



‘Pistol’ Pete Ward: No regrets about great Sox career that wasn’t

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Sometimes nicknames aren’t always what they seem.

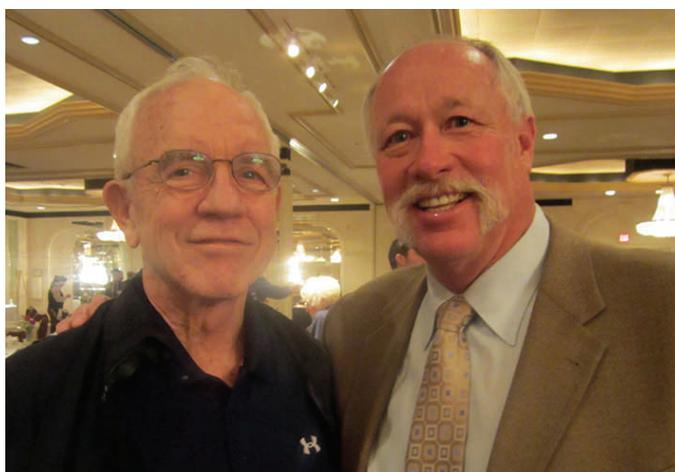
No, “Pistol” Pete Ward wasn’t the first to bear arms, so to speak, before his given name. Another nickname was more apropos.

“Somebody a lot older than I am, named Pete, they nicknamed him Pistol so every Pete that came along after that, they give it to him,” said Ward.

“My other nickname was ‘Pigpen’ with the Yankees because my socks got so dirty all the same. Same as in Chicago.”

Ward, now 75 with his memory clear as a bell, fits in a classic baseball mold of a hitter who starts out hot and appears headed for stardom. But the balance of his career never fulfills the early promise. The White Sox looked like they had third base sewed up for years to come with the emergence of Ward in 1963-64, a left-handed power threat almost matching the stellar numbers put up by right-handed-hitting Ron Santo at third on the North Side.

But when the car in which Ward was riding was rear-ended leaving a Blackhawks game early in the 1965 season, the 26-year-old sustained neck and back injuries that hampered his career going forward. He was never the same, and neither were the Sox. A Ward who had played at 1963-64 proficiency could have made the difference in the close four-team American League race of 1967, in which the Sox shockingly faded in the final five games.



Two generations of White Sox meet at the recent Pitch and Hit Club Banquet: Pete Ward (left) and Hall of Famer Goose Gossage.

And maybe one more run-producer would have complemented Ward during his greatest season in 1964 and put the Sox over the top. That's when Chicago finished just one game behind the Yankees in their final year of their post-war dynasty.

But Ward enjoys life despite its setbacks and never looks back to second guess.

"It was a good career," he said. "I enjoyed it. I have no regrets."

Love of travel cost shot at watching 2005 World Series

Ward was in Chicago recently for SoxFest and the Pitch and Hit Club banquet. He is comfortable in retirement in Portland, Ore., where he grew up, and returned after baseball retirement to establish a travel agency. His fondness for roaming the world did cost him a chance to watch his beloved Sox finally reach a promised land for which his own bid was stymied.

"The year (2005) they won the World Series, I didn't get a chance to see it," Ward said. "I was on a riverboat cruise in Germany. We didn't have it on TV. But they had ways of keeping up. Everybody on the boat would come up and let me know what's going with each pitch."

The Sox sacrificed Luis Aparicio in the prime of his career along with outfielder Al Smith on Jan. 14, 1963 to obtain Ward, knuckleballing master Hoyt Wilhelm, shortstop Ron Hansen and outfielder Dave Nicholson from the Baltimore Orioles. Wilhelm immediately started a six-year run with the Sox as the trickiest reliever in the game. Meanwhile, Ward paid immediate dividends.

He had 22 homers and 84 RBIs with a .295 average, finishing runner-up to teammate Gary Peters (19-8) record for AL rookie of the year honors.

"I never worried about that," Ward said of power totals. "I always thought I was a line-drive hitter, not a home-run hitter. Every once in awhile, I'd get in a streak and hit a few. I just rolled with the punches."

But the pattern of Ward's career and the Sox lineup was set. He was the team's only run producer. Nicholson also had 22 homers, but just 70 RBIs and struck out a then-astounding 175 times. The Sox won 94 games, finishing second, and wasting a mess of sensational pitching.

The frustration grew in 1964. Ward improved to 23 homers and 94 RBIs. But only Hansen had a semblance of a power year with 20 homers and 68 RBIs. Peters was 20-8, Juan Pizarro was 19-9 and Joel Horlen had a 1.88 ERA to show for his 13-9 record. Wilhelm saved 27 games with a 1.99 ERA. The Sox won their last nine in a row to finish 98-64. Problem was, the Yankees already had built a tiny cushion with a 13-1 September run to end up 99-63. Ward and the Sox were three decades too soon for the wild card.

Ward's fortunes, and perhaps those of the Sox, changed the following April. His family's love of hockey turned out to be fateful.

Rear-ender changed his career

Ward was the son of Jimmy Ward, a forward on the 1930s' Montreal Maroons in the NHL. He in fact was born in Montreal in the off-season. Ward's brother played four years of hockey at Michigan State. So it made sense Ward obtained tickets to a Hawks-Montreal Canadiens (on which Jimmy Ward also played) playoff game at Chicago Stadium. Teammate Tommy John accompanied Ward.

On the way out from the game, Ward sat in the right front seat. John sat in back. A car rear-ended their vehicle. Ward did not think they were hit that hard. But the next morning, he woke up sore all over with an especially stiff neck. The initial medical diagnosis was whiplash.

"I really didn't think there was anything wrong," Ward said. "Just in the neck and a little bit in the back."

But the injuries had a long-term effect. Ward's career was hampered by continued pain.

"They did everything they could do," he said. "I took the cortisone, we saw everybody. It's pretty hard to swing with a sore neck. I never really complained about it too much, I was still playing."

Ward hit just 10 homers in 1965, then dropped to just three in an injury-shortened 1966. He regained a bit of a power stroke with 18 in 1967. But with just 62 RBIs and a .233 average, Ward was infected with the latter-day "hitless wonders" epidemic that swept through the Sox lineup in the four-team AL race of '67.

Somehow the Sox held first place for much of the first half, and stayed within a couple of games of the top the rest of the way, while no regular hit more than .241. Ward's homer and RBI totals led the Sox. Only two other players had as many as 10 homers. Again, more magnificent pitching was often wasted. The Horlen/Peters/John-led staff was arguably more effective as a whole than the Dodgers' staffs of Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale the previous five years.

Sox 'should have won' in '67

"In '67, we should have won it," Ward said. "'67 was a great race. You get up in the morning, you didn't know whether you were in fourth place or first place."

The Sox had been ahead by as much as 2 ½ games on Aug. 8. On Sept. 25, with an 89-68 record, they headed to Kansas City for a two-game series with the lowly Athletics, in their last season in KC before moving to Oakland, one game out. The Sept. 26 game was rained out and made up as a two-night doubleheader the next day. Disaster struck and the Sox were swept. Then the Sox were swept in the final three games at home by the bottom-feeding Washington Senators. The "Go-Go Sox" era was over.

Ward hit 15 homers in 1968, played one more season at Comiskey Park, and finished as a Yankees backup in 1970. The Bronx Bombers took care of him. He coached one year, then managed seven more seasons in the Yankees minor-league chain.

“I liked managing a lot,” he said.

Ward returned to the majors to coach one season under Bobby Cox with the Atlanta Braves. Years later, after he finally booked his last client in the travel business, he realized his good fortune to play when he did.

“Thanks to Marvin Miller, I’m retired,” he said.

Now he follows his old teams on TV in Portland.

“I follow the White Sox, Yankees, Braves and Mariners, because they’re close,” Ward said.

It’s obvious which team is first among the equals. Ward had good times with the Sox, but no looking back at what might have been.