

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Ichiro 3-K quest once-in-a-generation treat for Wrigley Field fans

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If you're patient, you'll see everything at Wrigley Field.

On Sunday night, July 31, 41,000 and a national TV audience witnessed lefty Travis Wood pitch, shift to left field for two innings, make a Web Gems catch in the ivy and pitch again. Meanwhile, the Cubs wiped out an early 6-0 deficit, scoring runs via a bases-loaded walk and hit batsman. They tallied the tying run on a wild, wild pitch, then the winner on a squeeze by a pitcher whose handling of the bat might as well been Superman wielding Kryptonite.

Rare can you go to Wrigley in back-to-back games and possibly see something sensational. All-time import Ichiro Suzuki came into the Friendly Confines Monday night, Aug. 1 just two hits short of 3,000. He was likely to get at least two out of three starts with three Cubs right-handers scheduled to toe the slab.

Give Ichiro his due. He's been in a hurry to reach the traditional baseball hit-king milestone since he took the Mariners by storm in with 242 hits in 2001 straight from Japan. Four years later, the consummate batsman beat George Sisler's all-time seasonal record by five with 262 hits.

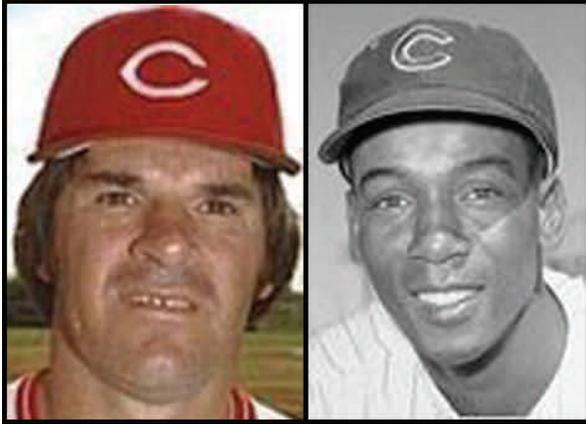
Now, he's in line to match Stan "The Man" Musial's pace in achieving the 3,000-hit mark in their 16th season. Musial provided the first instance of a 3,000 quest coming through Wrigley Field in 1958. Twenty-seven years later, Pete Rose tied (and was later proved to have broken) Ty Cobb's all-time hits record at Clark and Addison. On a once-in-a-generation pace, now it's Ichiro's turn.

Both Musial and Rose were not supposed to play in Chicago.

The Cardinals had an odd schedule. They played six straight games against the Cubs – a four-game series in old Sportsman's Park over a weekend, then two games in Wrigley



Ichiro Suzuki (left) has matched Stan Musial's 16-season pace in reaching the 3,000-hit level.



Pete Rose (left) actually broke Ty Cobb's all-time hits record at Wrigley Field, while Ernie Banks amassed three milestones against the Cardinals.

Field on Monday and Tuesday, May 12-13, 1958. As an example of pure humiliation, the Cards went on to win all six. Then the Redbirds were going to do a U-turn to return to St. Louis for a Wednesday, May 14, contest against the Giants.

Musial got hit No. 2,999, a first-inning double against right-hander Glen Hobbie, on May 12. Then he went hitless his next three at-bats. Manager Fred Hutchinson sat Musial against right-hander Moe Drabowsky the next afternoon to give Musial a chance for the milestone in front of the home folks. "Stretch Joe" Cunningham started at first base instead of Musial.

But Stan the Man was always about winning anyway. With the Cards trailing 3-1 in the top of the sixth, Hutchinson sent him up to pinch hit for starter Sam "Toothpick" Jones, another Cub who got away, with a runner on second and one out. Reliably, Musial doubled to left, driving in Gene Green to cut the lead to 3-2. The game was stopped. Photographers rushed out to second base to record the scene.

A well-documented 3,000th hit for the time

A newsreel camera caught Musial's swing. Of course, WGN televised the game, but had not yet employed videotape – experimented with by station engineers in 1958 – to record the scene. Harry Caray's exciting rendition of the hit on St. Louis' KMOX has been replayed endlessly over the decades. My major find for my weekly baseball radio show, "Diamond Gems," in the late 1990s was Lou Boudreau's play-by-play on WGN-Radio. Good Kid did a good job as a rookie announcer spelling partner Jack Quinlan for a couple of innings. We also had a witness on the show – co-host Red Mottlow had watched the game in the bleachers.

Musial's double touched off the winning rally. Three more runs scored in the sixth, starting with his pinch-runner, Frank Barnes. As per the style of the day, Cubs manager Bob Scheffing did not pull Drabowsky as the Cardinals racked him up.

Musial would not have to wait to return to Grand Avenue in St. Louis to enjoy a hero's welcome. With a home night game scheduled for Wednesday, the Cardinals took a train back after leaving Wrigley Field. Fans gathered to hail Musial at several whistle stops in downstate Illinois. And he rewarded 20,442 fans at Sportsman's Park with three more hits, including a homer, in the Cards' 3-2 victory over the Giants.

Musial was involved in two more Cubs-Cardinals games in successive seasons at Wrigley Field. On June 30, 1959, two baseballs accidentally were put in play simultaneously during a Musial walk in a 4-1 Cardinals win. Then, on May 15, 1960, he had far less success as a pinch-hitter with two out in the eighth against the newly-acquired Don Cardwell. Stan the Man struck out swinging, the 24th out in Cardwell's no-hitter.

Meanwhile, a conveyance much slower than a train – a bicycle – was responsible for then-Reds player-manager Rose coming oh-so-close to collecting hit No. 4,192 to overcome Cobb at Wrigley Field on Sept. 8, 1985. Years later, research proved Rose would go on to actually break the record this day.

Rose came in with 4,189 hits. Like Musial, the plan was for Charlie Hustle to sit out the game and try for the record at the start of a homestand two days later in Riverfront Stadium. A switch-hitter traditionally better batting left-handed, Rose also had a strategic out for grabbing some bench. Lefty Steve Trout was the Cubs' scheduled starter.

But at mid-morning, word reached Wrigley Field Trout had fallen off a bicycle and could not start.

“He fell off a bike that he was riding to Wrigley Field, I was told,” said Bob Ibach, the Cubs' media relations director at the time. “Some have said he fell off a workout bike, but the info I got it was a regular bike. It was always something with Trout.”

The majority of Chicago media were at Soldier Field, where the Bears opened the season on the sultry Sunday against the Tampa Bay Bucs. When the Cubs switched the starting pitcher to the little-known Reggie Patterson, Ibach and Co. phoned the football pressbox with the news.

“Rose was not gonna be in the lineup, so they were pretty safe to stay away,” Ibach said. “As soon as word got out that the right-handed Patterson was pitching, a lot of them left that press box to come over to Wrigley Field.”

I was in that Soldier Field pressbox. However, my assignment that day was football, and others had driven me to the Bears game, so I could not leave. I missed drama befitting only a baseball showman like Rose.

The media did not need to rush through Sunday traffic to reach Wrigley Field. A strong thunderstorm delayed the game two hours.

A Rose feat that later became the record

In the first inning, Rose singled off Patterson to come within one of tying the record. Then he tied the mark with a line-drive single to right off Patterson in his third at-bat in the fifth. Right fielder Keith Moreland took care in retrieving the baseball. The crowd gave Rose a long, heartfelt standing ovation, and he was moved soaking in the cheers as he stood at first base.

That gave Rose plenty of time to pass Cobb, first against an easy-mark right-hander. But he grounded out to short leading off the seventh against Lary Sorensen.

In the ninth, the Reds knicked closer Lee Arthur Smith for three straight singles to tie the game 5-5. Rose was the next hitter. However, Smith in those days threw in the high 90s mph range. With darkness closing in late on a September afternoon, Big Lee often had an advantage with his best heater. In what seemed to be his final shot with the crowd and announcers like Harry Caray and Marty Brennaman excited, Rose fanned, the first of three consecutive strikeouts to end the inning.

The Cubs failed to score in the bottom of the ninth. The game was suspended with all statistics counting, and scheduled for resumption after season's end if it affected pennant races. However, the Cubs and Reds were out of the race. The box score was consigned forever as a tie. That had no effect on Rose's quest. He broke the perceived record against Eric Show of the Padres two days later in Cincy.

Research later showed Cobb actually finished with 4,189 hits. So Rose had actually broken the record with his first hit off Patterson. Such hindsight statistic changes were not unprecedented. Hack Wilson was credited with one more RBI to up his all-time seasonal total to 191.

The Cubs never had a 3,000-hit man. The best they could muster is Ernie Banks' 2,500th hit off the Cardinals' Bob Gibson in the fifth inning of Game 1 of a doubleheader at Wrigley Field on Sept. 19, 1969.

Banks got other milestones against the Cardinals. He blasted his then-record fifth seasonal grand-slam homer against future teammate Lindy McDaniel at Sportsman's Park on Sept. 19, 1955. Almost a decade later at Wrigley Field, on Sept. 2, 1965, Banks slugged career homer No. 400, a three-run shot, off lefty Curt Simmons.

Fortunately, Cubs fans did not have to witness a final humiliation by the Hall of Famer who got away. Lou Brock got his 3,000th hit, a fourth-inning shot that ricocheted off starter Dennis Lamp, at old Busch Stadium on Aug. 13, 1979. Played on a Monday night, the game was not televised back to Chicago.

All of this history led up to Ichiro's visit. There won't be locally-oriented or team-rivalry back stories or emotions involved. Simply individual baseball excellence with the Cubs possessing a big division lead, freeing the fans to be Ichiro rooters if and when the moment arose.