

Ron Santo, Hall of Famer: A Boy And A Dream

(Former Cubs great Ron Santo will be inducted into the Hall of Fame on July 22 in Cooperstown, N.Y. In tribute to the late third baseman, the Chicago Baseball Museum will publish historical accounts of his career in the weeks ahead. This story appeared in Sport Magazine in July, 1962.)

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Occasionally, one like him comes along: Young enough to be candid; good enough to be cocky; eager enough to challenge the future; dedicated enough to improve and bright enough to learn from the past. Such a one is 22-year-old Ron Santo, a pleasant, handsome, Swedish-Italian kid. He is the Chicago Cubs' third baseman who already has earned comparison with the Cubs' one-time great, Stan Hack. In this bright spring of his baseball career, Santo's vitality and lust for life make him say things like . . . well, like this:

"I've always wanted to be a big-league ballplayer. I even prayed for this. But there's more than just being a big-league ballplayer. I don't want to be average; I want to be a great ballplayer.

"You can go higher than the big leagues. You can go higher by being the best there is. And when I get out of this game, I want people to remember Santo, and I want to look back on baseball and say, 'Thanks.'"

From the time he was a toddler in Seattle, where he was born and raised, the kid announced to all who would listen: "I'm going to be a big-leaguer some day." And now that he has made it, he savors each moment of his life with delight and his recent memories are bright with details. He remembers the exact date ("It was June 26, 1960") and circumstances of his first major-league game. It was against the league-leading Pirates before 40,000 howling people at Forbes Field. It was the first major-league game he ever saw.

The Cubs, plagued by third-base problems, recalled him from Houston, and he joined the team at 4 a.m. on Sunday.

"I went out to the park early," he recalls. "But I didn't go into the clubhouse. I was still in street clothes, but I walked through the tunnel. It's funny now, but I wanted to see how a major-league dugout felt. I mean just how it felt to sit in one. I sat there alone, looking out over all that grass and the big empty stadium. Forbes Field isn't very big, but it looked huge to me."



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After a while Santo left the dugout and entered the clubhouse where the Cubs were beginning to dress. A double-header was scheduled, and the team was in a losing streak.

“They print your name over your locker,” Santo says. “I began looking around at all those names... Banks, Ashburn, Thomas...

“Over in one corner was my name, 'Santo.' I looked at it for a long time and then I said to myself, 'I know that name and it's going to stay there.'”

An hour later he was dressed. Then Lou Boudreau, the Cub manager, took him aside and said, “There're 100 games left this season. Are you ready?” Santo nodded. “All right,” said Boudreau, “the position is yours.”

During batting practice, Forbes Field filled to capacity. “Then I got scared,” Santo says. “In batting practice, I couldn't hit a ball out of the cage. Not even out of the cage! All of a sudden, with all those people there, that big diamond just shrunk. I felt trapped. Then somebody came up and said, 'Hey, kid, do you know who's pitching for Pittsburgh today? Bob Friend and Vernon Law.' All I could say was, 'Oh, my God!’”

Santo's first at bat came against Friend in the second inning. “I began to shake,” he says. “My knees shook, my bat shook. I had to get hold of myself, so I backed out of the box and called for time. I stood there for a moment, with all those people watching me, and then I remembered something that I'd read somewhere, something about big-leaguers putting on their pants the same way. Something corny like that.

“I got back in the batter's box and looked out at Friend. I kept repeating to myself, 'He's just a minor-leaguer, he's just a minor-leaguer, he's just a minor-leaguer . . .’”

Friend's first pitch broke inside. “I just pulled in a little and it went for a ball. I said to myself, 'Well, I took that one like a big leaguer.' The next pitch was a fastball, and I hit it right past Friend's head. I can still see him jerking his head aside. After that, everything was all right.”

After all, everything was all right, indeed. He got two more hits, a double and a home run, and he drove in five runs. The Cubs snapped a nine-game losing streak, beating Pittsburgh twice, and Santo has been Chicago's third-baseman ever since. In 95 games that season, the 20-year-old batted .251, hit 24 doubles, two triples and nine home runs. He drove in 44 runs. In another doubleheader, against Philadelphia, he homered to win the first game, 2-1, then hit a grand-slam home run to win the second game, 7-3.

The one disappointing fact about Santo's fast start was his low batting average – largely due to his high mark on the scales. He was 15 pounds overweight. At the urging of Cub vice-president John Holland, Santo went home that winter and worked down to 180. He also did sprints daily to improve his speed. “In the beginning,” he says, “I was clocked from home to first at 4.4 to 4.5. By the end of the winter, I shaved it down to 4.1 and sometimes 4.0.” By conservative estimate, the excess weight had cost him 15 base hits.

Last year, he became a full-fledged star. In 154 games Santo batted .284. He hit 23 home runs, drove in 83 runs and scored 83. He was voted the National League's “Sophomore of the Year” award, and the late White Sox scout Bill Norman was moved to superlatives.

“Santo,” he said, “is the kind of kid you could give \$100,000 to sign, and still make the Brinks robbery look like a picnic for amateurs.”

Said Cincinnati manager Fred Hutchinson, “Santo damned near knocked us out of that pennant with his bat. He always seemed to beat us with the long ball.”

Santo was never offered \$100,000. The Cubs got him for an \$18,000 bonus (spread over three years) plus a salary commitment that raised his total to \$25,000. This was, of course, a bargain for the Cubs – gaining title to a boy who is now worth more than \$200,000.

The financial dealings for inextricably entwined with Santo's home life, development and temperament; part of his peculiar entry into professional baseball.

His mother Vivian was a divorcee, a waitress who worked long hours to support Ron and his older sister Adielene. The mother is still vaguely puzzled about Ron's early devotion to baseball (he began toting a bat around at the age of two.) At the age of six or seven, he began to talk about playing in the major leagues. “He would come into the kitchen,” she recalls, “and announce, 'Mother, someday I'm going to be a big leaguer.'”

Santo's mother remarried several years later, and Ron's stepfather, John Constantino, turned out to be the stabilizing influence in his life. Before Ron entered high school, he had pitched five no-hit games. He played baseball incessantly – at St. Mary's grammar school, in the Little League and in the Babe Ruth league.

“Even when he was a punk, he had authority with the bat,” recalls Constantino, grinning. “Sometimes I'd take him outside and throw to him, thinking, 'I'll take some of the cockiness out of him.' But he hit everything I threw. Funny thing, he never read about baseball. He knew who Babe Ruth was, and Joe DiMaggio, but he didn't know much about the other players. He didn't read about baseball, he was so busy playing it.”

Constantino brought order and discipline into the household. He kept the kid's brashness to a minimum by withholding praise, but doling it out at the right time. “You've got a long ways to go before you make it,” the stepfather would say. “Don't come bragging to me when you're kid. You already know it, so why bother to tell me?”

Later the family moved to a home just across the street from Sicks' Stadium, home of the Seattle Rainiers. Santo got a job at the ballpark and, occasionally, had a chance to work out with the team. By his sophomore year, Ron was a solid six-footer, and he began slugging high-school pitching for some incredible averages.

Such performances attracted the attention of numerous major-league scouts, but one, Dave Kosher, was first. Kosher had worked for the Rainiers before becoming the Northwest representative for the Cubs. He was close friend of Rogers Hornsby, then a coach under the Cubs' Bob Scheffing. Kosher dogged Santo for three years, visited his home, bought him shoes and gloves; in all, Kosher saw Ron play more than 125 high-school and semi-pro games.

“He was cocky, and a lot of high-school coaches didn't like him for it,” says Kosher. “But that didn't bother me. When a kid's cocky that way, I like him.”

Another scout, Dutch Reuther, got on Santo's trail. A hardened veteran at the business of putting a price on talent, Reuther also ran into the "too cocky" verdict by one of the high school coaches.

"Why, that kid thinks he knows more baseball than I do," complained one coach.

"Maybe he's right," said Reuther.

In the last five games of his senior year, Santo filled in for the injured regular catcher when the Hearst All-Star game was played in June, 1958. This event, comprised of top prep players, attracts almost every scout and "bird dog" on the West Coast. The game's "outstanding" boy is picked to represent Washington in the New York finals.

"Outstanding" turned out to be an understatement for the kid who had caught only five games in his life. He caught flawlessly, threw out two runners, got two hits, drove in a run, scored twice and stole three bases – second, third and home. By eight o'clock the next morning, the Constantinos' home became a ballplayer-hunter's mecca.

There is little doubt John Constantino could have run the bidding up to \$50,000 or \$60,000. Such was the fever of the moment. The Milwaukee Braves offered to top "by \$10,000" any other offer made. Dewey Soriano, general manager of the Rainiers, offered \$25,000 on behalf of Cincinnati.

"Then I began to realize the money involved," recalls Santo. "Those scouts were really shelling out the dough. It was unbelievable. I just wasn't that good in that game, but everything went right. And here were all these scouts offering me all that money."

Santo, however, had promised the Seattle newspaper, Post-Intelligencer, he would represent Washington state in New York. A number of friends advised him: Grab that money while you can. If you have a bad game in New York, you might not get it. But Santo had made his promise. Besides, Constantino felt there was more than just money involved. Stepfather and son made a study of major-league rosters, trying to determine which teams offered the quickest chance for advancement. They ruled out Cincinnati, which wanted Santo as a catcher but then had two top catchers in Ed Bailey and Smoky Burgess. They cooled a bit on Milwaukee, which not only had strong catching but had Eddie Mathews at third base.

The summer turned out to be a financial disaster for Santo. He played in the Hearst game in New York. Miserably. He allowed a couple of passed balls and dropped a foul popup. During the summer, when he played for a semi-pro team called B & B Hardwood, he began to slough off.

"He thought he had it made," says Constantino. "I tried to warn him, but he kept goofing off. I told him: 'Ron, those scouts are watching every move you make. They can withdraw all those offers.'"

Santo returned from New York to find his doorstep uncluttered by baseball scouts. "They saw him going through the motions," recalls Santo's semi-pro coach Walt Milroy, "and figured he was no competitor. I remember when he got back Ron called me and asked, 'Where are they? Where're all those scouts?'"

By the end of August, only two clubs were still interested – Cincinnati and Chicago. Soriano stuck firmly to his evaluation. And Kosher kept the Cubs' interest alive. In the

end, Koshier obtained authorization from the Cubs to offer Santo \$18,000 plus salary, and Santo signed. His stepfather offered one final word.

“Just remember,” Constantino said, “that this is a man's game, even if boys play it. When you go to that training camp, all the money in the world won't make it for you. It takes desire and ability. And remember something else: You can't put that scrapbook in front of their faces and say, 'Look what I've done.' What's past is past. It's the future that counts.”

Rogers Hornsby was perhaps the first to spot Santo's potential. “He's got a major-league bat right now,” said Hornsby after a few days of the 1959 spring-training season. Hornsby urged the Cubs to put Santo at third base. “He didn't shift good enough for a catcher,” said the Rajah. “And we were desperate for a third-baseman. Santo had a good arm, he always got in front of the ball, and this kid really liked to play. He wanted to play every day. He was major league all the way – great desire and willingness to learn.”

Farmed out to San Antonio, Santo had his miseries. “I was striding into everything and locking my hips,” he recalls, “and they sent Mr. Hornsby down and he straightened me out. My fielding was awful. I must have made 15 errors in the first two weeks. My throwing got so bad, I heard they wouldn't sell box seats behind first base.”

One day Grady Hatton, who was bearing the brunt of the press and fan criticism over Santo's poor play, called him in. “I know you're better than this,” he told Santo, “but I think you'd better go to B ball.”

Santo was in despair. “Don't send me down,” he begged. “I know I can play this classification.”

Hatton, a former Cincinnati third-baseman, thought for a long moment. “All right,” he said finally, “you stay. You're my third-baseman. Play your way out of it.”

Immediately Santo's fielding improved. And his bat improved. By the end of the 1959 season, Santo had made 165 hits, led the league in doubles with 35, hit 11 home runs and driven in 87 runs. His batting average was .327.

“That Hatton,” he said. “I'll always be grateful. Sticking with me then could have cost him his job.”

By 1960, Santo was ready for Chicago – at least in Hornsby's opinion. “I'm not trying to blow my own horn,” says Rogers, “but I was the only one who told Charley Grimm to keep him with the Cubs from the start.”

Santo was shipped out to Houston, recalled for three days, then shipped back to Houston. But by June it was apparent that if the Cubs were going to solve their third-base problems, Santo was the kid to do it. He made it in that first doubleheader against Pittsburgh. Today, scarcely a baseball man exists who won't make bright predictions for Ron Santo's future.

“If there's such a thing as a 'take charge' hitter, it's got to be Santo,” says Johnny Temple. “When he steps to the plate, the kid literally defies the pitcher to throw the ball.”

Hornsby, ever the blunt one, surveys Santo's future with qualified superlatives: "He lacks only one thing to become a really outstanding major-league player. You know, the Good Lord only gives us so much natural ability. The best we can do is improve up to the peak of that ability. Ron's drawback is running speed. He's got adequate speed, but he hasn't got that real good speed that would make him a truly outstanding major-league player."

Hornsby thought a second, then added, "Another good quality about this boy is his loyalty. Most of 'em, when they get to be good, they forget the guy who really helps 'em along. This boy remembers."

"I guess I have a lot to remember," says Santo. "I remember how hard my other work for us kids, and I remember how my stepfather kept me in line. I remember a lot of guys who helped me, like Harvey Lanman, my high-school coach, and Walt Milroy. I remember how Grady Hatton stuck his neck out for me, and the way Dave Kosher helped me from the beginning."

This past winter, he worked out five days a week, two days running to improve his speed, three days with barbells to strengthen his arm and back muscles. With a wife (the former Judy Merrill) and a young son to support, he showed he had learned about the hard-headed business of salary negotiations. Without becoming an official "holdout," he still jacked up the Cubs' original \$14,000 offer to a more lucrative 1962 salary figure of \$22,500.

Such gusty figures remain a mystery to at least one member of Santo's family, his grandfather on his mother's side, Gus Danielson, craftsman from Sweden. The idea of "playing games" for money is foreign to all of his experience, and the mere thought of getting \$18,000 as a bonus to go to work . . .!

But grandfather Danielson is learning. He now makes a loyal effort to decipher box scores – not always successfully.

"Is there another Santo playing for Chicago?" he demanded one day of Ron's mother.

"No, father, why?"

"Down here, below," said the old man, "it says there is an E. Santo. There must be another Santo."

"Good heavens, father," said Mrs. Constantino. "That's not E. Santo. That means 'Error – Santo.'"

It now comes as a vast pleasure to the old man to know that not only is there an E. Santo in box scores, but an H.R. Santo, not to mention an R.B.I. Santo. More and more, the assorted Santos keep showing up in agate type.

"Be sure and get it down," said Ron, a while back, "that I want to become as well known as Eddie Mathews and Don Hoak and some of those. I want to pay my mother back for the way she worked for us. I want to be so good that when she walks down the street, people will turn and say, 'There goes Ron Santo's mother.'"