

FROM THE BULLPEN

The Nebraska Hot Stove League



of the Summer of '68, "The Year of the Pitcher"



Bob Gibson



Denny McLain

2018 Campaign

Edition No. 1

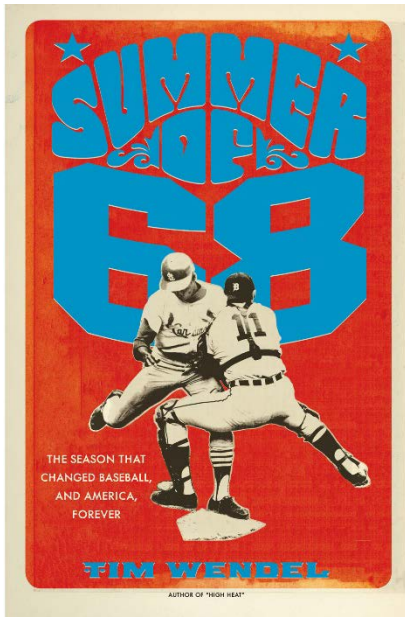
January 19, 2018

Gentlemen:

Happy New Year to each and every one of you. I hope that your 2018 is off to a great start.

Unless and until PAwesome exercises his option to redesign our website front page for 2018, I have taken the liberty of handling this privilege myself, with the aid and assistance of the oh-so-talented Linda, a/k/a League Secretary and Website Queen. We have chosen to honor the 50th anniversary of the Year of the Pitcher, 1968, with this year's masthead.

The brainstorm for our new look came from my recent reading of a very good book about the 1968 season, cleverly titled *Summer of 68* [FN 1]. Written by prolific baseball author Tim Wendel [FN 2] and published in 2012, *Summer of 68* is a "riveting account" which "masterfully weaves the social turbulence of 1968 into a narrative of one of the game's most memorable seasons." [FN 3]



I bought the book because 1968 was a watershed year in my life. It was the year that my sixth grade teacher at Pershing Elementary, Mrs. Reicher, allowed us to bring transistor radios into class so that we could listen to the afternoon broadcasts of the World Series games between the Detroit Tigers and the St. Louis Cardinals, an epic Series, as it turns out. I trace my fervent love of the game to that magical October when I was one of the chosen few whom Mrs. Reicher allowed to tune out class and tune in baseball with transistor radio and earplugs. In my mind's eye, I can still see myself in Mrs. Reicher's room and at the very desk I was sitting in that October, and I can still hear the euphonic voices of Pee Wee Reese and Ernie Harwell, the radio announcers for Games One, Two, Six and Seven, and the distinctive, gravelly voice of Jack Buck, who announced Games Three-Five. It may have been almost fifty years ago, but it seems like it was only last October.

Of course, as we all know, the Cardinals were favored by most to win the '68 Series (defending their 1967 World Series victory over the Red Sox) on the strength of the arm of Bob Gibson, together with the speed of Curt Flood and Lou Brock in the outfield and the power of Orlando Cepeda at first base. The Tigers expected to be competitive primarily by being the employer of Denny McLain, who was the first pitcher in baseball to win at least 30 games in 34 years, and as we all know, the last. As this audience well understands, the Tigers pulled off a surprising upset of the Cardinals through the lightning in the left arm of the portly portsider, Mickey Lolich, who won Games 2, 5 and 7 for the Tigers.

A few of the highlights from the 1968 Season, as chronicled in Wendel's book, are the following:

- * The Detroit Tigers won a team record 103 games in capturing the final American League pennant before each Major League was divided into two divisions. The Cardinals won 97 games to take the National League crown, a full nine games ahead of the second-place San Francisco Giants.
- * For the first time ever, the MVP in each league was a pitcher, with Bob Gibson capturing both the MVP and the Cy Young Award in the National League and Denny McLain accomplishing the same in the American League. Gibson had an earned run average of 1.12, the best ERA for a starting pitcher in the Live Ball Era. McLain won 31 games for the Tigers, the first pitcher to eclipse the 30-win milestone since Dizzy Dean in 1934.
- * Don Drysdale pitched six consecutive shutouts for the Dodgers in May and June, establishing a mark of 58-2/3 consecutive scoreless innings that would stand until Orel Hershisier of the same Dodgers organization would eclipse it in 1988 by pitching 59

consecutive scoreless innings. Luis Tiant of the Cleveland Indians had the lowest ERA in the American League at 1.60, and allowed a measly batting average of .168, a Major League record.

- * The only hitter in the American League who batted over .300 was Carl Yastrzemski, who barely achieved the mark at .301. Pete Rose of the Reds batted .335 to lead the Senior Circuit. Frank "The Capital Punisher" Howard topped all Major Leaguers with 44 home runs while Willie McCovey led the National League with 36. Lou Brock of the Cardinals and Bert Campaneros of the A's led their respective circuits in stolen bases with 62.

THE WORLD SERIES

The Fall Classic in 1968 began with **Game One** on Wednesday, October 2, at Busch Memorial Stadium in St. Louis. Gibson threw a five-hit shutout to get the win for the Cardinals, fanning 17 Tigers to establish a new single-game World Series strikeout mark that still stands. The Cardinals hung 4 on Denny McLain, who took the loss.

Game Two of the Series faced a matchup of Mickey Lolich and Nelson Briles. Willie Horton, Mickey Lolich and Norm Cash all homered for the Tigers as they coasted to an 8-1 win to even the Series at a game apiece.

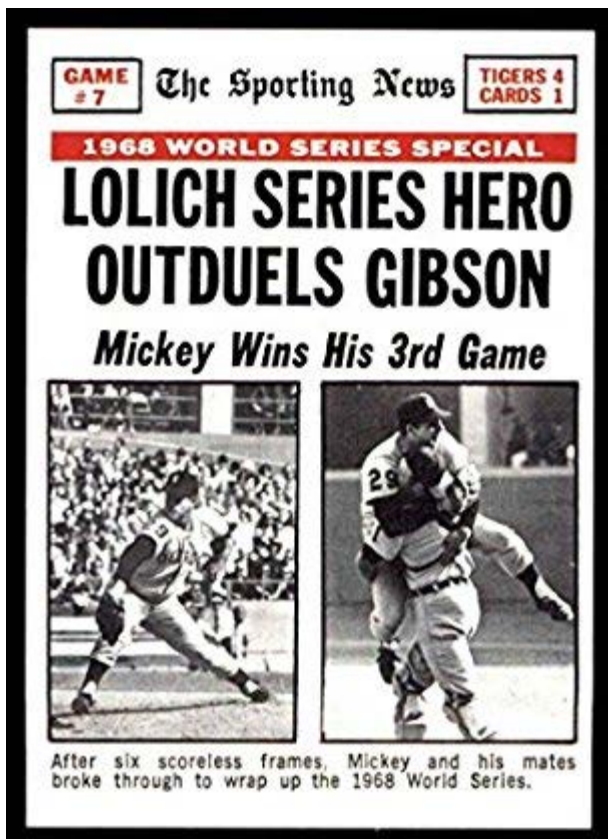
Game Three of the Series was a 1:00 game at Tiger Stadium in Detroit on a fall Saturday. The pitching matchup was Ray Washburn for the Cardinals against Earl Wilson of the Tigers. Detroit started the scoring with a two-run homer by Al Kaline in the third inning, but the Cardinals rallied to go ahead in the top of the fifth largely on a 3-run homer by Tim McCarver. Orlando Cepeda put the game out of reach in the seventh inning with another 3-run home run.

With the Cardinals ahead 2 games to 1, the Tigers had to face Bob Gibson again in **Game Four** on Sunday, October 6, a most discouraging prospect. Needing another left-handed bat in the lineup, Tiger pilot Mayo Smith inserted veteran Eddie Matthews at first base. Matthews, who was recovering from a spinal surgery that nearly ended his career, had one hit, but this would be the last game of his Major League career. A 35-minute rain delay caused havoc with McLain's cranky pitching shoulder, and the Cardinal bats made him pay early. After giving up 4 runs in 2-2/3 innings, the game was again stopped because of rain, and McLain's day on the mound was done. The Cardinals coasted to a 10-1 victory, with Gibson again going the distance and giving up only five hits (including a Jim Northrup solo homer) and striking out ten.

Game Five on Monday afternoon in Detroit began with some controversy with Jose Feliciano's unconventional pre-game singing of the Star Spangled Banner, which created

considerable hullabaloo with the Tigers and NBC receiving thousands of angry phone calls and letters from people who did not appreciate him taking such artistic license. Mickey Lolich took the hill for the Tigers in the top of the first, and promptly yielded 3 runs to the Cardinals, including an RBI single by Curt Flood and a 2-run homer by Orlando "The Baby Bull" Cepeda. Lolich blamed Feliciano's extra-long rendition of the anthem for causing him to get cold after his warmups and to pitch so poorly in the early going. Fortunately for the Tigers, Lolich settled down and ended up giving up no more runs and striking out eight Cardinal batters. Meanwhile, the Tiger hitters plated 2 runs in the fourth to draw close, and scored 3 more runs in the bottom of the seventh to take the lead in their eventual 5-3 win.

The Series moved back to St. Louis for **Game Six** on Wednesday, October 9. The Cardinals trotted **Game Three** winner Ray Washburn back out to the mound, while Mayo Smith started McLain on two days' rest, in part because of his short stint on the preceding Sunday. In his third World Series start, McLain was finally equal to the task, and limited the 'Birds to a single run, garnering the win in a 13-1 laughter in which the Motor City hitmen plated ten runs off three Cardinal pitchers in the top of the third frame, highlighted by Northrup's grand slam. The Series was now even at 3 games apiece.



Game Seven of this epic Series took place on the afternoon of Thursday, October 10, 1968, at Busch Memorial Stadium. Bob Gibson of the Cardinals was pitted against the tireless Lolich of the Bengals, pitching on two days' rest. Through six innings, the two mound warriors matched each other with goose eggs in each frame. Then, in the top of the seventh inning, with two out, Gibson faltered and gave up hits to Norm Cash and Willie Horton. With two out and two aboard, Jim Northrup hit a laser to center field that Curt Flood initially misjudged and briefly started in on before turning around and chasing after it. The ball one-hopped the warning track and resulted in a triple for Northrup and scored Horton and Cash, to give the Tigers a 2-0 lead. Opinions vary wildly about whether Flood could have caught the ball if he had not taken a step in at the crack of the bat. A number of players who were at the game stated that "Flood blew it," including Flood himself. However, Northrup proclaimed that the ball was "forty feet over Flood's head" and incapable of being caught regardless of his jump. The subject will no

doubt preoccupy hot stove league debates in St. Louis and Detroit for as long as Major League baseball is played.

The rest of the story is that Bill Freehan then doubled in Northrup to make it 3-0, and Don Wert added an RBI single in the ninth to make it 4-0. In the bottom of the ninth, Mike Shannon hit a solo shot to make it 4-1, but the Cardinals could do no further damage, and the final out was recorded when Bill Freehan caught a pop foul off the bat of Tim McCarver. Gibson struck out eight in the losing cause, giving him 35 strikeouts for the Series, a record, but Lolich was named the World Series MVP. The Cardinals shortstop went hitless in 22 World Series at-bats, a record.

Detroit's win over the Cardinals was only their third World Series championship in their history, and it was the third time that a team had come back from a 3-1 game deficit to win the Series, joining the 1925 Pirates and the 1958 Yankees in that accomplishment. Later on, the 1979 Pirates, the 1985 Royals, and the 2016 Cubs would join the list of teams coming back from 3 games to 1 to win it all.

After the season was over, Denny McLain, an accomplished keyboardist, went to Las Vegas and had a one-man organist show (if you can believe that) to profit off his celebrity, but his career was all downhill after that magical season, and he was eventually banished from baseball for a year because of gambling and later convicted of embezzlement and sent to prison. There is probably an entire book about the life of Denny McLain, which I will have to get to later.



After winning the World Series in 1964 and 1967 and coming painfully close in 1968, the Cardinals' dynasty quickly came to an end, with a number of players hurt or traded and the loss of the team's chemistry. Gibson went on to have a few more productive years, but his best was clearly in the rearview mirror. His performance in 1968 was the exclamation point of the "Year of the Pitcher," and in large part led to the powers-that-be lowering the pitching mound from fifteen to ten inches for the following season, and reinstating a more restricted strike zone.

MORE GOOD STUFF FROM THE BOOK

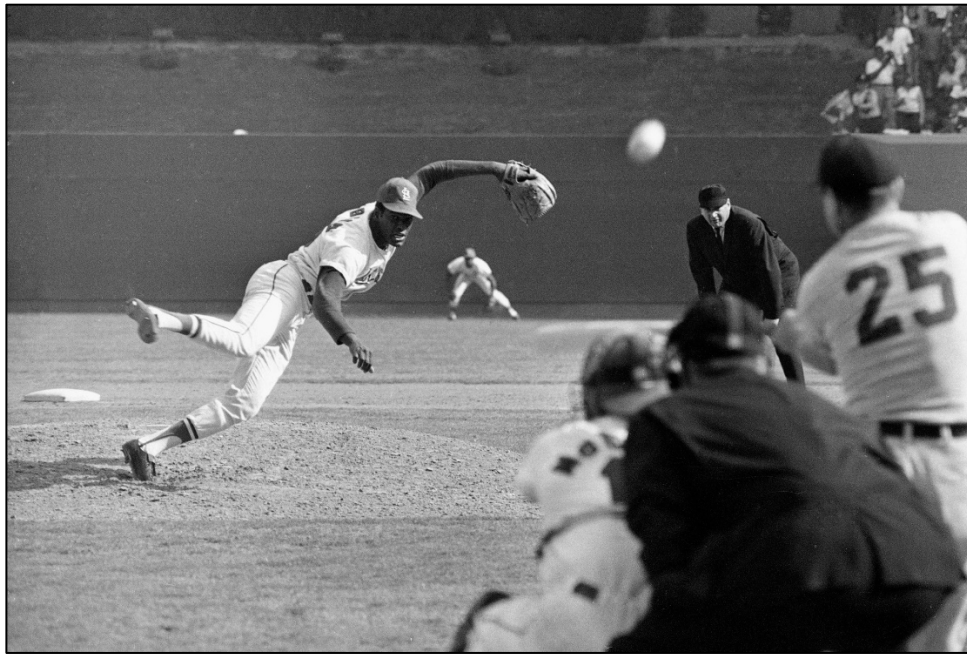


Ahead three games to one, the Cardinals had a great opportunity to capture their second consecutive World Series when Lou Brock headed for home in pivotal Game Five. The St. Louis speedster was thrown out, however, on a perfect peg to the plate from outfielder Willie Horton to Tigers' catcher Bill Freehan. Brock didn't slide, missing home plate by inches, and the Tigers later rallied on Al Kaline's bases-loaded single.



In one of the boldest decisions in World Series history, before Game One in St. Louis, Detroit manager Mayo Smith announced that Stanley would play shortstop. The gamble

opened a spot in the regular lineup for outfielder Al Kaline, which soon paid off for the Tigers.



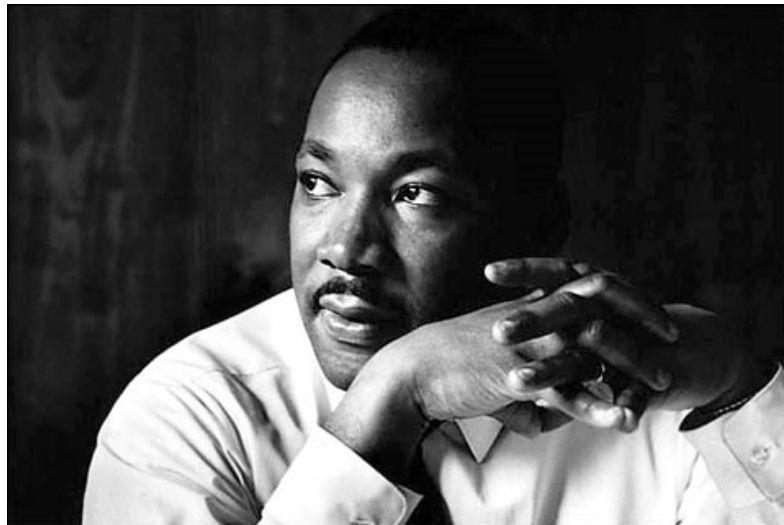
During the regular season, Bob Gibson compiled a 1.12 ERA--the third-best mark since 1900 and the lowest in a season not played in the "deadball" era. He completed 28 of his 34 starts, with 13 of them being shutouts.

THE REST OF THE YEAR

Outside of the green cathedrals, the year 1968 was historic for a number of other reasons, including the following:



- * Early in 1968, North Korea captured a United States surveillance ship named the USS Pueblo, resulting in the imprisonment and torture of a crew of almost 100 members for the better part of the year. The crew was eventually released, but North Korea continues to possess the USS Pueblo.
- * On January 30, the North Vietnamese launched the bloody and brutal Tet offensive, the beginning of the end of the Vietnam War.

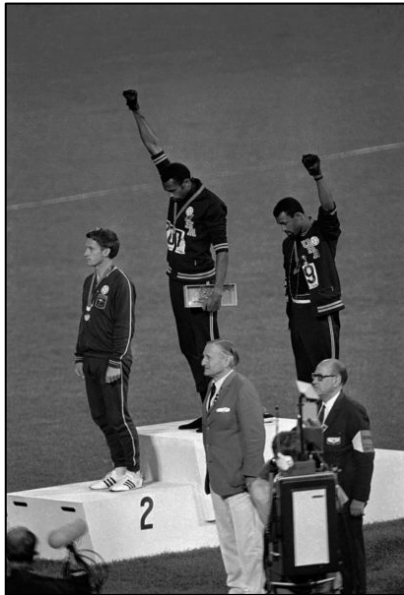


- * On April 4, 39-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee, during the midst of the Civil Rights movement. Killer James Earl Ray was captured in London's Heathrow Airport and extradited back to the United States where he was charged with murder. He was imprisoned and remained there until he died in 1998.



- * On June 5, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles at age 42 while in the midst of a presidential bid. His assailant, Sirhan Sirhan, remains in prison. [FN 4]

- * On September 30, Boeing introduced the 747 to the airline industry, changing forever the airline industry. The first giant birds carried 374 passengers and weighed 300 tons. And they could fly.



- * On October 16, at the Summer Olympics in Mexico City, American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their gloved right hands in protest while on the medal stand, in a show of "black power." They were dismissed from the team some ten days later, but returned to the United States as heroes to the African American community.

In summation, what a year it was, 1968. A season and a year for the ages.

BIG TRAIN

Thanks to Stretch for his email recounting of his travels across Western Kansas and his discovery of the birthplace of Walter "Big Train" Johnson. So as to preserve it for posterity, we include here Stretch's report.

Brethren: With my poor technological skills I could not figure out how to post these photos to the message board of the website. Sorry. But on a bleak January Wednesday with Spring Training seemingly ages away, I thought I would share with you a brief anecdote from a recent bleak December day, and some photos documenting a brief adventure. They can in no way compete with Dave's recent sojourn through the wilds of western Nebraska, but rather serve as a brief comment on the joys of south central Kansas.

As fate would have it I had the opportunity to be traveling near Humboldt Kansas just before Christmas. For geographic assistance Humboldt is in Allen County, about 10 miles north of Chanute Kansas. Humboldt's population is estimated at 1,847.

According to its Wikipedia page Humboldt is also known for the Biblesta Parade, where in: "Local churches, businesses, and organizations create floats for the parade based on Bible stories. Other festivities during Biblesta generally include a music concert and bean feed."

That really cracks me up. What do you think a "bean feed" is like??? I will try to get more information on when the 2018 Biblesta parade will be held and pass that along.

But, I digress.

As I traveled down Highway 169 heading towards Chanute, I noticed a fairly small sign off to the side of the highway advertising the Walter Johnson Birth site. After completing my business in Chanute, I was returning home when I realized I had a little extra time and could stop and explore the Walter Johnson Birth site and, assuming there would be a quaint little museum to explore, I would revel in all there is to know about one of the greatest pitchers of all time.

So I took a little detour, one mile west, 2 miles north, one more mile west, down the dirt road, until there I was face to face with the entirety of the Walter Johnson Birth site. See attached photos. For full pictures, click on VIEW PHOTOS. It was merely a plaque on a rock in the middle of absolute nowhere on a dirt road, near the "Dead End" sign. Nothing else. Now bemused and befuddled, I thought the museum must be in town, so I backtracked the few miles to the actual city of Humboldt and while Walter was shown on the sign entering town, I could not locate the hint of a museum; nothing. So it goes for one of the greatest pitchers of all time.

WINTER MEETING - SATURDAY, JANUARY 27

Just a quick reminder of PAwesome's post-season feting of himself at Fleming's in Regency, where we all look forward to receiving swag from the **Wahoos'** repeat HSL championship. See you there.

NEXT ISSUE

The wit and wisdom of Jim Murray.

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See you on Saturday next!

Skipper

FN1 And adroitly subtitled *The season that changed baseball, and America, forever.*

FN2 Also the author of:

1. *High Heat*: The secret history of the fastball and the improbable search for the fastest pitcher of all time.
2. *Far From Home*: Latino baseballs in America.
3. *The New Face of Baseball*: The 100-year-rise and triumph of Latinos in America's favorite sport.
4. *Castro's Curveball*
5. *My Man, Stan*

FN3 Praise from The American Profile.

FN4 And believe it or not, Major League baseball did not cancel its baseball games the following day, to the chagrin and anger of many. Among others, Roberto Clemente of the Pirates refused to play in the game the following day, and Milt Pappas complained loudly to anyone who would listen, and later resigned as the player representative.