

Eight decades later, Robertson has perfect partner in White Sox history

By Paul Ladewski

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For 87 years, Charlie Robertson had a rather lonely existence in local baseball annals. In 1922, he had become the first and last White Sox pitcher to author a perfect game, a feat achieved so long ago that his name had withered into relative obscurity since then. Only after Mark Buehrle pitched a similar gem last week did Robertson finally have a partner and he became relevant again.

So who was this person forever linked with Buehrle in White Sox history? And what is his story?

Charles Culbertson Robertson was born on Jan. 31, 1896, in Dexter, Tex., a speck on the map about 100 miles north of Dallas. In 1919, after three years at Austin College in nearby Sherman, Tex. he signed with the White Sox at 23 years of age. The 6-foot, 175-pound right-hander made his major league debut that season, and he spent the next two campaigns in the minor leagues.

Prior to the 1922 campaign, White Sox pitcher Dickey Kerr walked out on the team in a salary dispute. One year after Eddie Cicotte and Lefty Williams were suspended for their parts in the Black Sox scandal, the absence of Kerr left the staff with one proven starter. When his team got off to a 4-6 start, Manager Kid Gleason inserted Robertson into the rotation even though he had only 10 innings of major league experience. It was move made out of desperation more than anything else.

When the 26-year-old known as Robby took the mound at cozy Navin Field in Detroit on Sunday, April 30, there was no hint about what was to take place. In his first start of the season, Robertson allowed 12 hits and four walks in an unimpressive 7-3 victory against the Indians in Cleveland four days earlier.

What's more, the Tigers line-up was no pushover but one that featured outfielder Ty Cobb and first baseman Harry Heilmann, future Hall of Fame members. It also included three other players who would hit .300-or-better that season. The home team was an ornery bunch at the time, as White Sox ace Red Faber limited it to six hits one day earlier. The 6-0 loss was its 10th in 14 games in the early season.

Heilmann and especially Cobb were notorious bench jockeys, and both wasted no time to get in the ear of their untested mound opponent, according to the Chicago Tribune account. Robertson would hear none of it, however, and when first

baseman Earl Sheely staked him to an early lead with a two-run single in the second inning, his confidence began to swell.

While Robertson retired batter after batter with relative ease, the cantankerous Cobb grew suspicious that he loaded up the baseball, a practice that the major leagues had outlawed two years earlier. At one point, the Tigers player-manager was said to have taken it upon himself inspect to Robertson for a foreign substance.

In the seventh inning, the packed house began to hoot and holler, but Robertson remained calm beyond his years. The slim Texan retired Lu Blue and George Cutshaw on routine groundouts. Then he struck out the great Cobb to turn off the fans.

In the ninth inning, after Robertson retired pinch hitter Johnny Basler for the final out, the partisan crowd let loose with a rousing ovation. **KID ROBERTSON FLINGS PERFECT GAME FOR SOX**, the Tribune would declare a short time later. A full 34 years would pass before New York Yankees pitcher Don Larsen hurled the next perfect game, this one in the 1956 World Series.

Even after the final out, Cobb refused to concede defeat. He had several allegedly doctored baseballs submitted to American League commissioner Ban Johnson afterward. The protest was denied days later.

The only perfect games to be pitched in White Sox history had a number of similarities:

- Both were played in the afternoon.
- Buehrle said he relied on curveballs and change-ups, which often were set up with fastballs out of the strike zone. Robertson was reported to have mixed slow curveballs, change-ups and high fastballs with equally impeccable control.
- Sensational catches in the outfield kept them alive. Dewayne Wise made a remarkable over-the-wall catch in the ninth inning of the most recent perfect game. In the second inning of the earlier one, Johnny Mostil flagged down a drive in deep left field, where ropes were used to hold back the overflow crowd.
- Each pitcher struck out six batters.
- Buehrle completed his masterpiece in two hours, three minutes. Robertson achieved his in one hour, 55 minutes.

- The Buehrle perfect game attracted 28,036 spectators, a figure that included a number of late-arrivals. The Robertson perfect game was witnessed by an estimated 25,000 fans.

While Robertson always will best remembered for one game, the role that he played for one of the most important teams in White Sox history goes largely unnoticed.

With Faber and Robertson as the staff anchors, the 1922 team turned in a 77-77 record, which represented a 15-game improvement from the previous season. More important, one year after home attendance had plunged 35 percent in the aftermath of the Black Sox scandal, it did much to restore the trust of the local public. In what would be the best season of his career, Robertson ranked second to Faber in games started (34), victories (14) and innings pitched (272) on the team.

In 1923, Robertson posted a 13-18 record and a 3.81 earned run average before arm problems led to his release after the 1925 campaign. He split the next three seasons between the St. Louis Browns and Boston Braves before he retired at 32 years of age. His career totals included a 49-80 record and 4.44 ERA in 166 appearances.

Robertson passed away at 88 years of age on Aug. 23, 1984, in Fort Worth, Tex, but by all accounts, his legacy is certain to outlive his roots. Dexter is a ghost town now, and according to the Texas State Historical Association, it consisted of one church and 18 residents at the start of this decade. Or exactly one more church than Charlie Robertson allowed baserunners on that spring afternoon many years ago.