

Pitchers: Hoffer to Feller

A galaxy of pitching stars have come out of Iowa. Even if we omit Jack Coombs, a native of Le Grande, who was a star on Connie Mack's great teams from 1906 to 1914, but who was raised in Maine, and the brilliant Brooklyn ace, Dazzy Vance, who was born in Orient but spent most of his youth in Nebraska, many familiar names remain.

Bill Hoffer of Cedar Rapids was a mainstay on the staff of the great Baltimore Oriole team of the 1890's. From 1895 through 1897 he won 79 while losing only 24 games. His mark of 31-7 in 1895 and 26-7 in 1896 were the best in the National League. In his last four seasons following 1897, however, he succeeded in winning only 18 games as against 21 defeats.

Every team needs a relief pitcher and Mace Brown of North English was one of the best. After starring with the State University of Iowa in the early 1930's as both a catcher and a pitcher, Brown came up to the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1935 and from then until 1946 he was a leading hurler with the Pirates, Dodgers, and Red Sox. His best year was 1938 when he won 15 and lost 9 with the Pirates, mostly in relief.

That year Pittsburgh almost won the pennant. In the final game of the season Pittsburgh played Chicago, who trailed them by half a game. In the last of the ninth with two out the score was tied. Darkness was falling and soon would force the game to be called. On the mound was Mace Brown. At bat was manager Gabby Hartnett of the Cubs. Brown worked the count quickly to 2 strikes and no balls. On the verge of success, Brown pitched again. Hartnett met the ball squarely, sending it into the left field bleachers to win the pennant for his team.

One of the truly outstanding Iowa baseball names is Urban "Red" Faber. Born and raised in Cascade, Faber was one of the greatest athletes in the history of what is now Loras College. After several years in the minors, his brilliant pitching with Des Moines in the Western League in 1913 attracted considerable attention. His contract was bought by the Chicago White Sox and in 1914 Faber began his 20-year playing career with that club.

By 1915 Faber had blossomed into one of the league's outstanding pitchers as he won 24 and lost 13. Although his favorite pitch was the spitball, Faber also had good speed. A right-hander, he threw from a sidearm delivery. He had excellent control, and was known for his cleverness and coolness under fire.

In 1917 Faber and Eddie Cicotte, the famous

"shine ball" pitcher, led the White Sox to the championship. Facing the New York Giants in the World Series, Cicotte won the first game. Faber pitched the second. In the fifth inning, with two out and Buck Weaver on second, Faber singled to right. Weaver stopped at third, but the throw went to the plate, allowing Faber to take second and causing him to think that Weaver had scored. As the Giant pitcher stepped on the mound Faber noted him taking a big windup. "I thought Perritt was trying to show me up," Faber related, "and it seemed a cinch to steal, so I started with the pitch. You can't imagine my feelings on arriving at third when I heard Weaver say: 'Hello! What are you doing here?' I realized at once that I had pulled a 'boner,' but no one will ever know the feeling of mortification and chagrin that came over me." Despite Faber's mistake Chicago won the game, giving Faber his first series win.

The Giants defeated Cicotte in the third game, and Faber, 5 to 0, in the fourth, tying up the series. In the fifth game Faber came on as Chicago's fourth pitcher of the day with the score tied at 5 all. He proceeded to retire the Giants in order in both the eighth and ninth innings. Meanwhile, Chicago scored three runs in the eighth, to give Faber victory number two. The clubs headed for New York with Chicago ahead 3 games to 2.

After a day off for travel Chicago manager Pants Rowland, who had been born in Wiscon-

sin, but raised in Dubuque, decided to start Faber in the sixth game. Facing him was New York's veteran left-hander, Rube Benton. Entering the fourth inning of a scoreless game Chicago's Eddie Collins led off with a grounder to Heinie Zimmerman, who threw wildly over the first baseman, permitting Collins to reach second. Shoeless Joe Jackson flied to the Giant right fielder, who dropped the ball, Collins moving to third. With the infield in for a play at the plate Happy Felsch grounded to Benton. Collins was caught off third and Benton tossed to Zimmerman. No one was covering home, however, and so Zimmerman had no choice but to run after the fleet Collins, in an unsuccessful effort to tag him before he scored.

Chicago scored two more runs in this famous inning and another in the ninth, while Faber held New York to only two runs. The White Sox were World Champions and Faber the hero of the series. He had won three games, a feat duplicated only twice since that time. Faber's father danced on the sidewalk outside his hotel in Cascade when he heard the news and handed out cigars to everyone in town.

After serving in the navy in 1918, Faber returned in 1919 and seemed about to have a great year when, around June, he lost his effectiveness. He pitched scarcely at all in the last two months and took no part in the World Series of 1919 in which several Chicago players, including Weaver,

Cicotte, and Jackson, were later revealed to have been persuaded by gamblers to throw the games to Cincinnati.

Many thought Faber was washed up as a pitcher, but he staged a great comeback, winning 83 games during the following four seasons, although the Sox tumbled to the second division after the expulsion in 1921 of those involved in the gambling scandal. In 1921 and 1922 Faber had the best earned run average in the majors.

In 1920 a rule was adopted outlawing the spitball and all other pitches which applied foreign substances to the ball. Whatever the reason for this move, the spitball was not outlawed because of a belief that it was an unsanitary pitch. Babe Ruth remarked, "What does it matter if a guy wets the ball? Gosh, Red Faber is the nicest man in the world." Under the rule, all pitchers then active in the majors who relied on the spitball were allowed to use it through the remainder of their career. Faber and Jack Quinn were the last American League spitball artists, both retiring after the 1933 season. Burleigh Grimes in the National League retired the following year, ending the spitball era.

Faber could still win 10 games with a last place team in 1931 at the age of 42. Equally as remarkable, he shut out the Chicago Cubs in the Chicago City Series in October, 1933 after he had passed his 45th birthday. His lifetime record of 253

games won and 211 games lost was the best any Iowan compiled as a big leaguer until Bob Feller surpassed it in 1954.

Another Iowan who starred in World Series play was George Pipgras, a big righthander from Denison. After gaining experience in Ed Barrow's farm system for several years, Pipgras came up to the New York Yankees in 1927 and compiled a 10-3 record for the American League champions. In the World Series the Yanks swept by the Pittsburgh Pirates in four straight games, Pipgras pitching and winning the second game, 6 to 2. The following year he had his greatest year in the majors, winning 24 games against 13 defeats for New York, who won their third straight pennant. This time the St. Louis Cardinals opposed the Yankees in the October classic. New York's fearsome "Murderers' Row" revenged themselves on the club that had beaten them in 1926 by scoring another four game sweep. Pipgras again pitched the second game, facing ancient Grover Cleveland Alexander, the man who had dramatically saved the day for St. Louis in 1926. New York jumped on Alexander for 8 runs in the first three innings, knocking him out in the third. Pipgras, after getting off to a shaky start, allowed but two hits in the last seven innings and only one runner to get beyond first.

Pipgras continued to be a steady winner for the Yankees until 1931 when he fell off to a 7-6

record. He regained his effectiveness in 1932, however, winning 16 while losing 9 as New York returned to its accustomed spot atop the league standings. Pipgras started for the Yankees against the Chicago Cubs in the famous third game of the World Series in which Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth each hit a pair of homers. Ruth's second blast into the bleachers came after the mighty Bambino is supposed to have pointed to the spot to which he would hit the ball. Pipgras, meanwhile, after another faltering start, pitched well until the last of the ninth when two solid Cub hits caused Joe McCarthy to bring in Herb Pennock in relief. Pennock saved the game and Pipgras was credited with his third series win without a defeat.

The following season Pipgras was traded to the Boston Red Sox, but his days as a winning pitcher were over. He saw almost no action in 1934 and 1935, his final seasons in the majors. He later returned as an American League umpire from 1939 to 1945.

Earl Whitehill, a left-handed pitcher who spent many fruitful years in the majors, was a native of Cedar Rapids. Coming up with Detroit late in the season of 1923, Whitehill was with the Tigers for the following nine years before he was traded to Washington in 1933. Not until that year, when he was 34 years old, did Whitehill have his first and only 20-game season. His 22-8 record was a major reason why the Senators won the pennant

that year. It seems certain, however, that Whitehill would have had several more years over the coveted 20-game mark had he been with a stronger club instead of Detroit, which was a second division team during most of Whitehill's years with them.

In the World Series of 1933 Whitehill's masterful 5-hit shutout of the New York Giants in the third game was the only victory Washington could salvage from the National League champions. Whitehill finished up his playing days with Cleveland in 1937-1938, and Chicago in 1939. A curve ball specialist, Whitehill frequently had trouble with his control, but was noted for his steadiness on the mound. He later coached in the majors, before joining the Spalding Sporting Goods Company as public relations director, a position he held at the time of his death in 1954.

As Whitehill's career was ending another Iowan was beginning an amazing career as a pitcher. In 1936 Bob Feller of Van Meter suddenly appeared as a 17-year-old right-handed sensation with Cleveland. Behind him lay years of preparation. Feller's father determined when Bob was scarcely school age that his son would be a baseball player. Each day in the summer after work on their farm was finished father and son played catch or hit grounders. Around 1930 they even rigged up a couple of arc lamps in the back yard so that they could practice after dark.

During the winter of 1931-1932 Bob's father persuaded him to devote all his attention to becoming a pitcher. "Why," he said, "you can throw hard enough to knock a bull down. In a couple of years you'll throw faster than any of those big leaguers." In 1932 the Fellers built their own baseball field, formed a team, and played other area teams to give Bob pitching experience.

Soon Bob was pitching American Legion ball, and then in 1935, at the age of 16, he was judged good enough to pitch for the Farmers' Union Insurance semi-pro team of Des Moines. One day in July, Cy Slapnicka, a Cedar Rapids native who had been a good minor league pitcher and had then become a Cleveland scout, watched Bob pitch and was so impressed that he and Mr. Feller agreed at once that Bob would play for Cleveland's Northern League affiliate, Fargo-Moorhead, in 1936. Feller's semi-pro team went on to play in the national semi-pro tournament at Dayton, Ohio, but lost their game, although Feller struck out 18 men. Several major league representatives expressed interest in Feller, unaware that Slapnicka had preceded them.

Feller developed a sore arm the following spring and, upon Slapnicka's advice, did not report to Fargo-Moorhead. Feller was still only a junior in high school. Slapnicka, now Cleveland's general manager, asked him to report to the Indians after school was out so they could work the

soreness out of his arm. Meanwhile, Slapnicka transferred Feller's contract from Fargo-Moorhead to the Indians' affiliate at New Orleans. In Cleveland, once Feller's arm improved, Slapnicka put him to work pitching with a local amateur club. Shortly he signed him to a Cleveland contract.

Later in 1936, Des Moines of the Western League protested to Commissioner Kenesaw M. Landis that Feller had been signed in violation of an agreement that only minor league teams could sign players directly from amateur ranks. Des Moines asked that Feller's contract be invalidated so that they could sign him up. Before Landis made his decision a new agreement had been drawn up making actions such as Slapnicka had taken valid. Thereupon, although he castigated Cleveland for its handling of the Feller case, Landis ruled that it would be futile to invalidate Feller's contract because Cleveland or some other major league club could immediately sign him up again under the terms of the new agreement. The fact that Feller was happy to be with Cleveland influenced Landis in making his lenient decision.

Feller first won national attention in an exhibition game on July 9, 1936, between Cleveland and the St. Louis Cardinals in which he pitched three innings. Steve O'Neill, Indian manager and former great catcher, caught Feller himself. After Feller struck out two of the first three men to face him, O'Neill said, "I'm not as spry as I used to be,

and you might kill me with that fast ball before we're through, but you're great, Kid."

During his three innings Feller struck out eight of the famous Gas House Gang. As Cardinal shortstop, Leo Durocher, came to the plate for the second time against Feller he remarked to the plate umpire, "I feel like a clay pigeon in a shooting gallery." After the game photographers asked Dizzy Dean if he would pose with Feller. Dean replied, "After what he did today, he's the guy to say." Turning to Feller, Dizzy said, "You sure poured that pea through there today, Fellows."

Since that time Bob Feller has been one of the most highly publicized major league baseball players. He has been perhaps the greatest gate attraction since Babe Ruth. He is best known, of course, for his strikeout records. In his first starting assignment with the Indians in August, 1936, Feller struck out fifteen St. Louis Browns. On September 13, 1936, he tied the major league record for strikeouts in one game when he set down 17 Philadelphia A's. In 1937 Feller struck out 16 Boston Red Sox batters, and on October 2, 1938, he struck out 18 Detroit Tigers to set a new major league mark which still stands. These two clubs had on their rosters some of the league's most feared batsmen. As a matter of fact, Detroit defeated Feller 4 to 1 in the very game in which he set his new game record.

In 1946 Feller struck out 348 men, breaking the

major league record which had been set 42 years earlier by Rube Waddell. Feller led the league in strikeouts for seven years and by 1954 had a lifetime strikeout total exceeded only by those of Walter Johnson and Cy Young. Like many fast ball pitchers, however, Rapid Robert was also very wild in his early years. But as his fast ball began to lose some of its fire in the post-war seasons, Feller adjusted his pitching style and became a control pitcher, depending on his years of experience and his ability to put the ball where he wanted it plus a few new pitches to make up for his loss of speed.

A sore arm laid Feller up for part of the 1937 season. The following year he had a 17-11 record, but in 1939 he really fulfilled all the hopes the Indians had had in him as he won 24 games while losing only 9. Ordinarily, a player of Feller's youth would have gained his experience in the minors, but Feller had to get his the hard way which accounts for his early erratic performances. Opposing clubs heckled him severely, shouting such pleasantries as, "Time for milking, country boy." By 1940, however, Feller ignored such remarks completely and did not let them upset his poise.

Two days after Pearl Harbor Bob Feller enlisted in the navy and did not return to the Indians again until late in 1945. Virtually four full seasons when Feller was at the peak of his form were

thus blotted out by World War II. Undoubtedly had the war not intervened, Feller could have established a major league lifetime record for most strikeouts, and placed in the top five in total number of games won. But it should be remembered that Feller won 107 games and struck out 1,233 batters before he was 23 years old, an age at which such stars as Cy Young, Lefty Grove, and Grover Cleveland Alexander had not yet begun to pitch in the big time.

Feller's strikeout records may be surpassed but his performances in individual games will live on. Eleven times he has pitched a one-hit ball game, which is in itself a record. Even greater, however, is his feat of having pitched three no-hit games, a mark equalled in modern times only by Cy Young. The first of Feller's no-hitters came against the Chicago White Sox on opening day of 1940. Feller walked 5 and struck out 8 as he won the game 1 to 0. On April 30, 1946, he defeated the New York Yankees by the same score, striking out 11 batters, walking 5, but giving up no hits to a team which had such men as Joe DiMaggio, Tom Henrich, Charlie Keller, Joe Gordon, Phil Rizzutto, and Bill Dickey in the lineup. The victory was doubly sweet to Feller because a few days earlier the story had been circulated in the press that his days as a star were about over.

Similar stories appeared continually in later years as Feller began to lose his speed and had

seasons which were poor for him but would have pleased most pitchers. In 1951 he staged a notable comeback, winning 22 while losing 8. One of his wins was a no-hitter over Detroit on July 1, with the final score being 2 to 1 in the Indians' favor. In 1954 Feller made still another "comeback." As he approached his 36th birthday, he had become a spot pitcher, but in this role he won 13 games and lost only 3.

The one triumph that has eluded Feller has been a World Series victory. He had his chance in 1948 against the Boston Braves, and pitched magnificently in the opening game. He allowed the Braves only 2 hits, but his opponent, Johnny Sain, shut out the Indians on 4 hits. The game's only run was scored in the eighth by the Braves' Phil Masi from second base where he had just been called safe on a pickoff play from Feller to Boudreau. Many observers, however, felt that Masi had been tagged out. Feller started the fifth game, but this time was pounded unmercifully and had to be replaced. In the 1954 World Series Feller did not pitch, chiefly because the New York Giants swept the series in four straight, forcing Cleveland to pitch its three aces and not allowing them the opportunity to put in Feller.

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