



All-Star Game brings back ‘Big George’s’ memories of pinch HR in 1961 at Candlestick Park

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George Altman briefly was first among equals in the Cubs lineup in the early 1960s.

Belting a home run in the All-Star Game is special.

Doing it as a pinch-hitter puts you in an even more select group.

And you never forget.

Thus the passage of 52 years hasn't dimmed George Altman's memory. He can easily do the play-by-play of connecting on a hook and driving the ball beyond the Candlestick Park wall in front of a national TV audience and San Francisco fans glorying in their fourth season as a big-league town.

The pinch homer on July 11, 1961 in the first of two annual All-Star Games (held from 1959 to 1962 to boost player pensions) was the highlight of the dream season for Cubs right fielder Altman, one of a long line of prime talent Hall of Famer Buck O'Neil recruited for the Cubs over a three-decade span.

"I always had pretty good luck in San Francisco," said Altman, at 80 as old as the All-Star Game itself. "The wind blew to right a lot. The guys pitched you away a lot, so you get a lot of hits. Then when you start getting hits, then they try to come in on you, and you get a chance to hit home runs."

Along with second baseman and future manager Don Zimmer, Altman represented the Cubs at Candlestick. Despite his own prodigious season to date, the NL outfield was a bit crowded with hometown star Willie Mays and Roberto Clemente playing the entire game in center and right, respectively. Orlando Cepeda, another San Francisco treat, and Frank Robinson shared left-field duties. Altman had to be content with a pinch-hitting appearance leading off the bottom of the eighth against Red Sox right-hander Mike Fornieles.

Altman had a book on Fornieles

“I had played against Mike in Cuba, and knew he was a breaking-ball pitcher,” Altman recalled from his far-western suburban St. Louis home. “So I looked for a first-pitch curveball, and that’s when I hit the home run. I was looking for a curveball, I got it and there was nothing else to wait on.”

Altman’s left-handed-hitting style of slashing the ball to left and center paid dividends.

“If you’re not trying to pull the ball all the time and waiting on the ball a lot, you get to handle the breaking balls better,” he said.

He powered the second pinch-homer of the game. Two innings earlier, Harmon Killebrew of the AL connected.

Altman’s home run gave the National League a 3-1 lead. But the American League tied it up in the top of the ninth, then took the lead 4-3 in the top of the 10th. Marathon-men Mays and Clemente, though, won it 5-4 with a double and single, respectively, in the bottom of the inning.

The same teams re-convened nearly three weeks later, on July 31, in Fenway Park. This time, Altman got to work up a sweat on defense. He pinch hit for Sandy Koufax in the top of the seventh, flying out to center. Altman then replaced Hank Aaron in right field. He was the third right fielder for the NL after Clemente had started.



The Red Sox's Mike Fornieles served up George Altman's pinch-hit homer at Candlestick Park.

“It was great just to be on the field with those guys,” Altman said. “I found myself standing in the outfield with Willie Mays. That was a tremendous thrill.”

Altman also was lucky enough to be in the hometown Cubs contingent with Ernie Banks and Billy Williams in the second All-Star Game of 1962, on July 30 at Wrigley Field. He pinch-hit for Bill Mazeroski in the fourth and flied to left. Banks came in for Cepeda at first base in the fifth, while Williams replaced Stan Musial in left in the seventh.

“That was terrific,” Altman said of playing at home. “That’s the one thing about the Cubs – the fans. The fans are terrific, they’re loyal, they love the Cubs, you love to play for them. It was quite a thrill to be in the All-Star Game in Wrigley Field.”

Cubs opened up closed-off bleachers for '62 game

The Cubs barely drew 600,000, a post-World War II full-season low, to the Friendly Confines amid a 103-loss season in 1962. But a standing-room-only crowd of 38,359, some of whom arrived at dawn to score day-of-game-sale bleacher tickets, brought life to the ballpark. To handle the overflow, the blocked-off center field bleacher section was opened for the only time since 1952. That created hazardous batting sightlines with the white shirts directly behind the pitcher.



George Altman was thrilled to play right field next to Willie Mays in center in the All-Star Game in Boston.

“That was different,” said Altman. “You’re facing pitchers you’re not familiar with, and it made it a little tougher. But the whole gala was just tremendous. Just great to be there.”

The Wrigley Mid-Summer Classic version was a rush job, squeezed in on a Monday as players dashed to Chicago from their Sunday-afternoon assignments. There were no ancillary events like a Home Run Derby that almost overshadowed the actual game.

“I think it’s OK,” Altman said of the Home Run Derby. “It should be for the benefit for the fans. We owe the fans everything. Players have fun with it, too. You need to relax a little bit sometimes.”

Altman certainly earned his way to his All-Star berths. One of a handful of Kansas City Monarchs O’Neil had managed -- along with Banks and Lou Johnson – who found their way to the Cubs, Altman signed with Chicago on Aug. 19, 1955. Making his debut in 1959, he showed flashes of promise, but injuries disrupted his ability to be the first 140-game regular African-American outfielder on the North Side.

‘Big George’ Cubs’ best hitter of ‘61

After shuttling among all outfield positions and first base in 1959-60, Altman got the chance to play regularly in right in 1961. He was one of the few rocks of stability on a team that would lose 90 games amid the chaos of the first College of Coaches rotating-manager system.

“Big George,” affectionately known to the fans for his 6-foot-4 frame, earned the All-Star selection with an average as high as .357 in early July 1961 along with 14 homers and 45 RBIs. He finished with 27 homers, a team-leading 96 RBIs and a .303 average.

“That was the key, being able to go out there every day and do your job every day,” Altman said. “I had problems with injuries the first two years and then in the latter years. When I was healthy and feeling good, it was great.”

“To tell the truth, one of my problems is I wanted to succeed so much, I had a tendency to be tight a lot, be serious. I didn’t like losing, because I came from a winning program in college (Tennessee State), high school and the Monarchs. I took losing hard.

“That was probably part of my problem – I might have overly trained at times and strained myself, and I’d go out there with injuries. Some of my teammates would get on me, saying I was trying to show them up. But I wasn’t trying to show them up – I was trying to get in the best shape that I could. Even that wasn’t enough for me. When I went to Japan and went through what I call their ‘kamikaze training,’ I had the best years I ever had. I was able to play almost seven years straight without injury.”

Conquering Koufax – for one game

A second highlight of the ’61 season was Altman slugging two homers off Sandy Koufax, then enjoying his breakout 18-win season, in a 4-2 Cubs win on Aug. 4 in the Los Angeles Coliseum.

“I probably closed my eyes and just swung,” he mused.

Between Koufax’s immortal stuff and the Coliseum’s Death Valley dimensions for lefty hitters, it should have been a nightmare for Altman. For one day, it wasn’t.

“The only pitcher I could see who, to me, could throw the ball below your knees, and the ball would be rising,” he said of Koufax. “Most high fastballs would be rising. But he was throwing I guess with tremendous backspin or something. That ball was rising even below the waist. Then that big curveball – forget about it.”

Two years earlier, Altman had gotten some sage advice about handling Koufax from Rogers Hornsby, then Cubs hitting coach.

“Sandy was on the mound, throwing 100 mph,” he said. “Rogers said, wait, wait on him, wait, wait. You think he was crazy. But he was right. When you start to move too quick, you’re aiding the guy throwing the fastball because you’re moving forward and the ball’s coming forward. If you wait back, you have a chance to let your hands work.”

In addition to not trying to pull Koufax, Altman put some study into dueling the Hall of Fame-calibre pitchers of the day.

“I kind of studied the pitchers a little bit,” he said. “I ended up keeping a book on pitchers, what they threw and how their ball moved. That helped a lot.”

Altman enjoyed another good season in 1962 with 22 homers and a .318 average. However, Cubs pitching was so horrific in setting a team record for losses, never surpassed, that GM John Holland felt he had to sacrifice Altman in a deal for veteran starter Larry Jackson of the Cardinals soon after the season ended. That was an era when Holland made regular deals with counterpart Bing Devine of the Cardinals. Sending away Lou Brock – the man who replaced Altman in right – 1½ seasons later proved to be disastrous.

Branch Rickey's bad advice

So was Altman's one-year stay in St. Louis. By now, ex-Mahatma Branch Rickey had come full circle, as a senior advisor to the Cardinals. Eyeing Altman's power juxtaposed to the short porch of the first Busch Stadium's right-field pavilion, Rickey suggested to Devine and manager Johnny Keane that Altman change his swing to pull more. The strategy backfired. Altman hit just nine homers in 1963, and was sent packing to the woeful New York Mets.

But more injuries cut his time under Casey Stengel. Missing Altman and without Brock, Holland re-acquired him in Jan. 1965 for center fielder Billy Cowan. The plan was to play Altman in left with Billy Williams moving over to center. That arrangement opened the '65 season and Altman initially hit well. But the injury bug bit him again. Williams moved to right with the immortal Doug Clemens pushing his way into the left-field job. Altman devolved to a fourth outfielder and pinch hitter for the next two-plus seasons before enjoying success in Japan.

Two video artifacts of Altman's Cubs games are still preserved. He is shown making a good catch at the right-field wall of Carl Sawatski's liner leading off the ninth inning of Don Cardwell's May 15, 1960 no-hitter against the Cardinals. That is part of the oldest sports videotape believed to still exist, a game originally televised in color, but recorded in black and white. Altman's image was also preserved making another catch, this time recorded in color, on the Phillies' Johnny Callison during a short clip inserted in the first trans-Atlantic satellite broadcast, via Telstar, on July 23, 1962.

For several decades after he retired from baseball, Altman kept his home in Chicago, earning renown working at the Board of Trade. Altman used his height to his advantage in the rancorous trading pits. Later, he moved to the St. Louis area to continue his trading and financial work from home well into his 70s.



George Altman at a racetrack outing a few years ago.

"I finally retired a couple of years ago," Altman said. "I was ready for it, as long as I had something else to go to."

At 80 a horseshoes champ

He did. “Big George” uses his old competitive talents in another sport as an octogenarian.



George and wife Etta Altman at his recent 80th birthday party.

“I’m into horseshoes now,” he said. “I play league horseshoes. I’m still competing. I play three times a week. It keeps me busy. I do pretty well. I won a few tournaments. I compete in my age group. After 70, you get to throw from 30 feet. The younger people have to throw it 40 feet.”

“My old basketball experience (from high school and college) probably helps more than anything else. It’s like making a basket.”

Unfortunately, Altman did not stick around long enough to be a part of the fabled – and infamous – 1969 Cubs. That’s likely a reason why he has not been invited back to appear at the Cubs Convention in its 28 years of operation. Instead, he’s more involved in

the Cardinals’ alumni organization.

“I usually get out (to new Busch Stadium) on Opening Day, and to some of the alumni meetings,” he said. “I go every year to the (Cardinals’) equivalent to the Cubs Convention (the Winter Warmup).”

It’s not too late, though, to bring “Big George” back to Chicago, a city he loved as a player and in business, to share some hard-hitting All-Star Game memories.