

Durable Lollar found niche as White Sox anchor, run-producer

By John McMurray

Soft spoken and self-effacing, Sherman Lollar provided a strong defensive presence behind the plate during his 12 seasons with the Chicago White Sox. An All-Star catcher in seven seasons of his 18-year major-league career, Lollar won the first three American League Gold Glove awards from 1957 through 1959. Although he was not known as a power hitter, Lollar hit 155 career home runs and collected 1,415 hits. He also produced one of the White Sox' few bright moments in the 1959 World Series apart from their Game One victory, a two-out, three-run homer that tied Game Four in the seventh inning. (Unfortunately the Sox lost that game, 5-4.)

Even though Lollar played well and received awards during the 1950s, he did not receive as much national recognition as fellow catcher Yogi Berra, who won three Most Valuable Player awards. As Red Gleason wrote in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1957, "It is the fate of some illustrious men to spend a career in the shadow of a contemporary. Adlai Stevenson had his Dwight Eisenhower. Lou Gehrig had his Babe Ruth. Bob Hope had his Bing Crosby. And Sherman Lollar has his Yogi Berra."

John Sherman Lollar Jr. was born on August 23, 1924, in Durham, Arkansas. His father, John Sherman Lollar Sr., had been a semipro baseball player and was a veteran of World War I. When Lollar Jr. was three years old, he moved with his family to Fayetteville, Arkansas, where his parents opened a grocery store.

Lollar's interest in baseball began at an early age and he remembered playing catch with his father outside the store at the age of six. When Lollar was only eight years old, his father died unexpectedly during surgery. At that early age, Lollar, who was the oldest of four children, including two girls (Bonnie and Pat) and a boy (Jerry, who was born after his father's death), had to take on additional responsibilities at home.

His mother sold the grocery store and began working in a nursing home for the Veterans Administration. She told Gleason, "Sherman took a large share of the responsibility of looking after the younger children. He was both a big brother and father. Our being left alone so soon created a sense of oneness in all of us that remains even now."

Even with his additional responsibilities, Lollar's interest in baseball never waned. In 1936, shortly before he turned 12 years old, Lollar became a batboy for the Fayetteville Bears in the Arkansas-Missouri League. After graduating from Fayetteville High School at 16, a school that had no baseball team, Lollar took a job with J.C. Penney in Pittsburg, Kansas. He played with a team affiliated with the Chamber of Commerce in the Ban Johnson League while also studying at Pittsburg State Teachers

College. Two years later, after the Ban Johnson League folded, Lollar both played and managed for the semipro Baxter Springs Miners, working as a brakeman in a local mine when he wasn't playing baseball. With Baxter Springs, Lollar was a teammate of Mickey Mantle.

On the recommendation of teammate Stan West, a pitcher on the Baxter Springs team who was under contract to Baltimore of the Class AA International League, Baltimore signed Lollar in 1943, when he was 18. His pay was \$20 a month. He started slowly, batting only .118 in 12 games in his first season. Yet Lollar steadily improved: he batted .250 with 15 home runs for Baltimore in 1944. He also drove in 72 runs, one of the highest totals for any catcher in organized baseball that year.

Lollar won the International League's Most Valuable Player award in 1945, tearing up the league with 34 home runs, 111 runs batted in, and a league-leading batting average of .364. Baltimore had a working agreement with the Cleveland Indians and was soon forced to sell its top slugger to the major-league team for \$10,000.

After making his major-league debut on April 20, 1946, Lollar played infrequently behind veterans Frank Hayes and Jim Hegan. Soon he asked to go back to Baltimore so that he could play regularly. Back in the minor leagues, Lollar was unable to duplicate his great batting success from 1945, hitting only .234, but he did hit 20 home runs in only 222 at-bats for Baltimore. His biggest gain that year was meeting his future wife, Connie, whom he married in 1949.

In December 1946, Lollar was traded to the New York Yankees, along with second baseman Ray Mack, in exchange for outfielder Hal Peck and pitchers Al Gettel and Gene Bearden. In New York he was caught in a catching logjam that included Ralph Houk, Charlie Silvera, Aaron Robinson and a rookie named Yogi Berra. As a consequence, Lollar spent most of the 1947 season with Newark, the Yankees' farm club in the Triple-A International League. There were also concerns about Lollar's attitude. According to writer Bill Roeder, "The Cleveland complaint was that Lollar displayed insufficient dash and spirit. He had the ability all right, but no inclination to exploit it. Within a month, he was homesick for Baltimore, and [Cleveland manager Lou] Boudreau sent him back. Now Sherman belongs to the Yankees, and they hope he will react favorably to the fresh start."

Lollar appeared in only 11 regular season games for the Yankees in 1947, but he did play in the World Series, getting three hits in four World Series at-bats, including two doubles. In Game Three, sportswriter Dan Daniel wrote, “A secondary standout was Sherman Lollar, who started the game as a surprise entry. [Manager Bucky] Harris benched Berra in favor of the right-handed Lollar against the southpaw [Joe] Hatten. Lollar got a single which became a run in the third, and in the fourth drove in a run with a double.”

A contemporary article called Lollar “a Charley Gehringer type,” adding, “He appears a colorless, dispassionate individual, on and off the field, but he gets his job done effectively. If Lollar hits as well as Gehringer did, no one will care if he doesn’t say a word all season.”

In parts of two seasons with New York, Lollar saw action in only 33 games. Yogi Berra was on his way to becoming a regular in the major leagues in 1948, and Lollar was also hindered by a hand injury caused by a foul tip off the bat of Bob Elliott, requiring him to get stitches on two fingers of his throwing hand. Writing in August 1948, sportswriter Dan Daniel observed, “Sherman Lollar, right-handed hitting catcher, is another who has possibly had his last big opportunity with the Bombers. Now that Yogi Berra is available again, Gus Niarhos will handle all the receiving duties against left-handed pitching.”

Not surprisingly, Lollar was soon traded again, this time to the St. Louis Browns on December 13, 1948, with pitchers Red Embree and Dick Starr and \$100,000 in return for catcher Roy Partee and pitcher Fred Sanford. In St. Louis, Lollar took over for Les Moss as the ’s regular catcher and batted .261 with 8 home runs and 49 RBIs. For three seasons, Lollar stabilized the catching position for the Browns. He was an All-Star for the first time in 1950, and the primary catcher during Ned Garver’s only 20-win season in 1951.

Still, the Browns were regularly a second-division team. After the 1951 season, the Chicago White Sox were looking for a replacement for incumbent catcher Phil Masi, and on November 27, 1951, they received Lollar from the Browns along with infielder Tom Upton and pitcher Al Widmar in return for pitcher Dick Littlefield, shortstop Joe DeMaestri, catcher Gus Niarhos, first baseman-outfielder Gordon Goldsberry and outfielder Jim Rivera. According to his son, Lollar’s salary was increased to about \$12,000 when he was traded.

Arriving in Chicago was the break that Sherm Lollar needed. Unlike the Browns, who had won only 52 games in 1951, the White Sox had finished eight games over .500 and were considered a potential World Series contender. Still, the 1952 season was a disappointment for Lollar, who endured additional stress when his wife fell ill after childbirth. But while he batted only .240, his work with manager Paul Richards

helped to turn the young catcher's career around. As Gleason recounted in *The Saturday Evening Post*, Lollar later said:

"When I was having that terrible year in 1952, Richards called me into his office late in the season. He told me that my natural style of catching lacked appeal and I would have to be more of a holler guy. Paul said he understood my problem because he had been the same kind of catcher that I was. I feel that I've always hustled in baseball, but until Paul talked to me I probably had a misconception of what 'hustle' meant. I hustled to first base on a batted ball, and I hustled when the ball was around me. Richards made me see that something more was expected.

"Paul told me to show a little more animation. He wanted me to be a little more agile in receiving, and to show more zip in returning the ball to the pitcher. He recommended that I run to and from the catcher's box between innings, instead of just strolling out there."

Gleason wrote that Richards recommended Lollar's distinctive style of catching, with his left knee on the ground, because, according to Richards, "This moved him up – closer to the plate – and down – closer to the ground."

With the White Sox, Lollar regularly caught 100 or more games each season, and he was exceptionally durable during his 12 seasons with the team. In his second year there, Lollar changed from wearing uniform number 45 to the more familiar number 10 that he wore for the rest of his Chicago career.

Lollar was an American League All-Star in six seasons with the White Sox (1954-55-56-58-59-60). As evidenced by his Gold Gloves, he developed into perhaps the best defensive catcher in major-league baseball. In 1957, he played without making an error in his first 89 games (471 chances) before throwing wildly to second base on September 14. Years after trading for Lollar, White Sox general manager Frank Lane said, "It was one of the best trades I ever made. Sherm turned out to be one of the best catchers in the American League, behind only Yogi Berra and maybe Jim Hegan." Paul Richards told Gleason that Lollar was a better handler of pitchers than Berra.

Throughout his time in the American League, Lollar was compared to Berra, whose offensive numbers and championships outshined Lollar's. Wrote Gleason in *The Saturday Evening Post*, "Where Berra is distinctive looking, to put it mildly, the brown-haired Lollar is a sad-faced, sad-eyed individual. In most of his pictures, he looks as though someone has stolen his favorite catcher's mitt. In his 'smiling' pictures, the smile seems forced. Berra is celebrated for malapropisms. Lollar is seldom quoted. An unobtrusive workman, he is obscured on his own club by crowd-pleasers such as Nellie Fox, Minnie Minoso, Jim Rivera, and Luis Aparicio."

Lollar enjoyed his best offensive seasons with Chicago between 1955 and 1959, regularly hitting over .260 with more than 10 home runs and 70 RBIs. On April 23, 1955, against Kansas City during a 29-6 rout, Lollar accomplished the rare feat of getting two hits in a single inning twice in the same game. In spite of playing in Comiskey Park, which was never favorable to hitters, Lollar had his finest offensive season during Chicago's pennant-winning 1959 season, batting .265 with 22 home runs and 84 RBIs. In both 1958 and 1959, he finished ninth in the American League's Most Valuable Player voting.

Perhaps most importantly, Lollar was instrumental in handling the team's pitching staff in 1959, playing in 122 games behind the plate. Although he batted only .227 in the World Series that year, he hit a three-run homer in Game Four off the Dodgers' Roger Craig with two outs in the seventh inning to tie the game at 4-4. Other than the three home runs hit by Ted Kluszewski, Lollar's home run was the only one hit by a White Sox player in that series. However, a key turning point of the series came in Game Two, when the slow-footed Lollar was thrown out at the plate while trying to score from first base on Al Smith's eighth-inning double to left-center field, which helped cement a 4-3 Chicago loss.

Likely due to the wear and tear of catching so many games, Lollar's offensive performance with the White Sox began to decline in 1960. He played with the team through the 1963 season before being released on October 4, 1963. In his major-league career, Lollar committed only 62 errors in 1,571 games behind the plate, finishing with a .992 fielding percentage. When Lollar was released in 1963, only Jim Landis and Nellie Fox remained with the White Sox from the 1959 pennant-winning team.

After his major-league career ended, Lollar remained in baseball. As he sought a minor-league manager's job, Al Lopez remarked, "[Lollar] had tremendous ability with young pitchers. I think he shows great ability at handling men, which is the most important part of managing in the game."

Lollar coached with the Baltimore Orioles from 1964 through 1967; coached with the Oakland Athletics in 1968; managed the Iowa Oaks (Des Moines) of the American Association from 1970 through 1972; and managed the Tucson Toros of the Pacific Coast League in 1973 and 1974. Iowa and Tucson were Oakland farm teams. Lollar's Iowa teams finished in second place in his first two years and in third place in his final season; he led Tucson to first place in the PCL's Eastern Division in 1973 before the team lost in the playoffs to Spokane.

During his managerial career in Des Moines, Lollar barely escaped serious injury. While he sat in his car at a red light after a game in 1970, a nearby building suddenly collapsed. "I was just sitting there listening to the radio when – wham! It was like the sky falling," Lollar related. "What made it worse was that I had no idea what was

happening. I couldn't see a thing because of the dust and debris." Fortunately, Lollar was unhurt.

Lollar retired from the Toros after the 1974 season because of a dispute with Charley Finley, the owner of the Oakland A's. He had done advance scouting for the A's for the post-season, starting in 1971. In 1974, John Claiborne, Finley's director of minor-league operations, told Lollar that Finley wanted to pay \$500 less for the advance scouting than he had paid in previous seasons. Lollar refused. "He's going to be mad, Sherm," said Claiborne, "and you might not be managing next year." Lollar stuck to his guns. "It was the principle of the thing," he told a reporter later. "I never did have any direct contact with Finley about it. But ... I decided I had been playing ball 30 years and you've got to quit sometime, so I figured it was a good time."

After his baseball career ended, Lollar operated a bowling alley in Springfield, Missouri, and refereed high-school basketball games. After a long battle with cancer, he died in Springfield on September 24, 1977. He was 53 years old. He was survived by his wife, Connie, and a son, Sherman Jr. He is buried in Rivermonte Memorial Gardens in Springfield.