

Chapter 7. “The sweetest right-handed swing in baseball”

In the spring of 1957, Roy decided he was being undervalued by the Senators and held out from signing his contract. He wanted more than \$20,000. He figured that if the stadium could be remodeled for the benefit of his hitting talents, he deserved more than the very small raise Calvin Griffith was offering him.

But Roy was up against one of the most parsimonious club owners since Connie Mack. As Roy remembers it, Griffith countered that Roy’s average had slipped to .253, his RBI totaled a “mere” 95, and he had failed to deliver a single “walk off” homer all year. He then cribbed some lines from Branch Rickey: “We finished next to last with you; we can finish next to last without you.” Roy settled for the paltry \$500 raise that he had been offered.

To make matters even more interesting, rumors were circulating about a Sievers trade. Charles Comiskey, owner of the Chicago White Sox, told the press that he had offered to trade Minnie Miñoso and “Jungle” Jim Rivera for Sievers and Clint Courtney, but the offer had not been accepted. When he was advised of Comiskey's proposed trade, Griffith shrewdly replied it was the first he had heard about it. Griffith purportedly tried to contact Comiskey, but by the time they connected, Miñoso was tearing up the Mexican Leagues in home runs and Comiskey called off the “deal.”ⁱ

Owners often used such tactics, true or not, to cajole and intimidate players, especially during trade talks, and Griffith was a master of this sort of deception. However, Griffith admitted that during the winter months he had "made strenuous efforts to deal Sievers off and that he was included in almost every deal that was broached" by the Senators.ⁱⁱ

“That made me pretty mad," Roy recalled, "but it also made me determined to do better so’s I could get better money the next year. Griffith was a tough old bastard to deal with.”

True to his word, Roy began to up the ante on Griffith by turning in his best spring performance to date. During spring training games in March and April, he put up excellent numbers and was getting solid hits. As a result, Griffith changed his tune: "The price has gone up on Sievers. In fact, he's one of the players we won't trade now. Sievers and Lemon are going to give us one of the best one-two punches in the major leagues."ⁱⁱⁱ On April 3, in particular, the Sievers-Lemon duo sang a merry tune on the Cincinnati Reds, hitting back-to-back homers off Warren Hacker in a 4-3 exhibition win. After that game, Reds manager Birdie Tebbetts opined that the Senators could surprise the American League and reach the first division on the power of Sievers and Lemon.^{iv} Loyal Senators fans surely thanked him for his optimism, but deep in their hearts, knew better.

Avoiding his traditional poor start, Roy had 10 hits in his first 27 at bats over a 17 game span and was hitting at a torrid .370 clip. He had 12 RBI in his first seven games and hit four homers in

the month of April, the first one on April 16 against “The Chairman of the Board,” Whitey Ford. Roy would have good luck against the Yankees' ace lefty, taking him deep three times in 1957 and five times throughout his career.

On April 23, Roy hit the first of his five dramatic walk-off home runs of the year against Johnny Kucks as the Senators bested the Yankees 3 to 1. “I just seem to feel better,” Roy said, “and anybody can see I’m getting better wood on the ball.”^v

In their April 15 edition, the sages at *Sports Illustrated* gave this portending of the 1957 team:

Analysis of This Year's Senators

Strong Points

Senators have two low-average but powerful sluggers in Roy Sievers and Jim Lemon, and it's a good thing they do. They also have steady hitter in cheerful Pete Runnels, a versatile ballplayer who shifted around infield and finally ended up as first baseman. There's veteran Eddie Yost at third, who has an uncanny ability for making pitchers walk him, despite his .231 average; three fairly good catchers in Lou Berberet, Clint Courtney, Ed Fitzgerald; one superb starting pitcher, name of Chuck Stobbs, and one good relief pitcher, name of Bud Byerly.

Weak Spots

Poor fielding and awful pitching. If it weren't for Stobbs (15-15, 3.60 earned run average) and Byerly (2.94 earned run average), Washington pitching staff would have established all sorts of records for absolute futility. Dressen prides himself on ability as instructor of pitching, but performance of Washington hurlers is not good testimonial, to put it mildly. Even when fine work turned in by Stobbs and Byerly is included in statistics, Senators' pitching staff had combined earned run average of 5.33 per game, which is almost unbelievably bad. Senator pitchers gave more bases on balls than anybody else, more home runs than any staff except Baltimore's (despite the spaciousness of Griffith Stadium playing area), made more wild pitches and more balks. They were even softest touch in league for run-scoring sacrifice flies. Part of blame for this aromatic record could be attributed to fielding. Neither Lemon nor Sievers is a first-class outfielder, Runnels is not a first baseman by trade, Yost is slowing up some at third. Shortstop and second were passed back and forth among half dozen aspirants last year, and that fluid situation was never really solidified, though Jerry Snyder and Herb Plews were about the best to appear at short and second. The trouble is, Senators have no one who makes the big pitcher-saving play.

Rookies and New Faces

Most of young players on this squad have been up and down a few times between parent club and minor leagues. Lyle Luttrell and Jose Valdivielso, for example, have both played long stretches at short with Washington. Both have looked brilliant at times, awful at other times. Outfielders Carlos Paula, who hits hard but who doesn't seem too interested in baseball, and Dick Tettelbach, who cares very much but who doesn't hit hard, were in camp for another look. Outfielder Neil Chrisley is a genuine rookie, and hopes are high he'll repeat with Washington the good year he had with Louisville. Management also fondly hopes that some of young pitchers (Abernathy, Brodowski, Clevenger, Hyde, Wiesler, for example) will do something to improve mound situation. Bonus Player Jerry Schoonmaker, who played on U.S. baseball team in 1955 Pan-American Games, is hope for future.

The Big Ifs

It seems reasonable to assume that established players such as Lemon, Sievers, Yost, Runnels, Stobbs, Byerly and the three catchers will do about as well this season as they did last. This is cheering, but not cheering enough because both Kansas City and Baltimore, Washington's immediate rivals, seem considerably improved over last season. In order for Senators to stay with Athletics and Orioles, pitching (which in Washington is spelled I-F) absolutely must get better. Pedro Ramos and Camilo Pascual, two Cuban right-handers who have endeared themselves to Dressen, are being counted on very heavily. Last year Ramos gave up 5.27 runs per game, Pascual 5.86. The Senators have reasonably fair hitting, but they're not a six-run-per-game team by a long shot. Q.E.D.: Ramos and Pascual had best improve. Then, too, young pitchers must take up more of the slack.

Outlook

Two years ago, as he began his first season as manager of Senators, Dressen talked so optimistically about potential his sharp eyes had spotted in his young players that he conned at least one New York baseball writer into picking Senators to finish well up in first division. The Senators finished last, the writer's enthusiasm vanished, and so did Charley's. This season Dressen is working just as hard, but the scales seem to have dropped from his eyes. No longer does Dressen feel bullish about his boys. On paper club is not improved. Prospect: eighth place.

Sports Illustrated was spot on: the Senators finished eighth that year.

The Times, They Are A-Changin'

On April 15, 37,872 fans crowded into Griffith Stadium to see their Senators take on the nearly new Baltimore Orioles on Opening Day. President Eisenhower did his usual “schtick,” tossing out another long ball to the guys on both teams.

The Senators battled bravely. The O’s were up 2-0 until the bottom of the fourth when the Senators exploded. Roy hit a two-bagger (going 2 for 4 for the day), and pitcher Bob Chakales helped the cause by hitting a triple, putting the score at 5 to 2. It seemed the team might be destined for a winner.

But no lead is ever safe. The O’s scored two in the fifth and two in the seventh to take the lead 6-5. Then, in the bottom of the eighth, Courtney drove in Ed Yost with a double to tie the score and send the game into extra innings.

Pascual was called in to hold onto the game in the top of the eighth and used his famous curve ball to keep the Birds at bay through the tenth inning. But the O's Dick Williams doubled to start the eleventh; Al Pilarcik’s groundout bunt put Williams at third, and rookie Carl Powis sacrificed Williams home. Billy Lowes, who replaced a magnificent Mike Fornieles in the bottom of the tenth, shut down the Senators in their home half of the eleventh, thus sealing another opening day loss for the Senators.^[9]

On opening day, the Senators' lineup went like this:

Whitey Herzog	center field
Herb Plews	second base
Pete Runnels	first base
Eddie Yost	third base
Roy Sievers	left field
Jim Lemon	right field
Clint Courtney	catcher
Lyle Luttrell	short stop
Bob Chakales	pitcher

But it wouldn’t stay that way for long, as manager Chuck Dressen tried to piece together a team with some sort of consistency. Herb Plews and Lyle Luttrell were anemic at the plate and were shuffled with Gerry Snyder and Rocky Bridges. Herzog failed to produce the way he was expected to; hitting an anemic .167, he was sent down to the AAA Miami Marlins, never to return that year. Dressen was forced to platoon him with Dick Tettelbach. The middle of the order, Runnels, Yost, Sievers, Lemon, seemed to be the only ones who were consistent, with Roy being the most consistent of the group. His hits and RBI were up, and he had ten homers by the end of May.

There was no disguising the fact that Dressen’s major worry was the pitching staff. Starters Ted Abernathy and Russ Kemmerer were struggling to find wins. Camilo Pascual and Pedro Ramos,

two great Joe Cambria acquisitions from Cuba, were inconsistent, with Ramos giving up the long ball frequently. Veteran Chuck Stobbs (15-15, 3.60 ERA in '56), was the only one able to go the distance in his first six starting assignments. Bud Byerly, a New York Giants acquisition, and Tex Clevenger and submariner Dick Hyde seemed to be the only hope in the bullpen. The pitching staff's earned run average would end up being 4.85 for the season, the worst in both leagues.

Three weeks into the season, on May 7, Calvin Griffith broke his Uncle Clark's firm position, fired Dressen, and replaced him with third base coach Cookie Lavagetto. Lavagetto was forever etched into baseball history as the player whose pinch hit double in Game 4 of the 1947 World Series—his last hit in a Dodgers uniform—broke up Bill Bevan's bid for a perfect game.^{vi}

Cookie was a loyal friend to Chuck Dressen. After his playing days in Brooklyn ended, he played with the minor league Oakland Oaks under managers Casey Stengel and Dressen. When Dressen was hired to manage the Dodgers in 1951, Lavagetto quit playing and hired on as a coach with him. When Dressen was hired to manage the Senators in 1954, he took Lavagetto with him.^{vii}

At first, Cookie refused to take the manager's job, wanting to remain loyal to his friend. "It's sickening," he said. "They want me to take the job and I won't. I'm still with Chuck wherever he goes."

It was Dressen who convinced him to stay in DC, saying, "Look, Cookie, this is your big chance. This is the way it happens in baseball. I got my first job as a manager when one of my friends was fired. Nobody is a better friend of mine than Bucky Harris, but I also took his job in Washington when he was fired."^{viii}

Roy, Jim Lemon, Chuck Stobbs, Pete Runnels, and Ed Yost were a chorus of veterans, all decrying the rumor that it was a "rebellion" by the players that forced Dressen out. In an interview for Bob Addie at the *Washington Post*, published in *The Sporting News*, Runnels stated, "I learned more baseball under Dressen in two years than I did all my life under other managers. Charlie wasn't tough. He was enthusiastic about all he did and I think the general feeling of the players was he was always working for the good of the team. I'll tell you flat. There has never been any 'rebellion' or anything like that."^{ix}

A Manager in Spite of Himself

The transition was not an easy one.

Lavagetto never thought of himself as anything but a coach and he had a tough time at first adjusting to the position. He was used to being out of the spotlight and had always deflected

sportswriters' questions to Dressen. He liked playing cards with the players and enjoyed his anonymity.

That all changed when he became a manager. The life free of mental strain was gone and he was thrust into the limelight. People now wanted to hear what he had to say. On the road he was given a suite in the team's hotel. He did not like being alone and missed having a roommate. He also did not like deciding the batting order and the pitching rotation, and making decisions during games. What bothered him most was dealing with the losses of a last-place team. Eventually the constant worrying took a toll on Cookie, and he began to have trouble sleeping and eating and even broke out in hives.^x

After a while, though, Lavagetto became more confident. Although the team finished in eighth place in his first three seasons as manager, in 1960 they improved to fifth.

Roy remembered, "Cookie was a real player's manager. He enjoyed just being with the guys. He was always good to me. He could be firm when he had to, but he treated us all with respect."

Broadcaster Bob Wolff also remembered Lavagetto with fondness: "Cookie was a great personal friend of mine. He handled his players very well. He was a great baseball man."^{xi}

Television talk show host Maury Povich, son of Hall of Fame sportswriter Shirley Povich, spent three years as a bat boy for the Washington Senators during the tenure of Bucky Harris. In 1955, he "graduated" to become Bob Wolff's production assistant. Maury would take notes, go for coffee, or just be available to do anything Bob or the players needed. In a phone interview, he reminisced fondly about his days in Washington:

My friend was Cookie Lavagetto. First of all, his door was always open to everyone. He was so unkempt in terms of his hair. It always looked like he had never slept, and he was always taking his hand and rubbing it through his hair. He had this nice mane of gray hair, and he would just rub his hand through this mane of hair trying to think of what the hell to do to make things better! Cookie was good to me because his door was always open, I can't remember one instance when Cookie's door wasn't open. And he might have had a little pint of liquor in there, yea, a little somethin' to tide him over after the game! I don't think there was anything 'politically incorrect' about having a pint or a half pint there on the table of a manager after the game.^{xii}

The Great Year Begins

Once Lavagetto took over, things settled down and Roy began his incredible home run tear. He had a respectable May, hitting six homers. On May 16 he hit two in one game off his friend Billy Pierce of the White Sox. That put his total to 10, and his average at .299 for the month.

June was another good month, with Roy going yard eight times. He seemed to like White Sox pitching...a lot! He took pitcher Jack Harshman deep twice in June and once in August. By the end of June, he had upped his average to .302. He would finish the month in grand style: on June 30, he got a dinger in each game of a double header against (who else?) the White Sox, the second one being a walk off homer off Dixie Howell.^{xiii}

Roy, who liked the hot Washington weather, caught fire in July, hitting nine round trippers, spreading them out over every team in the American League. Each homer seemed to be higher, farther, and more dramatic than the last.

Roy's daughter Shawn remembered those days well. "We would love coming to Washington," she said. "School would let out sometime in June, and Momma would pack us all up for the trip to DC. We, of course, loved seeing Daddy and watching him play. But we would secretly hope for a rain out. Then we would all go to Glen Echo Park. I loved the big swimming pool and the bumper cars especially!"

When asked if it was a big deal to see her dad play, Shawn responded, "In my mind, baseball wasn't such a big deal. I was very little and didn't really understand it all. I just knew it kept Daddy away from us."^{xiv}

Stuffed Boxes and an All-Star Snub

In July 1957, for the third time in the then 24-year history of the All Star Game, St. Louis would host the summer classic. A total of 30,693 paying customers would file through the turnstiles at the newly refurbished Busch Stadium, formerly Sportsman's Park, just a stone's throw from the Sievers residence. Among the fans that year would be Roy's parents, his wife and children, his brother Bill and his family, and many of his hometown friends.

The 1957 All Star Game started out mired in controversy. The rumblings had begun in 1956, when five of the starting nine National League All Stars were from the Cincinnati Reds. Questions were raised, but nothing was said. '57 would be another story altogether. The Reds fans stuffed the ballot box and elected nearly their entire team, with the exception of first baseman George Crow.

The Cincinnati Times-Star newspaper published an already filled out ballot for the ease of the fans. Many local bars and taverns purportedly made it a prerequisite to fill out a ballot before ordering a meal. Another story told of a local tavern receiving ballots from Reds sponsor Burger Beer and leaving them on the counter in stacks. One young girl came by, took 1400 home, filled out all of her favorite Reds players and then returned the stack to the tavern, to be returned to the beer distributor the next day, who then mailed them in to the league office. The Z-Bar in Cincinnati accounted for over 10,000 ballots. A late deluge of over 550,000 ballots from Cincinnati raised the prospect that seven of the starting nine players would be from the Reds. All

of this was perfectly legal at the time. Any other Major League city could have done the same, but none did.^{xv}

An investigation instituted by then Major League Commissioner Ford Frick revealed that over half of the ballots cast had come from Cincinnati. Not wanting the game to be turned into a “mockery,” Frick stated, “An overbalance of Cincinnati ballots has resulted in the selection of a team which would not be typical of the league and which would not meet with the approval of the fans the country over.”^{xvi} In an effort to achieve some semblance of parity, he removed Gus Bell and Wally Post from the starting nine and inserted Hank Aaron and Willie Mays on his own authority. The following year, he transferred the responsibility for All Star voting to the players, managers and coaches; it would stay that way until 1970, when the vote returned to the fans.

Told he would be used as a pinch hitter, an excited Sievers bought 21 tickets for family and friends to watch the game. Unfortunately, his seats were relegated to some far-flung section of the stadium next to several old beer signs. And to add insult to injury, Sievers, along with five others, did not play in the game. Manager Casey Stengel kept the team “Yankee heavy,” keeping Yogi Berra and Mickey Mantle in for the whole game and subbing in pitcher Bob Grim, shortstop Gil McDougald, and first baseman Bill Skowron.

Roy said:

Casey had a job to do and he did it. Certainly I was disappointed I didn’t get to play in the All-Star Game, but I guess my biggest disappointment was in disappointing my home-town folks. My mother, my dad and all my friends were there.

Casey told me he meant to use me for a pinch hitter for Billy Pierce in the ninth, but then Billy was going so good that Casey left him in there—and I didn’t blame him. I wanted to see us win.

But I just wish I could have had one lick for everybody back home. It was a big kick for me to play in my own home town—at least, I mean appear with the All-Star squad, even if I didn’t play. It was a chance-in-the-lifetime shot because the next time St. Louis gets an All Star Game I’ll be too old. Casey wanted to win and I didn’t blame him...still...^{xvii}

The manager gets paid to make the tough decisions. In the eighth inning, Stengel chose to replace Ted Williams with Minnie Miñoso in left field instead of Roy. It turned out to be a propitious choice. Miñoso’s double in the bottom of the ninth scored Al Kaline and put the American League up 6-2.

However, the National League came back with a vengeance in the bottom of the ninth. The White Sox’s Billy Pierce walked Stan Musial.

Then Willie Mays tripled to right, scoring Musial. Mays scored a moment later on a wild pitch to Hank Foiles. Foiles singled, and Gus Bell walked. Don Mossi replaced Pierce and struck out Eddie Mathews for the first out. Ernie Banks singled, scoring Foiles and making it 6-5. When Bell tried to go to third on the play, Miñoso fielded the ball and fired to Frank Malzone, getting Bell for the second out. Banks went to second on the throw. Gil Hodges was chosen to pinch hit for pitcher Clem Labine as Bob Grim came in to pitch for the AL. Hodges sent a shot to left-center, but Miñoso made a spectacular running catch to end the game.^{xviii}

It's a sure bet that Roy would have loved to have had that chance.

Hot Fun in the Summertime

After the All Star break, Roy continued to punish American League pitching: he hit 22 of his record setting 42 home runs from July 17 to the end of the season. But Roy's bat was not the only thing on fire. As the temperature rose in Washington, so did his fielding. In an article published in *The Sporting News*, Dr. George Resta, the Senators' physician, concurred that Dr. Bennett's experiment on Roy's shoulder was bearing fruit. "He's the only man I've ever heard of who has gained so much free use of his arm following such surgery," he observed.

Roy's vastly stronger throwing began to command respect from the runners in the league. "I can cut loose from a three-quarters position once in a while and get pretty good distance," Roy said. He developed an extremely quick release that ensured base runners would not take chances with him.^{xix}

August turned out to be just as hot as July, both literally and figuratively. Starting with the Saturday game on July 27 against the Athletics, Roy connected for seven home runs in eight games. Starting with a blast in the second game of a double header on Sunday the 28th, Roy homered in six straight games, tying the six-consecutive-home-run mark set by Ken Williams of the 1922 Browns and Lou Gehrig with the 1931 Yankees.^{xx}

It was almost seven in a row, however. Playing the Tigers at home on Sunday, August 4, Roy came up for his last at bat in the bottom of the eighth and drove one into deep center field.

"My six straight games with a home run were quite an accomplishment," Roy maintained.

On the seventh day, Paul Foytack (of the Detroit Tigers), who I liked to hit all the time, was pitching. The wind was blowing out a little in Washington. I popped out the first three times and then in my last at bat, I hit it pretty good and I thought it was going out of the park, but Bill Tuttle, the center fielder, jumped up and caught the ball against the fence. I thought I would break the record. Good catch on his part, though.

Roy's most dramatic walkoff homer of the year came on August 3. Only 4,600 die-hard fans came out on that sweltering, 98 degree August Saturday night to see the Senators and the Tigers battle for four hours and 24 minutes in a seventeen-inning pitcher's duel. The Senators got things going in the bottom of the first. After Ed Yost's ground out to start the inning, Bob Usher doubled into the left centerfield gap. Jim Lemon popped one up to second baseman Frank Bolling for the second out. Then Tigers manager Jack Tighe did the smart thing; he intentionally walked Sievers. Roy then strayed a little too far off the bag, and pitcher Billy Hoefl pegged a perfect pickoff throw that would have ended the inning, but first sacker Ray Boone let it get by him. Usher scampered to third and Roy took second on the error. Art Shult then singled to center, bringing home the first two runs of the game, and Ed Fitz Gerald ended the inning with a ground out.

The Senators kept their 2-0 lead into the top of the sixth. Russ Kemmerer gave up only one hit in that inning, but that was a solo homer by "Mr. Tiger" Al Kaline, bringing the Tigers within one.

Then, in the top of the seventh, Kemmerer, tiring in the heat, gave up singles to catcher Red Wilson and pinch hitter Charlie Maxwell. Pitcher Billy Hoefl's sac fly scored Wilson to tie it up. After Kemmerer gave up another single to Harvey Kuenn, manager Cookie Lavagetto decided he had seen enough. He brought in Tex Clevenger, who promptly closed out the inning.

And there is where it stayed. Each manager sent in relievers after the seventh until manager Tighe settled on Harry Byrd and Cookie sent in steady Bud Byerly. Byrd and Byerly dueled for five innings in the sweltering evening heat, throwing the occasional hit but following it up with ground outs and pop ups.

Lavagetto brought in submariner Dick Hyde in the top of the sixteenth. Steve Boros singled to start the inning, Red Wilson sac bunted him to second, and Jerry Groth singled him in. Hyde then retired Harry Byrd and Ron Samford to end the top of the inning, but the Tigers were up 3-2.

But our hero Roy Sievers would have none of that. He singled to start the bottom of the sixteenth. Julio Becquer then sac bunted him over to second. Jack Tighe replaced Byrd with Al Abner, but the Senators smelled a rally.

Catcher Lou Berberet singled Sievers home, then took second on Kaline's long throw from right field. Milt Bolling hit a grounder to third baseman Steve Boros, who threw it past Ray Boone at first, and Berberet took third on the error. Rocky Bridges hit a comebacker to Al Abner, who threw out Berberet at home. That put Bolling on second and Bridges on first. Lavagetto sent in Jerry Schoonmaker to pinch hit for Hyde, and Jerry drew a walk to load the bases. Up came "the walking man," Ed Yost.

Could he do it? Not that night. Yost struck out to end the inning, leaving the bases swollen with Senators.

Lavagetto decided on young Ted Abernathy to try to hold the Tigers at bay. Abernathy, 24 years old and only in his third season of pro ball, had been manager Chuck Dressen's go-to guy in 1955, appearing in 40 games and posting a 5-9 record mostly in relief. He languished with Washington from '55 through '57, then was sent down to the minors for '58 and '59. After resurfacing with the Senators in 1960, he would go on to have a distinguished career after the 1961 expansion, spending seasons with the Indians, Cubs, Braves, Reds, and Cardinals, and closing out his career with the Kansas City Royals, posting a fine lifetime 63-69 W/L record with 149 saves and leading the majors in saves in '65 and '67.^{xxi}

But on the night in question, Abernathy did what he was supposed to do: three up and three down.

The Senators started the bottom of the seventeenth, and it looked like they'd be playing into Monday morning. Faye Throneberry flied out to Kaline in right, then big Jim Lemon grounded out meekly second to first.

Up strode our hero, Roy Sievers.

He had had enough, as had all those who had stayed and sweltered until the wee hours of Sunday morning. He took the first Al Abner fast ball he saw and sent it into the steamy night air, deep into the left field bleachers, sending everyone home happy...except for the Tigers, of course. Roy's solo home run in the bottom of the seventeenth would give Bob Addie, Shirley Povich and all of the *Washington Post* and *Evening Star* beat scribes volumes to write about over the weekend.^{xxii}

"Yeah, I remember that one!" said Roy. "Boy, was it hot. We'd been playin' for hours and I just wanted to get in and take a shower. By that last inning, I figured, now's the time, and just went up there tryin' to end the thing."

It would be the third of Roy's five walkoff homers for the year, and it turned him into the Senators' greatest gate attraction since Walter Johnson. Washington became one of four teams to show an increase in attendance for the '57 season.

With that August 3 dinger, his 30th of the year, Roy was well into his record-setting 42-homer season. Finishing August with seven homers total, Roy unleashed his September fury on Whitey Ford and Art Ditmar of the Yankees and in particular on Ray Moore of the Orioles, whom he took deep three times in the month, twice on Saturday, September 21 at Memorial Stadium in Baltimore. Roy's biggest blow came on September 14, when he tagged a Ned Garver fastball for a home run in the bottom of the tenth inning to give the Senators a 3-2 walkoff victory over the Athletics.

Hall of Fame third baseman Brooks Robinson remembers that big year:

“Roy Sievers was one of the nicest guys you’d ever wanna meet and one hell of a hitter. I was still playin’ part time in 1957, but Roy just hit the heck out of us, especially Ray Moore. I think he hit him deep about three or four times that year. What a great swing he had.”^{xxiii}

The Race Is On

Nothing pleases newspaper reporters more than a story “with legs:” a story with human interest that keeps readers engaged and sells newspapers. And what captures readers' interest more than anything are the great sports streaks and rivalries. DiMaggio’s 56 game hitting streak, along with Ted Williams’s equally quixotic attempt to hit over .400 for a season, gave American sportswriters fodder for an entire summer and well into the fall of 1941. Grandfathers today can still tell their grandchildren exactly where they were in 1951 when the Dodgers began their late season slide and “The Giants win the pennant, the Giants win the pennant!!” And even though Baltimore’s Camden Yards officially holds 45,971, the entire population of Maryland will swear they were there in 1995 when Cal Ripken Jr. broke Lou Gehrig’s seemingly unbreakable streak of 2,131 straight games played.

In 1957, Roy's prodigious home run output was the stuff of legend for American sports writers in general and the DC scribes in particular. Washington had not had had anything but the perennially cellar-dwelling Senators to read about since their one and only pennant in 1924. But this was a legitimate streak. The *Washington Post* and the *Evening Star* were harkening back to the DiMaggio era, posting Sievers', Williams', and Mantle’s hitting accounts day by day to go along with the usual American and National League standings. The three heroes' stats were pretty evenly matched throughout the entire season. The monthly tallies looked like this:

	Sievers	Williams	Mantle
April	4	4	2
May	6 (10)	7 (11)	8 (10)
June	8 (18)	9 (20)	11 (21)
July	9 (27)	9 (29)	7 (28)
August	7 (34)	4 (33)	6 (34)
September	8 (42)	5 (38)	0 (34)

As can be seen, Mantle had a torrid June, belting 11 round trippers to even himself up with the other two after his slow April start. Each man see-sawed through each month, keeping pace with the others.^{xxiv}

September became the telling month, though. It is quite possible that Roy would have been out-slugged by both Mantle and Williams if fate had not intervened.

Mickey Mantle had famously struggled with leg problems throughout his career. His battle with osteomyelitis kept him out of military service. His famous near-knee shattering injury in game

two of the 1951 Yankees-Giants World Series should have ended his career then and there. And his severe thigh injury, sustained when he crashed into the bleacher wall in Boston in September of '55, kept Casey Stengel up at night.^{xxv}

Mantle's legs never stopped taking a pounding, and 1957 proved to be no exception. Fighting shin splints throughout August and being relegated to pinch hitting roles, he finally succumbed and was admitted to Lenox Hill Hospital on September 6. He stayed for five days and was thereafter used sparingly by Stengel, who opted to save his star for the upcoming World Series. This might have cost Mantle the Home Run and RBI crown in '57, but he still walked away with the American League MVP trophy.^{xxvi}

At almost exactly the same time, Red Sox slugger Ted Williams, suffering from a severe chest cold, was ordered to bed by team physician Dr. Ralph McCarthy. The cold worsened into pneumonia and kept Williams sidelined for over two weeks. He was able to recover enough to give a good showing in September, but ultimately he lost out to Roy.^{xxvii}

By the time the last out was recorded, Roy had achieved another milestone. His league-leading 42 home runs and 114 RBI would give him the dubious distinction of being the first person in MLB history to win the home run and RBI title with a last place team. He also led the league in total bases (a club record 331), came in fourth in runs scored (99), and came in third in the MVP race for the year.

Respect must be given to Roy's worthy opponents. Mantle would end the regular season with 34 homers, 94 RBI, and a .365 batting average. Williams would finish with 38 home runs, 87 RBI, and a league leading .388 average, along with a then record-setting milestone. From September 17 through the 23, he reached base on 16 consecutive plate appearances. Roy's, Ted's, and Mickey's numbers were the "stuff that dreams are made of" for many modern day players.

By the end of the season, the Williams-Mantle-Sievers triumvirate would lead the league in 13 out of 44 statistical batting categories, with Roy winning four outright: home runs, RBI, extra bases, and total bases. Even sweeter, from Roy's perspective: Ted Williams proclaimed that Roy had "the sweetest right-handed swing in baseball."

Can't Get Enough of That Good Thing

With the baseballs flying out of the stadiums with great alacrity, the Senators needed to keep the team in the plus side of the headlines for as long as they could. Enter Herb Heft.

Heft, the director of promotions for the Senators, had the dubious job of making a silk purse out of a sow's ear, and he did so with panache. Having had a successful career as a sportswriter for the *Washington Post* from 1943 to 1954 and then for *The Sporting News*, he had returned to Washington in 1955 to work for the Senators. He subsequently moved with the team to

Minneapolis in 1960, and then became the first PR director for the New York Mets in 1963. He later went on to become Executive Vice President for the Baltimore Bullets, later to become the Washington Wizards.

Heft, in a precursor to today's All Star Game home run derby, arranged for a head-to-head home run contest between Mickey Mantle and Roy on the night of September 6, when the Yankees came to DC to play the Senators in a three-game set. Mantle had to work overtime, hitting in both the right and left handed contests. Mantle and Bill Skowron were paired up with Sievers and Jim Lemon in the right hand contest, and Mantle and Yogi Berra were matched with Clint Courtney and Lou Berberet for the left hand contest.

Sad to say, Mantle took the home run exhibition that night, but the Senators won the game, 4 to 3.

The Big Night

In a gesture of magnanimity, the Senators decided to give Roy a “night” in his honor. Local businessman Edward R. Carr chaired the Roy Sievers Night committee and arranged a joyous and varied program on September 23.

Mr. Carr, a successful home developer in the area, was an energetic civic leader within the metropolitan community and also the president of both the National Home Builders Association and the DC Board of Trade. A dedicated Senators fan, Mr. Carr was instrumental in securing housing for many of the Senators players, including Roy and Harmon Killebrew.

The evening began with several songs presented by “The Singing Senators.” This a cappella vocal group was started in the mid-50’s by then Senators broadcaster and Hall of Famer Bob Wolff. Bob had been a big band singer in his college days and played a mean ukulele. He started the vocal group as a means of relaxation on the long road trips. Players would come and go, but the group, with our own Roy Sievers as lead baritone, rose to such prominence as to be featured for several hours on the nationally syndicated Dave Garroway Show in 1959.^{xxviii}

After the vocal stylings of the Singing Senators came the hilarious baseball antics of Nick Altrock. A veteran coach with the Senators from 1912 to 1953, Altrock frequently teamed up with Al Schacht, the “Clown Prince of Baseball,” to perform comedy routines in dozens of stadiums throughout the United States.

Following Altrock’s hilarity came the Senators version of “shadow ball.” Shadow Ball had been a main stay of the Negro Leagues for decades. The team would take the field, the pitcher would throw an imaginary ball to the batter, who would hit, and everyone would scurry around like there was a real ball in play, throwing to bases, tossing it over their shoulders, and performing

many other spectacular feats of legerdemain. The fans sat in amazement as the players went about their drills as if there were a real ball in play.^{xxix}

After that came a comic “footrace” between Clint Courtney and Pedro Ramos. A lightning-fast runner, Ramos (with the Yankees in 1964) would constantly challenge Mickey Mantle to a \$100 sprint race. (Mantle always declined.)

On this night, however, Courtney would start at second base and walk to home plate, while Ramos had to run the bases at full speed and try to beat him to the plate. Courtney, with a little “cheating jog” every once in a while, beat Ramos to the plate. Following that came an egg throwing contest, with its usual messy results, won by pitcher Art Schult.

The feature of the evening was the home run derby. Roy, along with teammates Faye Throneberry, Lou Berberet, and youngster Harmon Killebrew, went head to head with Boston’s own Ted Williams and his mates Dick Gernert, Jackie Jensen, and former Senators first baseman Mickey Vernon. Appropriately, Roy won the contest, hitting two out of five right handed, and Ted hit one out to win the left handed contest. The Senators generously gave a \$1,000 check to Roy and gave Ted a check for \$250, which he donated to his favorite home town charity, the Jimmy Fund for Cancer.

The coup de grace occurred when the Master of Ceremonies, Vice President Richard Nixon, an unabashed Sievers fan, appeared on the field to make presentations to Roy and his family. The Vice President gave Roy and his wife Joan the keys to a brand new 1957 Mercury station wagon and complimented the 17,800 fans by saying, “This proves Washington is one of the most loyal baseball cities in the country.”

Next, Joan was given a beautiful mink stole and Roy’s children Robin, 5, and Shawn, 3, were given new tricycles. Then the “showering” began. Roy was presented with a full set of Sam Snead golf clubs, a Motorola clock radio, a tape recorder, a television set, free haircuts from a local barber shop, and an engraved wrist watch, along with dozens of other gifts donated by his teammates.^{xxx}

“Oh yeah, I remember,” said Roy’s daughter Shawn. “I had my little checkered dress and my Buster Browns on. They gave Daddy a car and Momma a pretty mink coat. Then they gave my brother a bicycle and gave me a tricycle, and I just took off around the bases. I didn’t know any better; I just wanted to ride my new bike!”^{xxxi}

Also viewing the festivities that evening were Jack Dunn, assistant general manager of the Baltimore Orioles, and Lum Harris, one of the Orioles’ coaches. Talking with columnist Bob Addie a few days later, Dunn described the evening thusly: “First, Mrs. Sievers wept, then Roy shed a tear of happiness, then I noticed several of the fans were crying as well. Then Lum Harris looked at me and we reminded each other that the Orioles had traded him away. Then we both decided that maybe we should be crying as well!”

Roy's wife and family, his parents Walter and Anna, his brother Bill and his family, as well as thousands of great Washington fans, watched as Roy, overcome with emotion, lowered his head and sobbed as he shook the Vice President's hand. In an interview, Roy remembered it this way:

"That was the most memorable night of my life. They gave me a car and all kinds of things. I'm not ashamed of it, I wept like a baby, all those fans cheering for me and my folks come up all the way from St. Louis. I'll never forget it."

True to form, however, the Senators lost to the Red Sox that evening 9 to 4. Ralph Lument, the Senators' new bonus baby who was still attending college at the University of Massachusetts, had rushed back to Washington to pitch to his "neighbors." The 20 year old Lument had just made his Major League debut against the Yankees three weeks earlier, and the Senators held high hopes for this fireballer.

But Lument, who hadn't worked out or pitched since his previous start because of attending classes, was also nursing a heavy cold that evening, and it surely affected him. After striking out Jimmy Piersall to start the game, he proceeded to give up six hits and two runs and to hit one batter in one and a third innings. Pedro Ramos was brought in to relieve Lument in the top of the second. Inheriting two runners, Ramos proceeded to give up RBI singles to Frank Malzone and "The Golden Boy" Jackie Jensen before finally getting Dick Gernert to ground into an inning-ending double play.

Behind 6-0 in the fourth inning, the Senators brought in former Red Sox Russ Kemmerer to relieve Ramos. Kemmerer fared no better, though. In only two innings, he gave up a walk; a two-run homer to Frank Malzone; a single to Ken Aspermonte; and an RBI double to Stan White. White, trying to stretch his double into a triple, scored, unfortunately, on a throwing error by the honoree of the evening, Roy Sievers.^{xxxii}

Besides the genuine outpouring of affection for Roy, the only other bright spot of the evening for the Senators was a tremendous pinch hit home run by their youngest bonus baby, future Hall of Famer Harmon Killebrew. Roy managed two hits in four at bats.

Charlie Brotman holds the distinction of announcing every Presidential Parade in Washington DC since 1957. He was the Senators' public address announcer and director of promotions from 1956 to 1971 and was invited to be the Opening Day announcer when the Washington Nationals returned to DC in 2005. He remembers Roy's evening this way:

It was a really special night. The Vice President was there, and Roy's kids and his folks. It was a very special night for all of us. Roy was everybody's favorite ball player; his personality, the way he handled himself. He was always everybody "superhero" 'cause he would come up with the big [hit] that would win the game. He never had the attitude that he was "above and beyond"

anybody else. It wasn't like he was a superstar and used it to his advantage. He was just a regular guy!^{xxxiii}

It would have been nice if the team could have rallied behind Roy to make his evening a sweeter success.

High Praise from High Places

Remembering that night, Roy mused, "Yeah, I was Nixon's favorite player. Nixon liked me, and Eisenhower liked my roomie Jim Lemon. He had me over to the White House several times. See that picture there? (Referring to a large, affectionately signed photo of President Nixon which hangs in Roy's living room.) He gave that to me personally."

Vice President Nixon was an unashamed Roy Sievers fan and held him in deep regard. He was also an avid Washington sports fan and sincerely enjoyed throwing out the traditional opening day first pitch every year when he was in office as President.

In a letter sent to Edward Carr, Nixon is quoted as saying:

Dear Eddie,

I am enclosing a modest contribution to the Roy Sievers Fund which I understand you are handling.

No man in baseball more deserves recognition than Roy. The fact that he is leading the league in both home runs and runs batted in is, of course, in itself outstanding but, in addition, the determination which enabled him to overcome the effects of an almost disastrous injury is an inspiration to our young people all over the country.

I think the highest compliment I've heard paid to him was expressed by my 11-year-old daughter Tricia. After she had seen him hit his thirty-seventh and thirty-eighth home runs against Kansas City on television, she exclaimed that "Washington shouldn't even trade Roy Sievers for Mickey Mantle."

This note brings my best wishes for what I know will be a very memorable evening on Roy Sievers night.^{xxxiv}

The Slight at the End of the Tunnel

One would think that, for a humble Midwestern boy to be mentioned in the same breath with deities such as Ted Williams and Mickey Mantle, to battle with them tooth and nail for one

hundred and fifty two games and best them in two out of three categories, it would be enough. Enough to earn the respect of fans and sportswriters alike. Enough to garner the most esteemed crown in baseball, the Most Valuable Player award.

One would be wrong.

Singlehandedly providing the only offense for a perennial cellar-dwelling team like the Senators was considered not valuable enough for the Baseball Writers Association of America. In 1957 Mantle would win the MVP crown for a second time with 233 votes, followed by Williams with 209, and then Roy with 205.

Bob Addie, a dean of Washington baseball writers, was chagrined, as he wrote in a *Washington Post* article in October of '57:

Looking at the past selections for the Most Valuable Player in the American and National leagues, it's obvious that, despite what individual heroics he performs, Sievers will have no chance for the top award. Why? I don't know. But the award always goes to a player with a first-division club, usually the player with a pennant winner and rarely to a player with a club as low as fourth. That, of course, would eliminate Roy.

Addie went on to explain that since 1931, when the award was established, the National League had had 17 players from pennant-winning clubs take the award; three from second place teams; one from a third place club; four from a fourth place team; and one from a fifth place team. The American League nearly mirrored that average, with 16 players from first place clubs, seven from second place clubs, one from a third place club and two from fourth place clubs.

Addie went on to say:

This brings up the old question as to what constitutes the most valuable player. Literally, it undoubtedly means the player who is most valuable to his club. It doesn't mean the club MUST win the pennant—else only the flag winners would have the MVP boys. I suppose it all means the without the MVP, a club would not have done as well as it did. ...Certainly, the Washington Senators could not have done as well as they did without Sievers.

But this premise is never accepted by the voters among the baseball writers. They'll argue, logically, that the Yanks couldn't have won the pennant without Mickey Mantle, and the Red Sox couldn't have finished third without Ted Williams. Both have contributed outstanding performances. But what happens to the poor man's hero, Sievers, who beats out these more famous stars in two departments—homers and RBI? Can you shunt Roy aside?

Sievers figures to be no better than third in the voting this year. That's a distinction in itself. But who can say he doesn't deserve the top spot if he succeeds in winning two crowns? Is a man with a first division club who hasn't performed as well as Sievers entitled to be named the most valuable player because he was surrounded by better players? It's something to think about.^{xxxv}

For Roy, the third place he achieved in 1957 would be as high as he would get in the MVP balloting. He would be considered for MVP seven times in his 17-year career (even in his rookie year), and be an American League All Star four times.

"Yeah, I had a helluva good year," said Roy, "best I ever had. And I was gonna make them pay for me the next year!"

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- ^{iv} "Capital Close-ups." *The Sporting News*, 17 April 1957, p. 14.
- ^v Povich, "Sievers' Weighty Hitting."
- ^{vi} Sisson, Matt. "Cookie Lavagetto." Retrieved from <http://www.sabr.org/bioproj/person/fe135be8>.
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- ^x Sisson, "Cookie Lavagetto."
- ^{xi} Author's telephone interview with Bob Wolff.
- ^{xii} Author's telephone interview with Maury Povich.
- ^{xiii} Sievers home run log on www.baseball-reference.com.
- ^{xiv} Author's telephone interview with Shawn Sievers, October 2014.
- ^{xv} "Stuffing the Box: The Redlegs and the 1957 All Star Game." Retrieved from <http://www.redszone.com/forums/showthread.php?60255-Stuffing-the-Box-The-Redlegs-and-the-1957-All-Star-Game>.
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^{xxiv} Statistics retrieved from www.baseball-reference.com

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^{xxx} "Nixon, Fans Honor Roy Sievers Tonight." *The Washington Post*, 23 September 1957, p. A20.

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^{xxxii} "Nats Lose on Sievers Night, 9-4." *The Washington Post*, 23 September 1957, p. A17.

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