

## **Beltin' Melton changed perceptions as first White Sox home run king**

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For the better part of 60 years, the majority opinion was that a power hitter would never thrive in the wide-open spaces of Comiskey Park, where long fly balls went to die, but it took third baseman Bill Melton only two seasons to tear down the wall, at-bat by at-bat, home run by home run.

In 1971, one year after Melton became the first White Sox player to reach the 30-home run mark in one season, he took the next bold step when he captured the American League home run crown, another first for the franchise. Almost as remarkable as the accomplishment itself was the fact that Melton was fairly oblivious to what he had done at the time, and it would be years before he and others began to appreciate its significance.

“The only thing that was important to me was the fact that we actually had become a better ballclub,” Melton told the Chicago Baseball Museum. “The fact that my power was in the line-up allowed us to get Dick Allen after the season. Team management started to realize that, as big a ballpark as it was, we could actually win with home runs. It kind of changed the way that the team looked at players in future trades.”

When Melton arrived for spring training at Sarasota, Fla. prior to the 1971 season, the 25-year-old was more confident than he had been in his career. The previous season the man known as Beltin' Melton hit 33 homers to shatter the team record that first baseman Zeke Bonura had owned for 36 years. For one of the few times in team history, a White Sox player was mentioned in discussions about the most feared sluggers in the game.

“I started to feel like I belonged,” Melton said. “I was a bit more established, and little by little, the ballclub had gotten better.”

“Oh, Bill had power,” manager Chuck Tanner said. “In fact, I told one sportswriter that he would be the next Harmon Killebrew. That's who I thought he would be. But when he hurt his back a few years later, it took some of his range and swing away. He still had power, but he played hurt a lot of the time. If he hadn't hurt his back, there was no telling how many homers he would have hit.”

Like most power hitters, Melton almost always required several weeks to find his groove. When he got off an unusually good start, it was an early sign that the 1971 season would be a special one for him. In the first two months, he had a respectable .278 batting average, six home runs and 22 RBI in 41 games.

As the weather began to heat up, Melton did, too. In June, he compiled a .311 batting average, 12 home runs and 26 RBI in 26 games, the best month of his

career. It wasn't until one year later that he learned that no White Sox player had hit as many as a dozen homers in one month previously.

"My first thought was, 'Too bad I can't hit 13 in April or May, when it's cold outside,'" Melton remembered. "I liked warm weather. I was terrible in cold weather. I always believed that cold weather affects a power hitter more than anybody, because he uses his whole body to get torque in his swing.

"I didn't know anything about the record. The first time that I knew about it was the next year, when Dick Allen hit 13 in one month. That was the only time it meant anything to me."

The June highlights were a pair of torrid four-game stretches, both on the road. On June 14-17, Melton produced four homers and 11 RBI in three games against the Detroit Tigers and one versus the Minnesota Twins. On June 28-30, he closed the month with a bang against the Brewers – four homers, six RBI.

On July 30, Melton hit his 25<sup>th</sup> home run, a two-run blast off Boston Red Sox starter Sonny Siebert at Comiskey Park. The round-tripper moved him two ahead of Detroit Tigers first baseman Norm Cash for the league lead. Red Sox outfielder Reggie Smith was three behind the leader.

Never before had a White Sox player been a serious contender in the home run race this late in the season, not that Melton paid much attention to it. "I didn't know what it was about except to look at the list and see only three or four guys with 20-something home runs," he said. "It wasn't a day-to-day watch like is now."

On Sept. 12, Oakland Athletics outfielder Reggie Jackson slammed his second and third homers against the Twins in two days. It was a four-man race between Cash (30), Jackson (29), Melton (29) and Smith (27) now.

Unlike Melton, Jackson had been down this road before. In 1969, he entered the final full month of the season with a league-high 45 homers, three more than outfielder Frank Howard, the Washington Senators slugger. But Jackson hit only three homers in September, while Killebrew went deep 10 times to catch him. On Oct. 1, the next-to-last day of the regular season, Killebrew hit his 49<sup>th</sup> homer off White Sox starter Billy Wynne in Minneapolis to take the lead permanently.

Two years later, the achievement meant a lot more to Jackson than it did to anyone else, a fact that Melton learned on Sept. 16-18, when the team visited Oakland for the final time. "I wasn't aware of anything that was going on until that series," Melton said. "I talked with Sal Bando, Joe Rudi and those guys, and they told me that Reggie Jackson wanted the home run title pretty badly. He was the first guy who really marketed himself.

"He went into the hospital with hives, he wanted it so badly. (The team) didn't say that he went there because of that, but when I went hunting with them in the winter, they talked about how much he wanted it."

Melton had problems of his own, namely, scouting reports that said it was best to pitch around him in game situations. After 12 consecutive starts without a homer, his longest drought of the season, he remained stuck at 30 for the season.

“It was just a slump that players go through over the course of the season,” Melton said. “Power hitters hit them in bunches, really. I didn’t change my swing. Did they pitch me differently? No. If your ballclub needs a run in the eighth inning, will you get anything to hit? I don’t think so. Some of that entered into it.”

While the odds were stacked against him, Melton had the schedule and manager in his corner. The White Sox were scheduled to close the regular season with a three-game series against the Brewers at home, while the Athletics and Tigers had two games left to play. (Because it was not necessary to reschedule a rainout against the Baltimore Orioles earlier in the season, the Athletics played only 161 games.) In his career, Melton would hit more homers (25) against the Brewers than any team in the league.

On Sept. 28, Melton went hitless in four trips to the plate. Meanwhile, Cash clubbed his 31<sup>st</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> homers against the Indians in Cleveland, while Jackson hit his 32<sup>nd</sup> homer against the Royals in Oakland. What it meant was, Melton would have to hit at least two homers in his final two games to gain a share of the lead.

Shortly after Melton arrived at Comiskey Park one day later, Tanner approached him.

“You know what?” Tanner said. “I’m gonna try to get you one more shot than normal.”

How’s that?” Melton asked.

“You’re gonna lead off,” Tanner said.

“Fine. Whatever,” Melton shrugged.

When Melton looked at line-up card, the words sunk in finally.

“Hey, I’m leading off?” Melton wanted to know for certain.

“Sure,” Tanner said. “I want to you get an extra at-bat.”

“I had thought it for awhile,” Tanner said. “Yeah, I was going to do it. I wanted to give him every chance that I could to win it.”

Better yet, Melton would face Jim Slaton in a highly favorable matchup. In 44 career at-bats against the right-hander, he had a .364 batting average and nine extra-base hits, four of which were homers. “Slaton had a good hook, but he always got behind me (in the count) for some reason,” Melton said. “We didn’t track anything, so I wouldn’t know who I hit and who I didn’t hit. You just knew that you felt good against a guy like him.”

In the first inning, Melton drove a curveball into the left-center field seats, an area that he frequented often in his career. Two innings later, he hit another curveball for the same result -- a solo homer into the lower deck.

“I didn’t try to hit them,” Melton said almost apologetically. “I was real loosey-goosey.”

At the same time, Tigers manager Billy Martin had elevated Cash to the lead-off spot, but he was unable to add to his total that night. In an afternoon game hours earlier, Jackson also was held in check. Suddenly, Melton not only had a share of the lead, but unlike Cash and Jackson, he had one game left to play.

As a resident of the Ambassador East Hotel, where Melton lived while the season was in progress, he was no stranger to the Chicago night life. He and friends and teammates had another reason to frequent Rush Street this time. From Faces to The Lodge to the Store Annex, they bounced around until the wee hours, not particularly concerned about the 12 p.m. start for the season finale.

“It had been along season, and we were happy to go home soon, so went out and celebrated,” said Melton, who was quick to add, “I probably celebrated a little bit too much.”

At 9 o’clock on Thursday morning, catcher Ed Hermann and pitcher Wilbur Wood provided wake-up calls. When Melton shook off the cobwebs, he was physically and emotionally spent. To make matters worse, the weather was unusually warm and muggy outside. If not for the home run thing, Swelton’ Melton would have just as soon called it a season.

After Melton dragged himself to the ballpark, his pre-game routine consisted of extended time in a Jacuzzi, where “I tried to get the previous night out of me,” as he put it. When Brewers starter Bill Parsons splintered his bat on a ground ball to the shortstop in the first inning, Melton didn’t like his chances the rest of the way. “I remember running to first base then crossing the field on the Astro turf and almost dying,” Melton said. “I was tired. My body felt heavy.”

In the dugout, good-natured teammates threw towels over his bat. While they administered the Last Rites to the sick piece of lumber, a weary Melton couldn’t help but crack up a few feet away from them.

But Melton had one good swing left in him, it turned out. He opened the third inning with a drive to deep left field that might be, could be . . .

“When I hit it, I knew that I hit it well,” Melton said of the third homer in his six at-bats of the season. “I was afraid it would hit the wall, because it was hit that hard. I got halfway to first base and saw that the ball would clear it. It got out pretty quickly.”

On the way back to the dugout, Melton tossed his batting helmet into stands while 2,814 enthusiastic fans cheered wildly. “I was just glad it was over with and done,” a relieved Melton said. “I didn’t know what it meant to me at the time.”

Melton went onto field for the fourth inning, but before it started, Tanner called him back to the dugout, where he received another ovation. After the game,

a 2-1 victory, the new home run king headed to O'Hare Airport, where he boarded a 5 a.m. flight to Los Angeles, his off-season home.

In the weeks to come, Melton began to receive phone calls from media around the country. Did he know that he was the first White Sox player to lead the league in home runs? "I said, 'No,'" Melton recalled.

"Three-three home runs! Wow! That was a ton back then!" Tanner said. "I was happy for him. Now Bill knows what he did. I think he appreciates it more now.

"And how about the ballpark that he played in then? That place was a barn."

Remarkably, Melton hit 17 of his 33 home runs at Comiskey Park, which ranked a distant seventh in home runs in the 12-team league. Overall, he averaged one homer per 15.3 at-bats at home and one per 17.6 at-bats on the road.

Ask Melton about the 1971 season, though, and he'll tell you that his proudest accomplishment wasn't the home run title but what he did to help turn around a franchise that had faced an uncertain future only months earlier. The South Siders finished in third place with 79 victories, a substantial 23-game improvement from the previous season.

"It's a long haul when you have 100 losses, and all of sudden, you're competitive again," said Melton, who finished the season with a .269 batting and 86 RBI in 150 games. "That was important in those times. Right now, you play to justify your salaries. Back then, you wanted to justify that you might have built a pretty good team.

"It was a different perspective. There was no free-agency at the time. There was no salary arbitration. What difference did it make to lead the league in home runs?"