

Roy Sievers: “The sweetest right handed swing in baseball”

INTRODUCTION

In 1959, the Washington Senators brought something to the D.C. area that had been missing for a long time: Hope.

Roy Sievers had his Hall of Fame year in 1957, leading the league with 42 home runs and 114 RBI. His roommate and outfield sidekick Jim Lemon had belted a respectable 17 homers and 64 RBI. 1958 was nearly a carbon copy of the previous season, with Sievers hitting 39 round trippers and 108 RBI and Lemon chiming in with 26 dingers and 75 RBI. “The Walking Man” Ed Yost did what he did best, drawing 73 and 81 walks and posting a .370 and .361 on base percentage in respective years, bringing in 38 and 39 runs. “Scrap Iron” Clint Courtney and Pete Runnels contributed with respectable RBI totals, and 1958 Rookie of the Year Albie Pearson earned that honor by literally walking in Ed Yost’s footsteps, getting 64 walks, a .354 on base percentage and 33 RBI.

Then in 1959, Calvin Griffith’s offensive-minded moves paid off. Harmon Killebrew, the bonus baby from Idaho, had been seasoned in the minors and was ready to play, and amateur free agent Bob Allison, with his matinée idol good looks and Popeye forearms was anxious to prove he could be a regular starter after an 11 game “cup of coffee” with the team in 1958. Allison would go on to be the 1959 Rookie of the Year and become part of the first MLB team to post two R.O.Y.’s in successive seasons. Sievers, Lemon, Allison and Killebrew were dubbed “The Fearsome Foursome,” and the balls were flying out of Griffith Stadium with great alacrity.

The Senators kept a stranglehold on last place, but we didn’t care. Mt. Calvary Parochial School had let out in June, and grade schoolers Paul and Glenn Scimonelli were left with long days of playing down at “the mound” with all the neighbor kids, and the inevitable early evening baseball games on Elmhurst Street in District Heights that would stretch on well past the time the street light went on. After supper, a little TV and then off to bed, where we would fall asleep to the dulcet sounds of Chuck Thompson and Bob Wolff calling the Senators play by play on WWDC radio. Being good Catholic boys, our bedtime prayers always included the Senators.

Saturday was always “allowance day.” Mother made it known; that 50 cents was “it” for the week. What you do with it was your business, but there would be no more. After finishing whatever chores we had, it was a beeline to the Kay-Cee drug store on Marlboro Pike. If you were frugal, you could stretch a quarter like a rubber band. 5 cents for a pack of Topps baseball cards, 10 cents for a Superman comic book, and 10 cents for a fountain cherry coke. Save the other quarter for after school Cokes and donuts.

Some weeks, we got lucky. We would do chores or errands for neighbors and earn another quarter or 50 cents. When that happened, it would be **5** packs of Topps cards. Had to build up your stash to play flip cards against the wall at school. Of course, you save all your Mantles, Mays, Aarons, Williams, and your favorite Senators players to use as trade bait, but Marv Throneberry?? Right into the spokes of your bicycle.

Although we treasured the time away from school, the long summer months would give way to boredom, so what do you do when it’s either too hot or too wet to go out and play? Let’s call up Roy Sievers!

Well, sure! We’d seen mom and dad use the phone, how hard could it be? Roy plays for the Senators, right? So he must live in DC! Let’s get the White Pages and look him up!

With trembling fingers and trepidatious hearts we ran down the list of “Sievers” to find only one “Sievers, R.” in the book. It must be him, we concluded.

Dialing carefully, we heard the phone ringing on the other end, a soft click, and then.....

The feeble sound of a very sweet old lady saying “Hello?”

Pillared with fear. What do we do?

“Hello?” she questioned again.

We did and said nothing.

“Hello.” This time with a little more consternation in her voice.

This can't be our hero Roy Sievers with that feeble little voice! WRONG NUMBER! HANG UP!

Without a word we sheepishly put the phone back in the cradle and ran pell mel out of the room. We had been told not to play with the phone. It was important that we keep it open in case my dad got a call from the U. S. Navy Band office, where he served as Trumpet and Post Horn soloist and later as section chief.

But we weren't playing. We sincerely wanted to call our hero Roy.

Several days went by. A strong summer rain was pelting the metro area, showing no signs of letting up. We knew the game would be canceled that night. So obviously, Roy would be home, right?

Surreptitiously meandering downstairs to my father's study, we once again looked up the number and re-dialed.

Again, the same results.

"Hello?" Again, the nice, feeble little voice.

Again, we say nothing.

"Hello!" This time with more fervor.

Not a word from us.

"I don't know who this is" she extorted, "but if you call again, I'm calling the operator and the police!"

That was it. Down went the phone, out we dashed, back upstairs to our room, vowing never again to place a call to our hero. Forever to remain a mythic figure, Sievers, R. was not to be called again.

But then, there was always Picture Day at Griffith Stadium.

Bill James, noted baseball historian and statistician, in his book *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract* (Simon & Shuster, 2003) describes Washington Senators slugger Roy Sievers thusly:

Can you name another player who had a value pattern as Roy Sievers? I'm not sure there is one. Sievers was a standout rookie in 1949, (for the St. Louis Browns) hitting .306 with 91 RBI, and winning the American League Rookie of the Year award. After that, however, he drifted into a prolonged slump, lost his regular status, had two serious injuries, drifted completely out of the Major Leagues, and had to go back to the minors and re-establish himself. He didn't re-emerge as a regular until five years later, 1954, but then became a star, driving in almost 100 runs a year for a decade.

In 1957, playing for the Washington Senators, Roy had a year that most players could only wish for. Hitting .301 while leading the American League with career highs in home runs (42) and RBI (114,) he ranked third behind Ted Williams (.731) and Mickey Mantle (.665) with a .579 slugging percentage. Sievers also led the league in total bases (a club-record 331) and was fourth in runs scored (99).

Sievers was on fire that year, for sure. He became the first Senator to win the RBI title since Goose Goslin accomplished the feat with 129 RBI in 1924. He also became the very first player in Washington history to win the home run crown after establishing the Senators team home run mark in 1954 through '56.

From July 28 through Aug. 3, in '57, he belted a home run in six consecutive games - tying an American League record at the time held by Ken Williams and Lou Gehrig. All this while staying true to a woeful Senators last place team.

In 1958, Sievers had another big year for Washington. He hit .295 with 39 home runs and 108 RBI. His homer total was third in the AL behind Mantle (42) and Rocky Colavito (41) while his RBI total ranked third behind Jackie Jensen (122) and Colavito (113). Sievers also was fourth in total bases (299) and fifth in slugging at .544.

Washington owner Calvin Griffith was a stark contrast to Roy's former Browns owner Bill Veeck, who treated his players more like family. After the 1957 season, Sievers, making only \$19,000 for that year, asked for a 100-percent raise to \$38,000 but only got 80-percent and settled for \$36,000. After '58, Roy asked for his initial \$38K again. Griffith wanted to cut Sievers' salary by 10-percent despite his numbers - reasoning that Sievers hadn't led the American League in any offensive category and stating categorically, "We finished in last place with you. We can finish in last place without you!"

Roy Sievers, the quiet, good natured Midwesterner, labored his entire career in the shadows of the likes of Ted Williams, Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, Henry Aaron, and Stan Musial. Baseball's vomitus "reserve clause" ensured his loyalty to a weak St. Louis Browns team and to a horribly mismanaged Washington Senators team, led by a miser who would not delve into his pockets to procure any type of baseball talent, and was more concerned with the "hot dog" money than fielding a good ball team.

Joe Cambria, a former dry cleaner from Baltimore, began scouting in the New Jersey minor leagues. He developed strong ties to Cuba and regularly filtered a succession of low cost ball players through the Senators starting as early as 1935. Happy to leave pre-Castro Cuba, many of these players agreed to the league minimum or lower. Once again, the Griffiths could field a team for practically nothing, lending credence to the old saying, "You get what you pay for."

Calvin Griffith also secretly opposed the inculcation of Negro League ballplayers on his club because The Homestead Grays, who played at Griffith Stadium when the Senators were on road trips, out drew the parent club. The money he made on their renting the stadium kept the team afloat. So, why kill the cash cow?

Frank Howard, the 1986 and 1970 American League home run champion relates;

"There were three people I knew who had the most mechanically sound, picture perfect right hand swings in baseball: Ken Griffey (Sr.) Dick Stuart, and Roy Sievers."

Frank Thomas, former slugger for the Pirates, Reds, Cubs, Phillies, and the Mets said;

"Roy Sievers was one of the greatest right handed hitters in the game. He had a picture perfect swing and should be considered for the Hall of Fame, but because he played for the Senators, he's ignored."

Ted Williams stated it more succinctly when he called Roy "The best right handed swing in baseball"

Career statistics do not a person make. The colorful, roller coaster life of Roy Sievers is the stuff of Hollywood movies, and Roy actually appeared in one! The story of his rise to the top, in the face of two significant injuries that would have ended the careers of most of today's modern player, has yet to be told.