

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Buehrle drafted low, finished high in Sox annals

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Posted Tuesday, February 28, 2017*

When 37-year-old Mark Buehrle gets his No. 56 retired June 24, the honor should also encompass every athlete who did not fit the scouts' mold of a stud performer with classic attributes, and instead achieved with discipline and desire.

Buehrle is the mold when the map for making the majors as a low-round draft choice is sketched out. A small-college left-hander with control was worth a look-see, but with few expectations, for a 38th-round pick in 1998. Three years later, Buehrle was a 200-inning, 16-win pitcher simply because someone gave him a chance, and he took it from there.

Every talent evaluator up to the owner level should take note when they proclaim a player can't do something, as opposed to can. Buehrle simply was Buehrle, uncomplicating the art of pitching simply by throwing strikes in good locations, never showing a huge ego. As a result, he's one of the most popular players in White Sox history.

Buehrle would have achieved such devotion even if he had not thrown two no-hitters, including a perfect game, and a stalwart last-out relief appearance in Game 3 of the 2005 World Series. I recall a wave of cheers at Guaranteed Rate Field, then The Cell, in 2007 when reports circulated Buehrle would soon leave the Sox. But he was too good of a mound craftsman, too much of a good citizen in the clubhouse, to let go just then.

Eventually time and team needs necessitated Buehrle leaving for Miami after the 2011 season – symbolically departing with Ozzie Guillen, the manager with whom he was most linked. But Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf never forgets his top achievers, even if they finish elsewhere. He welcomed Frank Thomas back into the fold after acrimony



Mark Buehrle was one of the most durable pitchers of modern times. Photo credit: [Keith Allison](#).

surrounding his departure. So Buehrle, upstanding start to finish, would be a lock to get No. 56 displayed on the outfield wall. He is the 12th Sox to get his number retired.

“Mark Buehrle is one of the most accomplished pitchers in franchise history,” Reinsdorf said in a statement. “Mark carried himself with class and professionalism throughout his career, and his popularity with staff, teammates and Sox fans is very well-deserved.

“Although a very humble person, he certainly showed a flair for the dramatic on the mound, from a no-hitter to an unforgettable perfect game to a World Series title. A standout on the field and a standup teammate in the clubhouse, it is our honor to retire Mark Buehrle’s No. 56 and to welcome him into the legendary class of all-time White Sox greats.”

Lefty broke in as middleman

I recall Buehrle simply happy to work in the back of the bullpen during his 2000 debut season on the South Side. For a short while, the Sox had a sound strategy of working rookie starter prospects in as middle relievers, rather than throwing them to the sharks. Buehrle wasn’t particularly distinguished that first year watching the likes of Mike Sirotko, James Baldwin and Cal Eldred eat up starter’s innings. But he listened and learned.

Rotation injuries paved the way for Buehrle to shine in 2001. In 221 ½ innings, he walked just 48 with a career-best 1.066 WHIP. Soon he’d settle into a familiar pattern. He’d allow an average of 10 or 11 hits per innings pitched. But he walked few. Buehrle rarely beat himself, and was a terrific fielder. His behind-the-back flip to Paul Konerko at first on Opening Day 2010 on the South Side is an all-time highlight reel deal. Pursuing a nubber into foul territory, the sure-handed Buehrle grabbed the ball and in one motion shoveled the ball to a stretching Konerko.

Buehrle was a four-time American League All-Star and three-time AL Gold Glove winner. As a Sox, the left-hander went 161-119 with a 3.83 ERA. He had 27 complete games, eight shutouts and 1,396 strikeouts over 390 appearances (365 starts). He ranked fourth among franchise leaders in strikeouts, starts and quality starts (231); sixth in wins (6th); seventh in innings pitched and strikeout-to-walk ratio (2.48), and eighth in games pitched.

Like Greg Maddux, a more unhittable yet similar-style pitcher, Buehrle was unusually durable. He started at least 30 games a season from 2001 through the end of his career in 2015. In his final season, he missed by 1 2/3 innings equaling the feats of Hall of Famers Don Sutton and Gaylord Perry, each of whom amassed 200 innings for 15 consecutive seasons from 1966 to 1980.

Although Konerko and Scott Podsednik get all the highlight time from the 2005 World Series, Buehrle and his rotation mates’ work clinched the championship. He tossed the first of four consecutive Sox complete games in Game 2 of the ALCS against the Angels, then secured the save in the 14th inning of Game 3 of the World Series at Houston.

For a man who basically pitched to contact, Buehrle was the most unhittable pitcher in Sox history in two highlight games. Notching his name with White Sox pitcher Charlie Robertson, who hurled the third-ever MLB perfect game against the Detroit Tigers on April 30, 1922, he recorded the Sox's second-ever perfect game at The Cell against Joe Maddon and the Rays on July 23, 2009. No one ever gets tired of Hawk Harrelson yelling as Alexei Ramirez threw to first for the final out. That perfect gem outdid his first no-no on the chilly South Side night of April 18, 2007 against the Rangers.

No wonder Reinsdorf rewarded loyalty with loyalty. Buehrle passed up chances to flee elsewhere when free agency first beckoned. No fan of long-term contracts to pitchers due to the injury factor, Reinsdorf paid Buehrle \$14 million in each of his final four seasons with the Sox from 2008 to 2011. And, earlier in his career, Buehrle turned down offers by the Sox to sign him to more money with multi-years deals baffling more baseball experts.

Buehrle also joined fellow Sox number retirees Konerko and Thomas as the only three players who performed on three Sox playoff teams. Buehrle and Konerko played on the 2000, 2005 and 2008 clubs. Thomas was the biggest gun on the 1993 and 2000 Sox, but only had an injury-abbreviated stint on the 2005 team and missed the postseason.

Equal to his stellar stats and Hall of Fame-worthy no-nos was Buehrle's off-the-field stance. He was the pitching staff's leader, ranking second to Konerko in overall clubhouse leadership. Younger pitchers coming up wanted to be Buehrle. And as fellow lefty John Danks -- who came up as a hard thrower -- went through an ultimately-unsuccessful comeback from shoulder surgery a few years back, his goal was to evolve into a Buehrle-style finesse pitcher. Danks could not complete the transformation; there was only one Buehrle.

Missouri plain speaker no media politician

Buehrle was never a media politician attracted to the cameras' red lights. He'd dutifully answer post-game questions in his plain-speaking Missouri style. I fear I wore him out several times pre-game with feature or issue-oriented lines of questioning. However, Buehrle came through mightily in his role as animal-rights advocate.

He and wife Jamie were active in dog rescues, supporting a shelter in Metro East Illinois, across the Mississippi from their St. Charles, Mo., home. Jamie also stayed behind during the season in St. Charles to care for a beloved pit bull, who was barred from living in Toronto when Buehrle pitched for the Blue Jays in 2013.



Teammates celebrate after Mark Buehrle, the lefty who pitched to contact, recorded the second perfect game in White Sox history. Photo credit: [Susan Johnson](#).

During the very bottom of the Great Recession in the spring of 2009, I wanted to get a message to financially-strapped people -- unable to afford dog food and care, or being evicted due to mortgages gone bad -- to not simply abandon their dogs on the street. Both Buehrle and fellow animal-rights activist Tony La Russa taped appeals to place animals in shelters for my "Diamond Gems" radio show.

Book June 24 for a must-attend game against the Athletics at Guaranteed Rate Field to see No. 56 get retired. Buehrle is a man whose sometimes uses two words when three would do. Let the fans fill in the verbiage for a beloved southpaw who never shorted the crowd on effort.

(Editor's note: CBM President Dr. David Fletcher believes that Buehrle will be the second Sox player with a retired number to play again for the Sox, following the footsteps of Harold Baines, when he returned to the White Sox in 2000. Fletcher is not counting the one year when Luis Apracio allowed Omar Vizquel to wear No. 11 in 2010. He sees Buehrle being talked back into the organization if the Sox rebuild is successful. If he were so inclined, Buehrle could have a Jamie Moyer-type career as a soft-tossing lefty. Buehrle also should be remembered along with Konerko as the only Sox players to have been members of three Sox playoff teams.)