

Pierce snub in 1959 World Series still leaves much for debate

By Paul Ladewski

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Fifty years later, it ranks among the most controversial decisions in Chicago baseball history, one that strikes a cord with long-time White Sox fans come this time each year.

Why didn't the greatest left-handed pitcher in White Sox history start even one game against the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 1959 World Series?

It is a question that stumps Billy Pierce like almost everyone else.

"I still think about that World Series a lot," said Pierce, whose 186 career victories are the most by a White Sox southpaw. "I had so many phone calls this week, I thought even more about it lately."

Indeed, it was all there for the White Sox that early autumn. Not only did the South Siders win six more games than the Dodgers in the regular season, but they had the home-field advantage and were the more rested team. (The National League pennant was decided in a best-of-three playoff after Dodgers and Milwaukee Braves finished the regular season in a flat-footed tie.) When the White Sox beat the visitors like a piñata in the first game, 11-0, there were even some thoughts of a sweep.

Rather than call on Pierce in the second game, manager Al Lopez opted for the untested Bob Shaw instead. The 26-year-old Shaw had been a major surprise in his first full season – his 18 victories ranked second on the team -- but in terms of big-game experience, he and Pierce were as different as north and south.

"Everybody – and I mean everybody – expected Pierce to start in the series," recalled Bill Gleason, a sportswriter for the Chicago American at the time. "Any reason for why that didn't happen is illogical. Pierce was 32 years old then, a relatively young pitcher. For all he had done for the franchise up until then, he was owed a start in the World Series, I'll put it that way."

Conceded Pierce, who considered the snub to be the greatest disappointment of his otherwise memorable career, "They weren't my happiest days, that's for sure."

In Game 2, Shaw was unable to protect a 2-1 lead in the seventh inning, when he allowed a pair of homers. The Dodgers held on for a 4-3 victory and never trailed in the series thereafter.

"That second game killed us," said Jim Rivera, who played right field for the team.

“In my mind, Game 2 was the pivotal one in the series,” said John Kuenster, who covered the beat for the Chicago Daily News. “If they had won the first two games . . .”

Because Lopez was understandably reluctant to start a left-hander at the Los Angeles Coliseum, where the left-field foul pole was a mere 251 feet from home plate, there was almost no chance that Pierce would start any of the next three games on the road, either.

In that case, would it have been wiser to start 22-game-winner Early Wynn in Games 1, 4 and 7, Pierce in Games 2 and 6, Shaw in Game 3 and veteran Dick Donovan in Game 5? “That wouldn’t have been a bad plan,” said Pierce, who won 14 games despite health problems that season. “That would have made a lot of sense.”

After the White Sox dropped two of the next three games on the road, Pierce anticipated that he would get his chance when the series returned to Chicago for the sixth game. But Lopez chose to bring back the 39-year-old Wynn on two days’ rest. Wynn lasted just three-plus innings, and the Dodgers were on their way to an unlikely championship celebration.

“I was surprised that Early started Game 6, because at his age, it sometimes was difficult to come back on short rest,” Pierce said.

Decades later, not even Pierce knows why he was bypassed for the one assignment that he coveted more than any other. “I talked with Al a few times over the years, but we never discussed it.”

“My experience with Lopez was that he had pets,” Gleason said. “For some reason, Pierce fell out of favor with him.”

“There was something about Nellie (Fox), Sherman (Lollar) and myself that went on with Al at the time, and we couldn’t figure out what the problem was,” Pierce acknowledged. “The first few years, he was wonderful to us, then all of a sudden, the atmosphere seemed to change.

Furthermore, Lopez was concerned about the effects of a hip injury that had sidelined Pierce in late August, shortly after he pitched 16 innings in a game against the Orioles in Baltimore. When Pierce was ineffective in his final two appearances of the regular season, he did little to convince Lopez otherwise. Pierce denied that his health was an issue, however, a claim that his four innings of scoreless relief in the series would seem to support.

Only the baseball gods know whether Pierce would have changed the outcome, but he may have provided a clue three years later. As a member of the San Francisco Giants, the veteran pitched a masterful three-hit shutout against the Dodgers in the opener of the National League playoff series. In the pennant-clincher two days later, he pitched a one-two-three inning to earn the save.

One can only wonder how history would have changed had the White Sox won the 1959 World Series. Would the front office have traded young talents Johnny Callison, Norm Cash and John Romano in an attempt to secure the final pieces to the puzzle two months later? Is it possible that they would they have went on to dominate the 1960's decade?

“I’ve heard so many different stories, I really can’t tell you what happened,” Rivera said. “One story was that Billy and Al didn’t get along. Another thing was, they felt he wasn’t ready and this and that, so you can’t believe anybody. All I know is, Billy was a great competitor, and he would have pitched his heart out if they had let him.”