



Cubs try hard enough vs. Koufax to make him pitch a game and a half twice

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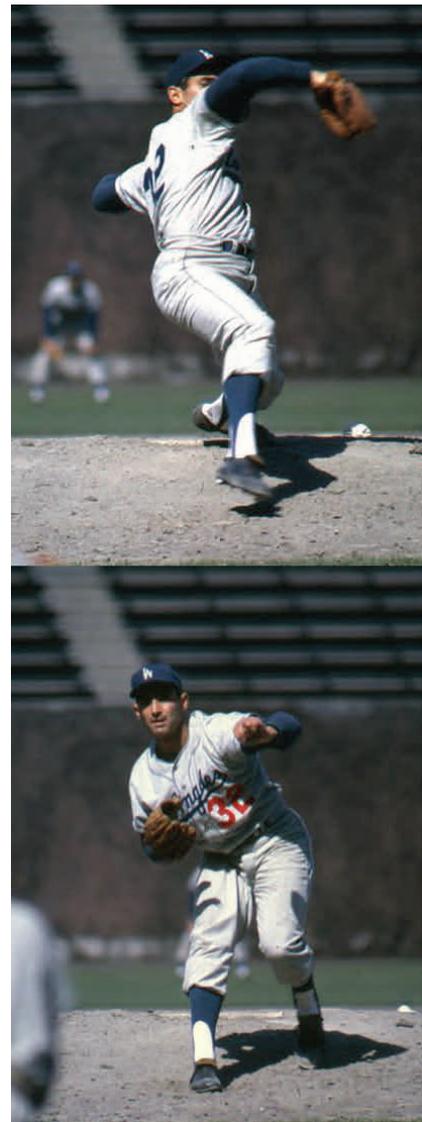
Beat Koufax!

The Cubs may not have won many games overall, or often defeated a certain Los Angeles Dodgers left-hander who pitched “above” big-league level. But no matter what quality of his other-worldly stuff that day, Sandy Koufax often had to pitch for his life against the second-division Cubs of his era.

And in two instances, “Dandy Sandy,” as some of the scribes of the time called him, Koufax had to go the equivalent of double-overtime to even get a decision, win or lose, against the Cubs. The barbaric handling of Koufax in these pair of games by Dodgers manager Walter Alston might have contributed to finger and elbow problems that afflicted Koufax in the last five seasons of his Hall of Fame, but abbreviated, career.

Koufax hurled games for the ages against the Cubs. On Sept. 9, 1965, he notched a perfect game – the last of his four no-hitters – against the Chicago visitors at Dodger Stadium. Koufax struck out the final six Cubs to bring his game total to 14. That game started a prodigious streak – the Cubs have gone the longest of any present team without being no-hit. They’ve been no-hit into the ninth twice, by Tom Seaver in 1969 and 1975, and by Alex Fernandez in 1997. Somehow, they’ve come up with a well-timed single to keep the post-Koufax perfect skein intact.

As much as Koufax figured to dominate in pitcher-friendly Dodger Stadium, he said he felt comfortable at Wrigley Field, too. Koufax made that interesting observation in a rare interview, in this case with ESPN-1000’s



Sandy Koufax with his trademark over-the-top motion on a mound he liked in Wrigley Field. Photos courtesy of the Leo Bauby Collection.

Jesse Rogers when the lefty visited Wrigley Field with the Dodgers in his role as a special pitching consultant during the Aug. 1-4, 2013 series.

“I used to love coming to Wrigley,” Koufax told Rogers. “Part of it was Wrigley and part of it was day games. For me, the ballpark depended on the mound, and I always liked the mound here. I had a lot of fond memories here. (I had) friends on the Cubs.”

Koufax probably felt most comfortable at 1060 W. Addison St. on April 24, 1962.

Capping a 10-2 Dodgers victory, Koufax struck out 18 Cubs, tying the all-time single-game record up to that point. Koufax had fanned 18 previously, in a 1959 game. He felt so much in his normal rhythm that Koufax was at first puzzled why his teammates mobbed him after the last out against the Cubs.

That whiff streak remained the Wrigley Field strikeout record until Kerry Wood fanned 20 Astros on May 6, 1998.

Double no-no brews during perfecto

The blowout score of the '62 game wasn't that common when the Cubs faced Koufax. They were a little more than motivated against the all-time southpaw. Best example was the perfecto. Soft-tossing lefty Bob Hendley gave up one unearned run in the fifth and also took a no-hitter into the seventh in the eventual 1-0 final. The lone LA hit, a bloop double to right by once and future Cub “Sweet Lou” Johnson, had nothing to do with the run, of course. Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley remarked he was keenly interested in the middle innings with a double no-hitter going.

The attitude of the Cubs against Koufax was best summed up by catcher Randy Hundley, after Ken Holtzman had taken his own no-hitter into the ninth inning at Wrigley Field in Koufax's last-ever start against Chicago on Sept. 25, 1966 at Wrigley Field.

“I know he was determined to beat Koufax,” Hundley said of the then-20-year-old Holtzman, going up against the 30-year-old master. Holtzman gave up the first hit to Dick Schofield leading off the ninth before hanging on to win 2-1 when Willie Davis lined to second baseman Glenn Beckert for a game-ending double play.

The game was hyped as the first duel of Jewish left-handers, with Holtzman, still attending classes at the University of Illinois, often touted as the “next Koufax.” The duo ended up dueling because the Jewish High Holy Day of Yom Kippur fell on Sept. 24, pushing both pitchers' starts back. And, no, despite rumors, Holtzman and Koufax did not repent for their sins by attending synagogue together.

“No, that wouldn't have looked too good,” Holtzman said after the game. Instead, Holtzman went to synagogue with then-girlfriend Roberta Garrett. In turn, another Garrett friend, identified only as “Stephanie,” headed up the Koufax fan club at the University of Illinois. Such was the telegenic Koufax's appeal in 1966.

Hendley couldn't beat Koufax his first try, but in their next turn throughout the rotation, got the best of him. On Sept. 14, 1965 at Wrigley Field before 6,220. Hendley won 2-1 as Beckert doubled before Billy Williams sliced a two-run homer to left in the sixth off Koufax. When faced with a tough lefty, the southpaw-swinging Williams always

tried to go to the opposite field. In another twist in the Koufax-Hendley duels, Don Drysdale was used as a pinch-hitter for Koufax in the top of the seventh. Perhaps the best-hitting pitcher in baseball in his day, “Big D” drove in Wes Parker with a single for his 15th RBI of the ’65 season.

Dick Ellsworth -- who would go on to be the last Cubs lefty to win 20 games with a 22-10, 2.11 ERA (lowest by a Cubs starter since World War II) in 1963 – took two turns in 1960 and 1961 making Koufax work at least 13 innings.

In the May 28, 1960 game, Ellsworth, like Holtzman just 20 in his rookie season, kept the Cubs within range, allowing three runs and six hits in eight innings. He left with his team trailing 3-2 via a first-inning Frank Thomas (not the Sox super-slugger) single and a sixth-inning throwing error. Koufax gave up two hits and five walks through eight innings. But with two out in the ninth, Thomas snatched victory away from Koufax with a tying homer to left.

He’d go on to labor through the 10th, 11th, 12th and 13th innings. Alston let him start the 14th. He walked Ed Bouchee and Ernie Banks before Alston finally pulled him in favor of Ed Roebuck. Koufax had thrown 193 pitches. Three batters later Don Zimmer singled in Bouchee, who had stolen third, to win 4-3. Koufax was tagged with the loss despite striking out 15 (including four beyond the ninth inning) and allowing just three hits in the 13-plus innings.

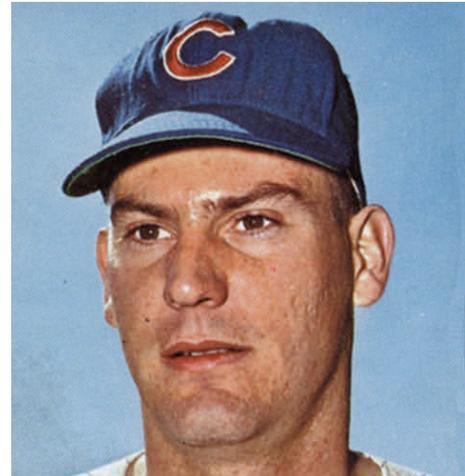
Minimum 135 pitches in five straight starts

The loss completed a five-start stretch in which Koufax threw at least 135 pitches in each outing. The first of the starts was a 9 2/3-inning stint on May 6, 1960 in which Koufax amassed 175 pitches. Koufax gave up four runs in the 10th against the Phillies in a 6-1 loss. Alston left him in until he served up a homer to singles-hitting Alvin Dark. That was a seemingly reprehensible way to handle a once-in-a-lifetime arm that some teammates nicknamed “the left hand of God.”

Unfortunately, that was the macho credo of the time, defying all common sense that should have trumped the witch-doctor’s-level of understanding of sports medicine by both physicians and trainers.

“The mentality during that era and the eras preceding that was if you were getting guys out, you stayed in the game,” said Ellsworth, now part-owner of the Triple-A Grizzlies, the Giants’ top farm club, in his native Fresno, Calif.

The extreme example was July 2, 1963 at Candlestick Park in San Francisco. Juan Marichal and the Braves’ Warren Spahn each matched zeroes through 15 innings. Marichal



Dick Ellsworth pitched very competitively to force Sandy Koufax to work at least 13 innings in games in 1960 and 1961.

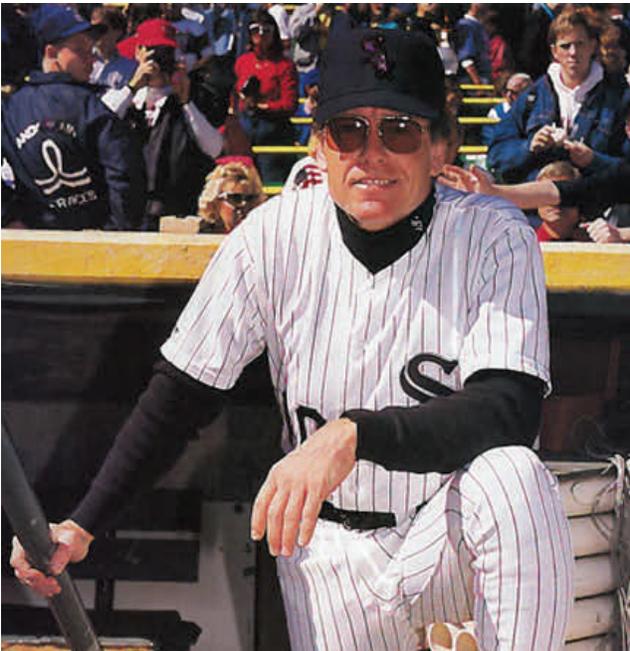
retired Milwaukee in the top of the 16th before Spahn finally weakened to give up the deciding run with one out in the bottom of the inning.

On May 26, 1959, at County Stadium in Milwaukee, the Pirates' Harvey Haddix pitched a once-in-baseball-history 12 perfect innings. Lefty Haddix, though, had the misfortune of going up against a stalwart Lew Burdette, who hurled 13 shutout frames. Haddix finally cracked in the bottom of the 13th when Felix Mantilla reached on an error by third baseman Don Hoak, then eventually scored when Joe Adcock homered, but was credited with an RBI double when he passed Henry Aaron on the basepaths amid the startling finish.

"I pitched 16 innings one time, and I threw probably 200 pitches," said 1950s' Sox ace lefty Billy Pierce. "We pitched 10 innings, 11 innings all the time. That's the way the game was played then. Everybody completed ballgames."

The main way pitchers conditioned themselves was extensive foul-line to foul-line running before games – a workout at which Pierce was adept – and even pitching batting practice between starts.

Still, Alston tried to get too much of a good thing with Koufax. Over his career, Koufax recorded 64 starts in which he threw 130 or more pitches. He developed circulatory problems in his index finger in 1962, cutting short his season, then pitched through mounting arthritic pain in his left elbow the final four years of his career before finally calling it quits after his 27-9 season in '66.



Jeff Torborg, who caught Sandy Koufax's perfect game, said his elbow problems likely were cumulative from the pitcher's earlier career work. Photo courtesy of Chicago White Sox.

On the heels of his huge May 1960 workload, Koufax gave up nine runs in 10 innings with seven walks in his next two starts. He was reluctant to let go of the baseball when he finally was entrusted with it after Alston used him sparingly despite his electric stuff in his first three seasons in Brooklyn.

Arm strain cumulative after early workload?

"I think that became a cumulative thing," said former Sox manager Jeff Torborg, who caught Koufax's perfect game as a young Dodger. "Sandy struggled so much early in his career, you wonder how much strain he put on his elbow early trying to harness all his exceptional stuff. He left everything he had on the field."

From a medical standpoint, the workload cause-and-effect was clear.

“It led to his early career-ending degenerative osteoarthritis,” said Dr. David Fletcher, president of the Chicago Baseball Museum and an occupational medicine specialist with special expertise in upper extremity cumulative trauma disorders.

Bad mechanics, like throwing across the body in the manner that hurt Wood and earlier Cubs flame-thrower Mike Harkey, was not the issue. Torborg rated Koufax’s over-the-top delivery as smooth.

“I don’t think it contributed to arm problems,” said Ellsworth. “He had a great natural delivery. He was a victim of the physiological aspects of pitching in his time. He developed arthritis. He was no different than anyone else as a starter in late 50s and early 60s.”

Ellsworth’s own history featured him pitching through mounting tendinitis when he threw his trademark slider after the 22-10 season. He refused to miss a start. Seasons that began 10-6 in 1964 and 12-6 in 1965 devolved to 14-18 and 14-15 finishes, respectively, as he had to cut down on the use of sliders due to pain.

Koufax made some progress in 1959, including the 18-K outing and a 1-0 loss to the White Sox in the World Series, but had more inconsistency in ’60 to finish with an 8-13 record. Koufax was so disgusted with the year that he threw his equipment in the trash after the season’s final game as he entertained thoughts of quitting. Clubhouse man Nobe Kawano, brother of legendary Cubs locker-room chief Yosh Kawano, retrieved the gear to hand back to Koufax the following spring.

But Koufax began to take something off his pitches in 1961. No longer in and out of the rotation, he was 18-13. As if to gain revenge for the 1960 marathon loss at Wrigley Field, Koufax held firm in a night-game start at the LA Coliseum on Sept. 20, 1961. He allowed only a two-run homer to Ron Santo in the fourth. Problem was, Ellsworth was just a little bit better, allowing just one run until backup catcher Norm Sherry homered to lead off the eighth.

Ellsworth departed after the eighth, but Koufax continued like a machine. He threw goose eggs through the 13th, his improved control the key. He walked just three while again striking out 15 Cubs. Finally the Dodgers rewarded him for his double-time work when Ron Fairly drove in the winning run with two out in the 13th off reliever Barney Schultz.

A ‘thrill’ to pitch against Koufax

“I would just say this: as silly as it may sound, it was a thrill to pitch against Koufax,” said Ellsworth, who does not remember the specifics of the 1960 and 1961 games. “To be able to stand at the plate to see his stuff. Sad Sam Jones had a real hard breaking ball that impressed you, but Koufax’s curve was the best.”

Torborg estimated Koufax’s fastball was consistently in the 96 to 98 mph range and occasionally may have touched 100 mph.

If only Ellsworth could have thrown that hard. When you tried to emulate Koufax, it just didn’t quite work out. On May 15, 1965, Ellsworth took his own no-hitter into the

eighth, leading 1-0 at Dodger Stadium. Torborg reached on an error by Ron Santo leading off the eighth. A throw to try to nab pinch runner Willie Crawford at second on a Dick Tracewski bunt was late. Pinch hitter Al Ferrara homered. That was it.

All throughout the era, the desire was to beat Koufax the pitcher, not Koufax the man. As the now-senior citizen said, he had friends on the Cubs. In the off-season after the perfect game, Koufax ran into Cubs catcher Chris Krug at a golf tourney. Krug had made the throwing error that let in the only run in the perfecto. Koufax encouragingly told Krug the loss was not his fault.

And how could you argue with a pitcher who, when asked what his best pitch was, replied “strike one?”

The Cubs did everything in their flawed power to beat Koufax. Sometimes they did, more often they didn't. And when they lost, they knew they had dropped one to the best, and were enveloped in class in the process.