

21 K

September 13, 1991—Twenty-nine years ago yesterday, old George Susce, the Washington Senators bullpen catcher, was warming up a pitcher in Memorial Stadium. Good Kid had seen some pitchers in his time. Susce called everybody “Good Kid,” so that’s what everybody called him back. But he’d never seen anybody with better stuff than the Nats right-hander had on that pleasant September night.

The rising fastball was on fire, jumping up above the belt. The overhand curveball had its bite. That goofy knuckleball was actually crossing the plate. And even the slider looked pretty decent too. Brooks Robinson, Jim Gentile, Boog Powell, and the rest of the Orioles were in for a long night.

“Good Kid, if you don’t pitch a no-hitter tonight, it’ll be your own fault,” Susce told Tom Cheney.

He didn’t pitch a no-hitter or a perfect game. He did something far rarer. Something absolutely unique. Something, actually, which may be the Baseball Record That Is Never Broken.

He struck out 21 Orioles on September 12, 1962.

You can win a lot of bar bets on that one. No, Roger Clemens does not hold the all-time record with his 20 K’s. That is the nine-inning record. Cheney needed sixteen innings, which, in its way, is just as amazing. Especially for a pitcher who would blow up his elbow at twenty-nine and would end with a 19–29 career record.

Cheney is coming back to Memorial Stadium tonight to commemorate the record and wave to the crowd.

Cheney is the 6-foot-tall, fifty-six-year-old Georgian who looks like a fellow who might have spent some years farming and might now run a propane gas business in Cordele. That's 40 miles from Albany, which is 25 miles from Morgan, population 400, where Cheney was born. It's all a long way from 21 K's and fame. Cheney doesn't mind. He's a man who'd rather work long-hour days at a real job than go to a card show and ask a kid for five bucks to sign his name with a "21" after it.

"The money would be nice," he says, "but I don't think I could do it. I still sign a lot of autographs because of the record, but I don't charge anybody. If I see a gleam in a kid's eye, that makes me feel good. . . .

"I think it's real nice of the Orioles to have me back," he adds with a little chuckle that seems to say "since it was them I struck out."

Some athletes cling to their one moment. Others run from it. Cheney does not seem to need to do either. The Game is right back there, comfortable and mysterious, whenever he wants to rub it.

"I can't explain it and neither can anybody else," says Cheney, who was 7-9 that season with a 3.17 ERA and 147 strikeouts in 173 innings. "How'd I do it? That's a good question. Just something nobody knows. It was one of those times when everything works."

He came up with the talent-rich Cardinals, then was traded to the world-champion Pirates. He was just wild enough not to get much chance until he was twenty-seven and the desperate expansion Senators put him in their rotation.

"We called ourselves the Misfits. You knew if you gave up one run, you had a good chance of losing," says Cheney, who was 8-9 in 1963 despite a 2.71 ERA.

The cool night that he set the record, he did in fact give up a run. That's why he set the mark. If Charlie Lau's seventh-inning single hadn't tied the game, 1-1, Cheney would never have gotten those 12 strikeouts from the eighth inning on. In the end, he battled through a 10-hitter with 4 walks. Nobody kept a pitch count. Who knows how many? Certainly 200, probably 250.

Manager Mickey Vernon "told me it looked like I got stronger as the game went along," recalls Cheney. "I didn't feel tired at the time but, after I sat down in front of my locker, I could hardly get up."

Actually, Vernon tried to take Cheney out after twelve innings. But Cheney said: "Nope." When pressed, he elaborated: "I'm finishing. I'm gonna win or lose."

By the end, he'd struck out Gentile (46 homers in '61), Russ Snyder, Dave Nicholson, Marv Breeding, and reliever Dick Hall three times apiece. He also got starter Milt Pappas, Brooks Robinson, Jerry Adair, Lau, Hobie Landrith, and Dick Williams once. (Whitey Herzog never got a chance to hit. The only Oriole who didn't fan was Powell, who led the team in strikeouts.)

"I didn't know I was anywhere close to the record [of 18] by [Bob] Feller and [Sandy] Koufax until they announced that I'd tied it when I struck out Breeding in the fourteenth," recalls Cheney. "It must have shaken me up 'cause my next pitch to Hall was extremely wild."

The night of his 21, Cheney seemed on the brink of stardom. After the game, Vernon said: "When he is able to control his fastball, he's as good as any pitcher in the business. You gotta stick with a guy like him. Trade him off and he's liable to win thirty."

The next spring, Cheney remembers he picked up where he'd left off, starting the year 6-0. Then, one night with a 3-0 lead against the same Orioles, his career effectively came to an end on one pitch. "The pain shot through my arm."

Three trips to the Mayo Clinic got him a diagnosis—"epicondylitis, it's like tennis elbow but on the bottom of the elbow, not the top"—and a prognosis—no surgery possible and no cure known. Cheney tried pitching through pain. He tried taking a whole year off. He tried a comeback.

"I'd lost it," he says. "It was kind of a bitter defeat. Over a few years, I got it out of my system."

Could the sixteen-inning game have led to the elbow problem the next year? Who knows? Was he unlucky? "Oh, no," he says. "I was very fortunate. I even got to pitch in the World Series" in 1960.

What was his Series highlight? "I came in against the Yankees with the bases loaded," he says. What happened?

"I served up a grand slam to [Bobby] Richardson," says Cheney, laughing.

"I helped him set the Series RBI record. . . .

"At least we got the last laugh on the Yanks in that Series. They'd beat us, 15-3, then we'd win, 3-2. Gino Cimoli said, 'They set the record [for runs in a Series] but we got the money.'"

Ah, the money. These days, if a twenty-seven-year-old had a solid season, then topped it off by fanning 21, he'd probably get a multiyear deal for a few million dollars. He sure wouldn't have to sell propane for seventeen years before he could open his own business.

"Born too soon," says Cheney.

What he remembers about his magic game is that everybody close to him shared in it. His wife listened to the radio in Washington. A cousin came to the game. And, back home in Morgan, Georgia, the night was clear and the radio broadcast came in perfectly so his parents could listen to every pitch.

Cheney wanted to call somebody and say, "I struck out twenty-one men tonight."

"But I had nobody I could surprise," he says. Then, after a second, he adds, "Except myself."