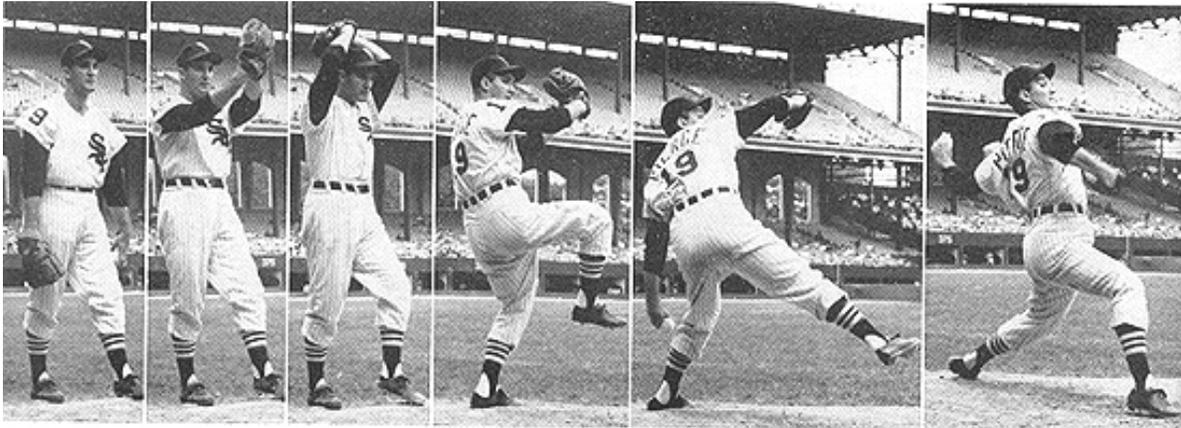


Mr. (Almost) Perfect



On its 50th anniversary, Billy Pierce recalls one of the most dominant performances in local baseball history.

*Posted by Paul Ladewski
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Five decades after **Billy Pierce** pitched one of the greatest games in Chicago baseball history -- a 28-up, 27-down one-hitter against the Washington Senators -- one would think that he would have almost forgotten the near-miss by now. And the former White Sox great probably would have if so many die-hards only let him.

An announced crowd of 11,300 witnessed the 3-0 masterpiece at Comiskey Park on June 27, 1958, but to hear so many seamheads mention it years later, Pierce could swear that at least 113,00 were actually there. "I think about it a lot mainly because somebody reminds me," said Pierce, 81, still a South Sider and a big fan. "It seems like a lot of baseball fans either were there or listened to it on the radio or read about it or something."

Pierce held the Senators without a hit for 8 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings that Friday evening. In fact, the left-hander had been so spot-on that the visitors didn't have anything remotely close to one at that point. Then pinch-hitter Ed Fitz Gerald reached out and slapped an opposite-field double to right field -- "The ball was a foot inside the line," Pierce replayed it in his mind one more time -- the hit that prevented one of the most perfect of all perfect games in major league history.

In a career that spanned 18 seasons, it's the one pitch that he would like to have back. "Truthfully, missing the no-hitter and perfect game meant more to me as the years went by and I heard more about it," Pierce said. "I started to think, 'Gee, that would have been great if I would have thrown a different pitch' or whatever. But at the time, it was a victory, and I was very happy with the shutout."

In the bullpen prior to the game, Pierce had no clue that he was about to pitch the game of his life. "I didn't sense anything special when I warmed up," he recalled. "It seemed like

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a regular game." Pierce was on such a roll at the time, maybe the performance should have come as no big surprise. He had pitched consecutive shutouts in his last two previous starts, a five-hitter versus the Boston Red Sox and a two-hitter against the Baltimore Orioles, each of them at home. In the latter game, Pierce retired 15 of the last 16 batters, as pinch-hitter Al Pilarick singled in the ninth inning to become the only one to reach base.

Almost as remarkable is that, on the 50th anniversary of the near perfect, Pierce still remembers the details quite well. Here is the inning-by-inning breakdown in his own words (batting average, home runs and RBI totals for each player at the start of the game are in parentheses):

- First inning -- Albie Pearson (.268, 0, 13) grounded out to first base unassisted. Rocky Bridges (.308, 2, 22) flied out to right field. Roy Sievers (.277, 15, 42) grounded out to third base.

Pierce: "Pearson was a smaller fella. The first thing you want to do against any smaller, get-on-base man is throw strikes and get ahead of him. But you have to get ahead of the hitters.

"I wanted to throw strikes to Bridges but didn't want to lay fastballs over the plate to get them, so I threw curveballs and sliders.

"We faced Sievers many years. He was a good fastball hitter definitely, and he had a nice swing. I had to throw breaking balls and get them in on him.

- Second inning -- Jim Lemon (.242, 11, 35) struck out. Eddie Yost (.191, 1, 12) popped out to shortstop. Norm Zauchin (.260, 5, 10) grounded out to shortstop.

Pierce: "Lemon was a good ballplayer. I watched him hit the ball well a bunch a times. He took a big swing, so I tried to get ahead of him with a curveball then throw a fastball up in the strike zone. That was the best place to pitch him. He could hit the ball a long way.

"It surprises me that Yost was in that bad of a slump. Eddie had the respect of the umpires because he knew the strike zone and didn't swing at too many bad pitches. He got the benefit of the doubt and walked a lot. We would swear that, no matter where the ball was pitched, the umpire would call it ball.

"Like Lemon, Zauchin was another big swinger and definitely a good fastball hitter, but I thought Jim was a better hitter myself. On certain days, they were all dangerous with bats in their hands, but in the games that I watched Norm against us, he wasn't as consistent."

- Third inning -- Ken Aspromonte (.245, 3, 20) flied out to left field. Steve Korcheck (.105, 0, 0) grounded out to third base. Russ Kemmerer (.129, 0, 1) was called out on strikes. (The White Sox scored one run in the bottom half.)

Pierce: "Aspromonte wasn't a home run hitter. He would hit the ball all over the place -- up the middle and to right field. You didn't pitch him one way. He hit left-handers pretty good. The majority of hitters are fastball hitters, no question about it. But if a guy doesn't go for the long ball, then he's generally ready for any pitch. Ken was that type. A curveball wouldn't fool him as badly as it would the power hitters.

"Korcheck had a tough time as a hitter, no question about it. He had a good arm, but hitting was not his forte. The most important thing against players who are in a slump or don't hit the long ball is not to walk them.

"Kemmerer had tough luck against me. I always seemed to pitch well against him."

- Fourth inning -- Pearson flied out to right field. Bridges grounded out to shortstop. Sievers grounded out to second base.

Pierce: "The important thing against any hitter but especially the lead-off batter is not to walk him. You want to get the ball over the plate. Of course, if you get ahead of him in the count, you can pitch a bit differently. But you don't want to walk a lead-off hitter because it can set up a big inning.

"I wanted to mix up the pitches. You try that before the game, but sometimes when you get on the mound, it's a bit different because it's flatter when you warm up. Some days one thing works better than the other. Some days you're fortunate and have a good day with all of them. That day everything was good for me. Everything worked out.

"I had to be careful with Sievers. He was the key man in their line-up and I didn't want him to beat me."

- Fifth inning -- Lemon flied out to center field. Yost struck out. Zauchin struck out.

Pierce: "Usually, Yost was the lead-off man for their ballclub. I'd rather have him bat fifth in the order than first. You were leary not to walk him, so you gave him pitches to hit. You wanted to get the ball over the plate and get ahead of him. You didn't try to hit the corners too much because you knew that you wouldn't get the call.

"I had felt good all year long. As I went along, I had lot of confidence. I knew that I had thrown strikes and didn't walk hitters."

- Sixth inning -- Aspromonte grounded out to third base. Korcheck was called out on strikes. Kemmerer grounded out to pitcher.

Pierce: "It was a 1-0 score late in the game, so you're main focus is to win the ballgame. In that situation, you concentrate very strongly on the hitter because every one can tie the game. I mean, you always try, but you focus harder in a one-run ballgame.

"Basically, you know that you have a no-hitter, but you don't keep track of a perfect game. I didn't know that until the seventh inning.

- Seventh inning -- Pearson grounded out to first base unassisted. Bridges struck out. Sievers grounded out to third base.

Perce: "It didn't get special until late in the game. When I faced Pearson to lead off the seventh inning, I knew that nobody had gotten on base.

"We were so good defensively, a lot of the plays we made were good plays, but I can't remember a diving catch or anything. People ask me, 'What was your best pitch?' and I kid

to them, 'The at-'em ball.' They hit the ball where our fielders were, and that's always important. Everything went right along pretty good that day."

- Eighth inning -- Lemon flied out to right field. Yost grounded out to third base. Zauchin was called out on strikes. (The White Sox scored two runs in the bottom half.)

Pierce: "The guys got quiet in the dugout late in the game. You didn't hear too much out of them, that's for sure. They were all there, and I know they were all pulling for me. As I've seen in the record book, the White Sox hadn't had a perfect game in 30 years or something. The last time they had one was way back. (Charlie Robertson was the last pitcher to do so in the 1922 season). I mean, you didn't see a perfect game too often."

- Ninth inning -- Aspromonte grounded out to shortstop. Korcheck struck out. Fitz Gerald (.313, 0, 3) batted for Kemmerer and doubled to right field. Pearson struck out.

Pierce: "Oh, yeah, the crowd was very excited at that point. You're trying a little more than normal because your adrenaline is flowing harder. You get the first batter out and you're happy. Then you get the second batter out . . . Now you've got a pinch-hitter at the plate.

"We had seen Fitz Gerald much more than we had Korcheck in ballgames. He was a good ballplayer. He wasn't an easy out at all. He was a good fastball hitter and hit the first pitch a lot. (Catcher) **Sherm (Lollar)** put down the signal for the curveball and I was very content with that. I thought that it made a lot of sense. I threw a curveball away from Fitz Gerald and he went with the pitch and hit it down the right-field line. I thought it was a strike. It was on outer part of the plate.

"If I had thrown a fastball and Fitz Gerald hit it, I would have second-guessed myself. Sherm and I were on the same page. I threw the pitch that was appropriate at the time. It just didn't work out. Fitz Gerald hit it good for a base hit. All you could do was tip your cap to him and get the next batter out. Then I struck out Pearson. I was trying very hard to get the game over."

Even the media were sympathetic afterward, so close did Pierce come to baseball history before the baseball gods conspired against him. "The reporters came in after the game and said, 'Oh, we're sorry. We're sorry,'" he recalled. "But I tell you, it really didn't hurt as much as you would think it might. I was very happy that we won the game." In another part of the home team locker room, longtime roommate **Nellie Fox** joked that he had gotten a late jump on the two-bagger and should have caught it. Closer to the truth, the second baseman wasn't within 100 feet of the ball when it touched down.

In his next start, a date with the Cleveland Indians at Comiskey Park four days later, Pierce took a fourth consecutive shutout into the seventh inning before he walked pinch-hitter J.W. Porter with the bases loaded and two outs. The run was unearned and the first that he had allowed in 34 1/3 innings, the longest scoreless streak of his career.

"I had games that meant more than that one," Pierce said. "When I was with the San Francisco Giants a few years later, I pitched a shutout in a playoff game. Another big game

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was the third game of the playoffs, when I relieved for one inning. Of course, I won a game in the World Series that year, and that as big because we tied the series. But the one-hitter has to rank as the best game that I ever pitched. I mean, how close can you come to a perfect game?

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