

A second look at Hall of Famers



BY MARTY APPEL

This Aug. 5 will mark 70 years since Charlie "Red" Ruffing passed Bob Shawkey as the winningest pitcher in Yankee history.

And while southpaw Whitey Ford would pass Ruffing in 1965, Red remains the winningest righty, and figures to continue to be so for at least another generation.

For Ruffing, who died in 1986, this would have been unimaginable early in his career. Imagine starting out with a 39-96 record, a .289 winning percentage, and winding up in the Hall of Fame.

It happened. And wait...

Imagine predating your pro career with a horrible physical injury that might have ended anyone's dreams of playing in the major leagues.

He overcame that, too.

Ruffing, a native of the small village of Granville, Ill., attained the pro turnaround after being traded by the Red Sox to the Yankees in 1930 for Cedric Durst. He is one of only seven players in the Hall — with 2009 electee Rickey Henderson, Wade Boggs, Jack Chesbro, Waite Hoyt, Herb Pennock and Babe Ruth — to have played for both storied franchises.

RED RUFFING

His lifetime record with the Yankees was 231-124, and when he left them after the 1946 season, he was their all-time leader in games, innings pitched, wins, shutouts, strikeouts and complete games. He was a four-time 20-game winner and a six-time All-Star. He pitched in seven World Series with a lifetime record of 7-2, which represented the most World Series victories until it was also broken by Ford.

But before discarding his Red Sox statistics as though it was a bad dream — an earlier comeback, this one physical, needs to be noted.

As a 15-year-old in 1920, Red began working in the coal mines of Nokomis, Ill., with his father. A year later, he lost four toes on his left foot in a mining accident. This crushing injury ended his days as an outfielder, and found him moving to the

pitching mound in a desperate attempt to stay with the game he loved. Had it been his right foot, the right-hander could almost certainly never have pitched at a high level. Still, his ability to hit never left him. He would become one of the best hitting pitchers of all time.

The fact that he made the conversion from outfielder to pitcher, albeit before he turned pro, often brought up comparisons with Babe Ruth, certainly more so after he went from Boston to New York, as had Ruth. As a hitter, Ruffing batted .269 over 1,937 at-bats, with 36 homers and 273 RBIs. He hit .364 in 1930, .339 in 1935 and .330 in 1931, and was often called upon to pinch hit by manager Joe McCarthy. He batted .254 in 225 career pinch-hit at bats, and they weren't always for pitchers. He batted for Bill Dickey four times.

On the day he passed Shawkey for career wins with No. 169, August 5, 1939, he beat Cleveland 6-1 in one hour, 37 minutes, and went 2-for-2 with a home run and an intentional walk. Just another day at the park for Red.

Ruffing came to personify the image of the all-business, no-nonsense Yankees of the '30s, when pennants seemed nearly automatic. Along with his teammate Lefty Gomez, the team could count on 40 wins a year and find a way to win the other 50 or so needed to get to the World Series. They had an amazing run.

Ruffing was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1967. Anyone who had seen the first part of his career would have had to shake his head in wonder. Probably even Red himself. ♡



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