



Billy Pierce Obituary

By Mark Liptak

Posted Saturday, August 1, 2015

Editor's Note:

When the news came over the wire about the passing of White Sox great Billy Pierce, I knew only one White Sox historian could write his obit, and that was Mark Liptak. I knew he was close to Billy and Gloria.

Billy was supportive of the development of the Chicago Baseball Museum (CBM). He was generous with his time when we asked for his help. Billy appreciated the CBM's advocacy efforts for his Hall of Fame candidacy last December, when I was out in San Diego lobbying for four Sox greats (out of ten on the ballot) to get elected to the Hall of Fame by the Golden Era Veterans Committee.

Billy was the spiritual head of White Sox alumni. His work for Baseball Cancer Charities in Chicago was more important than any of his on-field baseball activity.

He shared with me the private intense pain he suffered when his teammate Nellie Fox got diagnosed with melanoma skin cancer in 1973 and died in 1975.

I particularly enjoyed being in a Diamond Suite on July 1, 2010 with the Comiskey Family, Minnie Minoso, and Billy Pierce celebrating the 100th anniversary of the first game at Comiskey Park.

Chicago baseball historian George Castle noted: "If Billy pitched his prime with the Yankees or Dodgers, he'd have been acclaimed as one of the greatest lefties of modern times. He did not



**Pierce on the mound at Comiskey Park.
Photo credit ootpdevelopments.com**

need to work in all that hype, though. Good things do happen to good people, and thus Billy was blessed with a long, full life that included 65 years married to his bride Gloria.”

“The only bad time Billy had with the Sox was as color analyst with Jack Drees on channel 32 telecasts in the 106-loss season in 1970... fortunately, with UHF audience penetration not fully developed yet, a mass viewership did not see Billy suffer.”

RIP #19— A Class Act...

Dr. David Fletcher, President, CBM

This is a story I hoped I'd never write. It's always difficult for a writer to have to do a story of this nature when the person involved was a good friend. Billy Pierce, one of the greatest players in the history of the White Sox franchise passed away at the age of 88, Friday morning, July 31, 2015.

The cause of death was gall bladder cancer.

I last spoke with Bill shortly before opening day to wish him a Happy Birthday and to see if he was going to be at the home opener. Bill said that he wasn't because he was suffering from a cold and that at his age; he "has to be careful..." I had no idea that Billy was sick and when I got the news that morning, it staggered me.

I'll talk about Billy the player later in this story but first I want to tell you about Billy the person along with his wife Gloria. I had gotten to know Billy around 2002 when I interviewed him for White Sox Interactive. We struck up a friendship and the times I was able to return to the Chicago area we'd always get together. My family still lives in Oak Lawn and I'd take the train to Lamont. Billy and Gloria were always there to meet me and take me into their home where I spent hours talking with them about baseball and just spending time with two tremendous people. We'd also have lunch together when possible and yes Bill always picked up the tab.

One year my mother and uncle picked me up at his home and he stood there with them in his



Gloria Pierce, Billy's wife of 65 years, #19, and Pat Brickhouse, whose husband Jack was the Sox broadcaster, his entire time as a White Sox hurler. Taken June 2012 at '72 White Sox reunion.

driveway for 20 minutes or so talking with them. My mother and uncle knew Billy of course from his days with the White Sox but they never met him. Billy treated them like old friends and enjoyed talking about the days when he played and the neighborhoods where they all lived. He was that kind of person.

At the 40th anniversary celebration of the 1972 White Sox, sponsored by the Chicago Baseball Museum and the White Sox, at the dinner that Monday night at U.S. Cellular Field, Billy and Gloria attended. During my speech I introduced Bill and he got a tremendous hand from the 300 or so guests who remembered all that he accom-

plished over the years. Billy also devoted many hours over 40 years to the Chicago Baseball Cancer Charities raising millions of dollars to fight the disease that ironically took his life.

“We’ve raised about 10 and a half million dollars. 60% per cent of the funds go to Northwestern Memorial Hospital; the other 40% go to Children’s Memorial Hospital. We also sponsor “Camp One Step at a Time”, which is where kids go for a few weeks a year. The children, who go, have cancer or are getting over cancer. They have a great time. I actually got involved one year when I was invited to their golf tournament. Then Nellie Fox passed away because of cancer and I really got into it, I’ve been involved ever since. I’d also like to thank the Sox for all of their support over the years. Mr. Reinsdorf has been very generous with contributions to help the kids.” That from my interview with Billy back in 2002 and in another irony it was published on July 31st which would turn out to be the date of his passing.

Talking with former teammates all had the same story about Bill as a person. Ken Berry spent some spring trainings with him in the early 60’s and while he didn’t associate with him much since Berry was a rookie he did say that Pierce was “a classy guy, full of life, friendly.”

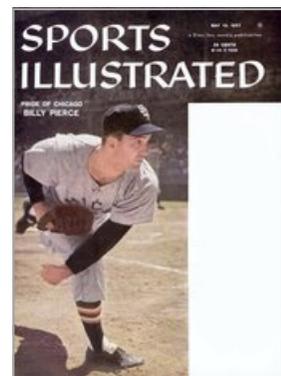
Ray Herbert pitched with Bill on the Sox during the 1961 season but knew him for years before that. “We were all kids in amateur ball in Detroit and we’d all hang out together since we were the same age. He was a good friend, we played in golf tournaments together and we were both part of the Tigers alumni association. Bill would always be available to help out if we needed to get something done.”

Joe Horlen also came up as a rookie in that 61’ season which was Billy’s last with the Sox. But he remembered him in the same way others did. “I’m so sad to hear that Billy has passed. He was just a good guy, definitely humble.” Jim Kaat never played on the same club as Billy but had this to say upon learning of his death, “Followed him as a kid and got to meet him when I came up in 1959...stylish lefty and classy guy.”

Jerry Reinsdorf the co-owner of the Sox, in a Sox press release, had this to say about Billy’s death, “Generations of White Sox fans lost one of their heroes today. It was an absolute privilege to consider Billy a friend. He epitomized class, not just as a ballplayer on those great Go-Go White Sox teams of the 1950s, but as a gentleman and as a human being who devoted so much of his life to helping others.”

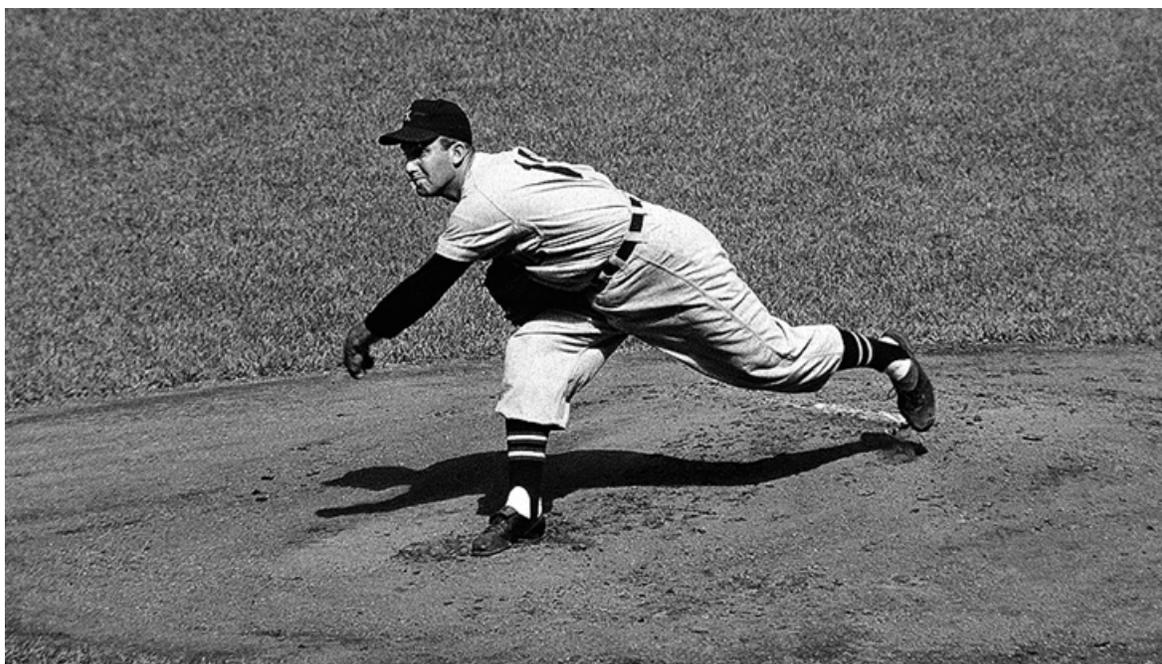
As far as Billy the pitcher, the numbers that he put up, particularly during the 1950’s, rank as among the best in baseball. Only 5-10 about 170 pounds Pierce had a blazing fastball with great control, an issue he overcame as a youngster. “Billy had great stuff,” remembered Herbert. “Threw hard and he didn’t walk anybody. Back then if he walked one guy in a nine inning game he’d tell me his control was off that day.”

The numbers as mentioned speak for themselves. 186 wins for the Sox between 1949, when he was acquired in a trade from the Tigers, and 1961. 11 years of double digit wins for the team. 20 game winner in 1956 and 1957. Threw 35 shutouts, 19 saves, four one hitters (losing a perfect game with two out in the 9th inning in 1958), seven time All Star (one of only 13 pitchers to ever start three of them), the first White Sox player to ever appear on the cover of “Sports Illustrated” (1957) and also appeared on the cover of “Sport” magazine (October 1957).



Pierce on cover of Sports Illustrated May 13, 1957. Photo credit Sports Illustrated

He led the American League in complete games in 1956, 1957 and 1958, led the league with a 1.97 ERA in 1955 and led the league in strike outs in 1953. The only left hander in the American League mentioned in the same breath as Bill was the Yankees Whitey Ford. Those two faced each other 14 times; Pierce won eight of them, including game #6 of the 1962 World Series when he was with the Giants. Pierce threw a complete game, three hitter, beating Ford and the Yankees 5-2. Former Sox co-owner Chuck Comiskey talked about Bill and his impact on the franchise back in 1988. "Billy was the first guy we ever got in a trade. He was a winning pitcher, a mainstay as we were building a championship club. When he'd pitch against Whitey Ford, you could sell the seats 25 times over. That's how many fans wanted to see him pitch."



Pierce following through in a road game. Photo credit espn.go.com

In the three game National League playoff series in 1962, Billy won game #1 with a complete game three hit shutout, 8-0, taking care of the Dodgers and Sandy Koufax. That season, his first in San Francisco, Bill went 16-6 and didn't lose the entire year in Candlestick Park. The Giants thought that was so remarkable that after the season they tore out the pitching rubber and mailed it to his home.

In four All Star appearances Bill threw 10.2 innings allowing only six hits with an ERA of 3.38. In five World Series appearances he threw 19 innings allowing 10 hits with an ERA of 1.89.

During the times I spent with Bill or talked with him over the phone about his days with the Sox a few things immediately came back to his mind and I wanted to share them with you.

For example I wondered how Billy found out he was traded to the Sox for catcher Aaron Robinson back on November 10, 1948. "I was at my girlfriend's house, she's now my wife Gloria, and we heard it over the radio. A DJ came on with a sports bulletin that said I was traded to Chicago. I wasn't very happy about it because it was just in the paper about two weeks before that the Tigers were going to rebuild and give all of us kids a chance to play. I did not want to go to either Chicago or Philadelphia. It's not that I didn't like Chicago, but in those days the stockyards were going full force and when you played in Comiskey Park, especially at night, the smell was

unbelievable! It turned out to be a great break for me... the Sox had lost like a 100 games the year before and they were going to give everybody a chance."

What did he think was his best season with the Sox? "I'd have to say 1955. I led the league that year in ERA at 1.97. It had been like 20 years since anybody ended a season with an ERA under two. I only went 15-10 that season but I lost four games by the score of 1-0. I think I pitched as well as I did in 1956 when I won 20 games, but I just didn't get some breaks. I also think that was my best year because in 1954 I was a little sore, so in 1955 the Sox gave me a little most rest between starts."

I asked him about coming so close to a perfect game at Comiskey Park when he gave up a bloop hit to Ed FitzGerald of the Senators with two out in the 9th inning. "At the time I didn't think it was that important. I was a team guy and we wound up winning the game. Sure I wanted to get him out. He was a first ball, fastball hitter. We threw him a low breaking ball that he hit off the end of the bat. I won the game though and that was more important to me at the time. Over the years however, I've had so many people tell me they were listening to the game on the radio or were at the park watching, that I've wanted that one pitch back more now than I ever did then." That one pitch may have kept Pierce out of the Hall of Fame.

Billy also talked about his biggest disappointment, not starting a game in the 1959 World Series as manager Al Lopez juggled his rotation to try to get most of the starts for Early Wynn and Bob Shaw. "It was very tough. It was a real hard thing. I appeared in three games and pitched well but it was a disappointment. I still wanted the Sox to win, after all, they were my teammates but I was very glad when it was over. Let's put it this way, I left town pretty quickly to try to forget about it all. Al was a real good manager. His record shows that. He was a solid percentage baseball guy. I honestly think the controversy affected Al more than me. I wasn't the culprit; all I could do was what he told me. He had to listen to the fans who wanted me to pitch but I couldn't do anything about it."



Pierce with catcher Sherm Lollar at Comiskey Park 1959. Photo credit ebay.com

Billy Pierce, White Sox icon. Great baseball player...better husband, father, friend.

He is survived by his wife of 65 years, Gloria, son Bill Jr., daughter Patty and son Bob, five grandchildren and one great grandchild. Rest in Peace.

As of Saturday morning 8/1/15, services for Billy are pending. The family has asked donations be made in Pierce's name to Chicago Baseball Cancer Charities (CBCC) for which he was the President for many years. CBCC is a nonprofit volunteer organization that supports cancer patient care, education and research programs at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago and Northwestern Memorial Hospital. The website for CBCC is currently not working, and the CBM will try to inform readers of where to send donations. nsalzman@luriechildrens.org is listed as a contact on the CBCC Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Chicago-Baseball-Cancer-Charities/435643793176793>