



No '59 Series Starts for Pierce Still Sore Point

(This story appeared in the Daily Southtown on June 17, 2005, when the Los Angeles Dodgers and the White Sox met for the first time since the 1959 World Series.)

By Paul Ladewski

Jaws will jut out like so many forklifts from here to Hammond. Blood pressure will rise faster than the price of premium unleaded. Faces will turn every shade of red in the spectrum, maybe even a little bit of purple, too.

And that's only when the Los Angeles Dodgers take the field for pre-game drills at U.S. Cellular Field tonight, when they make their first appearance on the South Side since they broke its heart in the 1959 World Series.

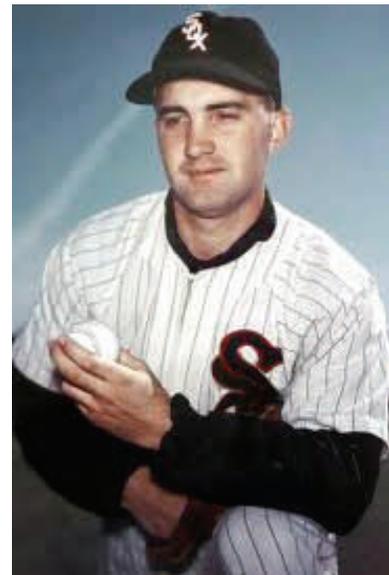
You see, the most powerful memory of the '59 World Series for die-hard Sox fans isn't Ted Kluszewski's three home runs or Al Smith's beer bath. No, what they can't forget even 46 years later is that the greatest left-handed pitcher in team history did not start a single game in the Series, a humongous oversight that darn well might have cost their team a world championship.

If Sox fans still haven't gotten over it, can you imagine how Billy Pierce himself feels?

"I still think about that Series a lot," admitted Pierce, 78, whose 186 victories with the Sox rank first among southpaws in team history. "I had so many phone calls this week, I thought about it even more lately."

Indeed, it was all there for the Sox that year. Not only were the American League champs the more talented of the two teams – the Dodgers were only a shell of what they would become later – but the South Siders boasted the homefield advantage as well. When the Sox beat the visitors like a pinata in the opener, 11-0, there were even some thoughts of a sweep.

Then came the decision that would haunt Sox Nation for decades, maybe forever.



Billy Pierce started 390 games in a White Sox uniform but none in the World Series.

Rather than call on Pierce in the second game, Sox manager Al Lopez handed the ball to untested Bob Shaw instead. True, Shaw was a major surprise in his first full season with the team and deserved to be in the rotation, but he had 137 fewer victories than Pierce at the time. In terms of big-game experience, the two couldn't have been more different than north and south.

“Everybody – and I mean everybody – expected Pierce to start in the Series,” recalled Bill Gleason, a Chicago American sportswriter 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 considers the snub to be the biggest disappointment of his otherwise stellar career: “They weren't my happiest days, that's for sure.”

Sure enough, Shaw became unglued in the seventh inning, when he yielded two tape-measure home runs and the lead. The Dodgers held on for a 4-3 victory, and the Sox never led in the Series again.

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

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

So would it have been wise to start staff anchor 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,” Pierce said. “That would have made a lot of sense.”

After the Sox dropped two of three in L.A., Pierce anticipated he would finally get his chance. But Lopez opted to bring back the 39-year-old Wynn on two days' rest.

Burly Early lasted just three-plus innings on little more than fumes, and the Dodgers were on the way to their first championship in Southern California.

What bothers longtime Sox fans even more is that, to this day, nobody seems to know for sure why Pierce was bypassed. (The 96-year-old Lopez has been in poor health in recent years, and an attempt to contact him through his son was unsuccessful.)

“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) and Sherman (Lollar) and myself that went on with Al at the time, and we couldn't figure out what the problem was,” Pierce said. “The

first few years, he was wonderful to us, then all of a sudden, the atmosphere seemed to change. I talked to Al a few times over the years, but we never discussed it.”

According to another theory, Lopez was concerned about a hip problem that had sidelined Pierce earlier the season. But Pierce denied that his health was an issue, a claim supported by his four innings of scoreless relief in the Series.

Still others point out that, as Cleveland Indians manager, Lopez declined to call on future Hall of Famer Bob Feller in the 1954 World Series, which his team also lost.

Only the baseball gods know whether Pierce would have made a difference, but maybe we have the answer already. Three years later, as a San Francisco Giant, Pierce threw a three-hit shutout at the Dodgers in the opener of the National League playoff series. He saved the pennant-clincher two days later then painted another three-hit masterpiece in a 5-2 victory against Whitey Ford and the New York Yankees in Game 6 of the World Series.

Now the Sox and their fans can only wonder to what extent history may have changed. If the 1959 World Series had been won, would the franchise be known more for that than the Black Sox scandal? Would the front office have refused to trade so much young talent in the next off-season? Would they have dominated the 1960s, grabbed hold of the toddlin' town to the point that they would own it today?

I mean, 46 years is a long time to wait for another World Series championship, but it beats the heck out of 88 years, don't you think?

“The current team reminds me of the '59 one a lot,” said Pierce, a Lemont resident and forever a Sox fan. “Wouldn't it be great if this was the year?”

For Sox fans who have suffered long enough, it would be all of that and more. Yet it wouldn't get back the one that they can't get out of their heads, the 1959 World Series that got away for no good reason.