against your old friends the Yankees. Did you at least get a measure of personal satisfaction out of that?

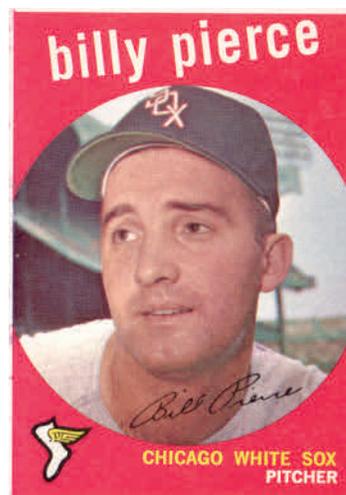
BP: “Without question. That whole period coming so late in my career... the playoff games against the Dodgers and then the World Series with the Yankees was very special. It was an exciting 10 day period especially, like I said, because it came so late for me.”

ML: After the 1964 season and with 18 years of service, you retired. Was that an easy decision for you?

BP: “After the 1963 season I decided with my wife, that the 64’ season would be it. In the fall of 63’ we moved to Chicago where we’ve been ever since. This is where we wanted to be. Once I had made up my mind to retire, it was easy to accept. I was very willing to leave. It was much easier because it was on my terms.”

ML: Looking back Billy, which year was your best season?

BP: “I’d have to say 1955. I led the league that year in ERA at 1.97. It had been like 20 years since anybody ended a season with an ERA under two. I only went 15-10 that season but I lost four games by the score of 1-0. I think I pitched as well as I did in 1956 when I won 20 games, but I just didn’t get some breaks. I also think that was my best year because in 1954 I was a little sore, so in 1955 the Sox gave me a little most rest between starts.”



Billy Pierce's Topps baseball card from 1959.

ML: What was your best pitch and how hard did you throw?

BP: “I wish I could tell you. I know I read where Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams both said I threw very hard, but we didn’t have radar guns in those days. At first my best pitch was my fastball but then about 1953 to 1955, I developed a good slider...a real hard slider that would break in on guys six or seven inches. It would dart in on fellows.”

ML: What was the secret to your success, especially for a guy your size?

BP: “At em’ balls! (laughing). Seriously I worked hard when I pitched. I never believed in that approach where you’ve got to pace yourself. The 1st inning was just as important as the others. I also felt I had to get the weak hitters out. You couldn’t afford to give up hits to the eighth or ninth place hitters... those three, four and five guys were just too good to come up with guys on base.”

ML: Billy I’d like to talk about some of your individual accomplishments. You were named to seven All Star teams, started three, appeared in four and pitched almost 11

innings giving up four runs. You even got a hit in the 1957 game and scored a run. This was when playing in the All Star Game meant something and you were facing the best hitters in the game.

BP: “It did. You basically pitched three innings. They’ve changed that philosophy over the years. It wasn’t considered an exhibition game back then, you played to win, and you took it seriously. Just being there was an honor. I remember the 1953 game, my wife was in the hospital, and my son had just been born. I was starting the All Star Game in Cincinnati thinking about both of them. What a gift. I also remember the 1955 game in Milwaukee. Mickey Mantle hit a ball into the trees outside of the stadium.”

ML: You also threw four one hitters, the best remembered on the night of June 27, 1958. You took a perfect game into the 9th inning against the Senators. You got the first two outs then gave up a double just fair, to a guy named Ed FitzGerald. What goes through a pitchers mind when he gets that close to the ultimate game?

BP: “At the time I didn’t think it was that important. I was a team guy and we wound up winning the game. Sure I wanted to get him out. He was a first ball, fastball hitter. We threw him a low breaking ball that he hit off the end of the bat. I won the game though and that was more important to me at the time. Over the years however, I’ve had so many people tell me they were listening to the game on the radio or were at the park watching, that I’ve wanted that one pitch back more now than I ever did then.”

ML: You also threw one hitters on June 15, 1950 (Yankees), April 16, 1953 (Browns) and June 11, 1959 (at Washington). Do you remember anything specific about those games, like who got the hit and in what inning?

BP: “The Yankees game, I remembered it rained a couple of times. Billy Johnson got a single to right field in the 5th inning. The St. Louis game, a guy named Young got a hit, a double I think, to right center, in the 6th. I don’t remember anything at all about the game at Washington. Whoever got the hit must have done it very early in the game.” (Author’s Note: Shortstop Ron Samford got a double in the 3rd inning.)

ML: A friend of yours, Ted Williams passed away recently. Tell me, how did you pitch to him?

BP: “Very carefully! He would absolutely kill a fastball. And if you should make him look bad on a swing and he’d grab his cap and pull it down tighter, you better be careful on your next pitch. I faced a lot of great hitters but I don’t know of anybody who was better. He’s the only guy I know, who, when he came up to bat, the other guys would be watching him from the dugout and not going inside or using the restroom. I know he didn’t get along with the media but he was well liked by the players. He was always helping guys, whether it was his teammates or guys on the other club.”

ML: You spend a lot of time now doing charity work for Chicago Baseball Cancer Charities. Tell us about that organization.

BP: “It was started 32 years ago. It does a tremendous job. During that time we’ve raised about 10 and a half million dollars. 60 per cent of the funds go to Northwestern Memorial Hospital; the other 40 go to Children’s Memorial Hospital. We also sponsor

“Camp One Step at a Time”, which is where kids go for a few weeks a year. The children, who go, have cancer or are getting over cancer. They have a great time. I actually got involved one year when I was invited to their golf tournament. Then Nellie Fox passed away because of cancer and I really got into it, I’ve been involved ever since. I’d also like to thank the Sox for all of their support over the years. Mr. Reinsdorf has been very generous with contributions to help the kids.”

ML: If someone reading this would like to make a contribution where can they send it?

BP: “They can send it to Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Developmental Office in care of Chicago Baseball Cancer Charities. It will go to the right place and I’d like to thank them for their help. Everyone has been affected by cancer in one way or another.

ML: Billy from talking with you and from everything that I’ve read or heard about you, you are a very modest man. What would it mean to you and your family, for you to get a call from Cooperstown saying you are now in the Hall Of Fame?

BP: “It would be a tremendous thrill, the culmination of my life, no question about it. My family and I would appreciate it very much. You have no way of knowing how the people vote; I’m sure all of them have their favorites, so we’ll just have to see.”

ML: Wrap up your career for me will you?

BP: “I had a wonderful career. The fans in Chicago couldn’t have been nicer to me and my family. I am very thankful to them.”