

Bob Gibson and Stan Musial,
Spring Training 1961, Tampa Bay

NEBRASKA HOT STOVE LEAGUE

SEASON XXXVI



Angry no more.

FROM THE BULLPEN

2020 Campaign

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Brethren,

In an otherwise uninspiring COVID-19 week, I woke up this morning with one of the great tunes from my *Lobo's Greatest Hits* 8 track tape spinning through my head, and I was immediately motivated to finish up a *Bullpen* that I started right after learning of the death of the great Pack¹ Robert Gibson:

IN PRAISE OF GIBBY



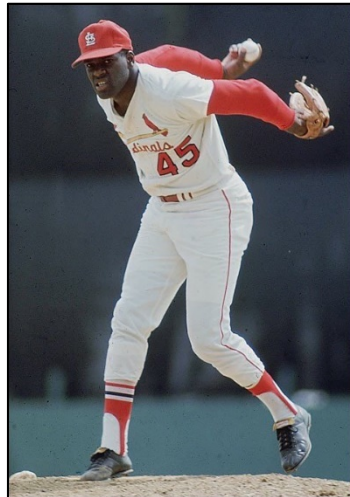
As you all know, we lost yet another baseball Hall of Famer a week ago last Friday with the death of Omaha's own Bob Gibson at age 84 from pancreatic cancer. While the passing of any baseball legend is both remarkable and sad, it's also a great time to reflect upon the matter of his career and to relish some of the great stories being told about him.

¹ Did any one of you know this was Gibson's given first name? I did not.

On the Saturday afternoon following his death, I listened to Bob Costas wax eloquent and nostalgic about the rich tapestry of Citizen Gibson's baseball career, as he regaled the audience with stories of Gibson's legendary fierceness and singlemindedness of purpose. My favorite Costas story has to do with Gibson's final major league pitching outing on September 3, 1975, when the Warrior's great body finally gave out on him and he had virtually nothing left in the tank. With the score 7-6 in the 7th inning and the bases loaded, Cardinal manager Red Schoendienst decided to leave the prideful Gibson on the mound for one more batter, knowing that he would be upset if Schoendienst took him out of the game at that point to bring in a reliever. In his final pitch as a major league hurler, Gibson gave up a grand slam to the perpetually underachieving Pete LaCock², putting his team ahead by the score of 11-6 and insuring the loss for Gibson in his final outing. Schoendienst then had no choice but to take Gibson out and bring in the reliever.



Fast forward ten years to the Old Timers' Game in 1985. Gibson, at age 50, was on the mound for his team and who do you suppose comes up to the plate but the aforementioned Mr. LaCock. As told with great gusto by the voluble Costas, with the only ending that could be scripted, the fiery Gibson then wound up and threw a flaming rib-roaster to plunk LaCock, putting him down on the dirt. Gibson later described this act as "leveling the scales," when asked about his payback pitch.



In addition to other wonderful Gibson stories, Costas recounted that he was a youngster in primary school on Long Island when Gibson pitched the first game of the 1968 World Series against the Tigers, against which he struck out 17 Tigers to set the World Series strikeout record. He talked about how he could "sense" Gibson's fierce determination as he looked into a tiny black and white television screen. While I didn't watch the 1968 Series on television, I did listen to much of it on my transistor radio, which our sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Reicher, allowed us to do during class in the afternoons when World Series games were being played in those days. I would love to have a sit-down with Bob Costas to discuss some of our mutual

² Who, as you may recall, was the son of a well-known game show host, Peter Marshall

memories from those halcyon days of our youth.³ To this day, I consider that my lifelong love affair with baseball began with the 1968 World Series.

ECHOES OF '68

And now a few words about Gibson from Dirk Chatelain's wonderful book about North Omaha athletes, *24th and Glory*, on loan to me from our own Tirebiter. Read this about Gibson from the prologue of this book, entitled *Echoes of '68*:

Nobody told the man on the mound.

Not his teammates in the St Louis Cardinals dugout. Not 54,692 fans at Busch Stadium. Certainly not the hopeless Detroit Tigers.

As the ninth inning began, everyone saw Bob Gibson inching closer to baseball immortality--except Gibson.

The 32-year-old from Omaha stood alone atop 15 inches of dirt, the most dominant force in America's most popular sport, a source of universal amazement against a backdrop of national turbulence.

Across America that Wednesday afternoon--Oct. 2, 1968--barbers and shopkeepers cranked up their radios. Doctors and lawyers postponed appointments. Kids rushed home from school and switched their black-and-white TVs to NBC, where Harry Caray delivered play-by-play.

"All over the world," Caray said, "people I'm sure are tense as they are here at the ballpark for this pitch."

Yet Gibson, who'd already thrown 130 pitches, wasn't in on the secret.

He breathed heavily in 82-degree sunshine, his mouth slightly open. He squinted beneath his hat, the bill lopsided and wavy like a rotten wood floor. His red wool sweatshirt bled through his white sweat-soaked jersey, No. 45.

³ I am not sure if I have previously written about this in past issues of *FTB*, but I had a very brief, and not unpleasant, encounter with Costas on the eve of the 1997 All-Star game in Denver. Sunny and I drove out to that game together, and once we arrived in the Mile High City, we had to meet up with the Coloradoan from whom we were purchasing our All-Star game tickets, at a hotel right across the street from Coors Field. As I was just getting ready to step onto a long down escalator after the transaction, I saw Costas standing right in front of me on the escalator. Because of my surprise, I reflexively uttered his name out loud, "Bob Costas." He immediately turned around in front of me on the escalator, saying, "Yes?" and I quickly stammered out an apology and said something like, "Sorry, I'm just a nobody from Omaha." Following this, Costas kindly said something like, "Well, you don't look like a nobody," and we then chatted a bit about the next day's All-Star game and our excitement for the same on the ride down the escalator. From that one very brief encounter, Costas seemed like a very decent and down-to-earth guy.



He nodded to his catcher, folded his hands to his chest and unleashed a delivery defined by power, grace and fury. His left leg landed and his right leg swung so hard across his body that he nearly fell over--like a tether ball whipping around its pole. Gibson finished 5 feet left of the mound as Al Kaline whiffed at a two-seam fastball on the outside corner.

"Got him! Listen to the crowd!"

Gibson still didn't understand the commotion. He took off his cap, wiped his forehead with his sore right forearm and stepped back to the mound. When he looked up, his catcher stood in front of home plate, pointing to an outfield scoreboard.

Let's go, Gibson motioned--he hated to wait. Finally, he turned and saw the message.

"Gibson has tied World Series record for strikeouts in a single game with his 15th."

All year, the two-time World Series MVP had focused amid chaos. A day after Martin Luther King Jr. was buried, Gibson opened the '68 season allowing one run in seven innings. The day Bobby Kennedy died, he hurled his first shutout. Four days after the Democratic National Convention riots in Chicago, he pitched 10 scoreless innings, won his 20th game and dropped his ERA to 0.99.

Gibson wasn't the only North Omahan on the sports page.

That first week of October, one native son led the NFL in rushing. Another averaged 22 points per game in the NBA. One was about to begin a 17,000-point pro basketball career. Another was about to break football's most stubborn racial barrier. One--a future Heisman Trophy winner--broke Friday night records.

They all came from the same parks and gyms. The same schools and coaches.

Their fathers shared the stench of the kill floors. Their mothers shared the pews at Zion Baptist Church. On North 24th Street, they rode the same streetcars, visited the same comic book stores and tasted the same Skeet's barbecue pork--who else applied hot sauce with a paintbrush?

They knew each other like cousins. They cheered Gibson, too.

Back in St. Louis, Tigers cleanup hitter Norm Cash fouled back a fastball and the crowd urged it out of play. The Cardinals' 4-0 lead was safe. Fans wanted strikeouts, not pop-ups.

"It is such a dramatic scene," Caray said, "that I find myself not wanting to say a word because your picture is telling you the whole story." But the picture wasn't complete. Not even close.

Down in the Cardinals clubhouse, hate mail littered Gibson's locker. "Why don't you and the other blackbirds on the Cardinals move to Africa where you belong." Above the letters, a button proclaimed Gibson's world-view: "I'm not prejudiced; I hate everyone!"

Half a mile east of Busch Stadium, civil rights protesters marched beneath the new Gateway Arch. A single-engine plane tugged a banner promoting segregationist George Wallace for president.

And back in North Omaha, Gibson's old neighborhood ripped apart, brick by brick. He could baffle the world's best hitters. He couldn't save the culture that raised him.

On his 139th pitch, Gibson's 2-2 slider curled in on Cash's swinging hands.

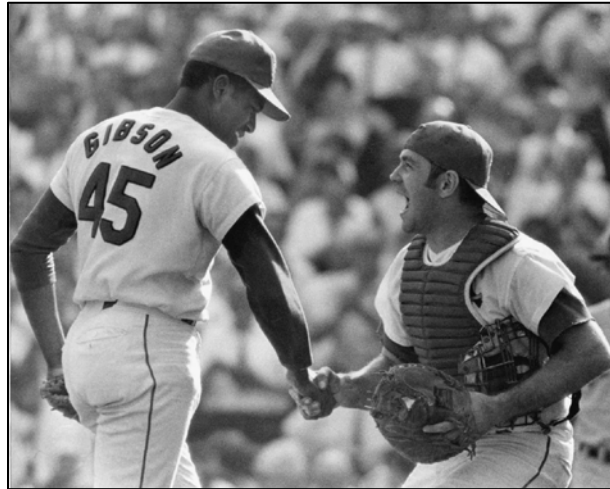
"Got him!"

The crowd roared for the record. Gibson didn't crack a smile. He didn't even step off the mound. It was Game 1 of the 1968 Fall Classic and the Cardinals needed one more out.

The last Tiger at bat was Willie Horton. With two strikes, Gibson took a deep breath, filling his cheeks. He raised his hands, kicked his leg. His left arm flailed, his right hand spun a slider that started so far inside that Horton thought it was going to hit him. The ball turned back over the corner.

"Struck him out! Look at the scene on the field!"

Look at the scene 50 years later. Gibson's 17 strikeouts still stand in the record books--probably forever.



The day Bob Gibson whiffed 17 Tigers

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE

As Joe Posnanski wrote, "children whose fathers are not old enough to have seen him pitch, still come up to Gibson to say he's their favorite pitcher, not because of his 3,117 career strikeouts or his 1.12 ERA in 1968 or his unremitting brilliance in the World Series. No, it's because he was mean, tough, a symbol of badass."

Hank Aaron on Bob Gibson

"(Hank Aaron told me) 'Don't dig in against Bob Gibson, he'll knock you down. He'd knock down his own grandmother if she dared to challenge him. Don't stare at him, don't smile at him, don't talk to him. He doesn't like it. If you happen to hit a home run, don't run too slow, don't run too fast. If you happen to want to celebrate, get in the tunnel first. And if he hits you, don't charge the mound, because he's a Gold Glove boxer.' I'm like, 'Damn, what about my 17-game hitting streak?' That was the night it ended."

- Dusty Baker

Dick Allen on Bob Gibson

"Gibson was so mean, he'd knock you down and then meet you at home plate to see if you wanted to make something of it."

- Dick Allen

Pete Rose on Bob Gibson

"I'm in the league two weeks, playing in St. Louis. [Bob] Gibson hits a double, I'm playing second base. I go over and say, 'What'd you hit, Gibby, a fastball?' And he stood there like this, not moving, not saying anything. So maybe I didn't say it loud enough. 'What'd you hit, Gibby, a fastball?' Nothing. Now the inning's over, my manager's Fred Hutchinson, I went over and said, 'Hey, skipper, let me ask you a question.' He said, 'What do you want, rook?' I said, 'Is Bob Gibson a deaf mute?' He said, 'Why?' I said, 'I asked him what he hit, and he won't talk to me.' He said, 'No, he don't talk to the opposition.' So the next day I'm out there early hanging on to the cage watching Groat and Boyer and Musial and Julian Javier. And Gibson comes out of the dugout. In those days there wasn't fraternizing, and I'm watching batting practice. And he walks by me and says, 'It was a slider, rook.' It took him 24 f-king hours, but he talked to me!"

- Pete Rose

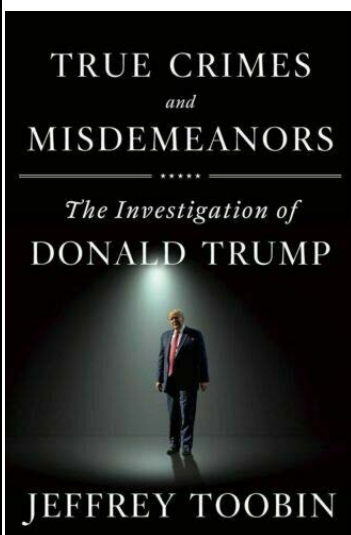
Tim McCarver and Bob Gibson

Tim McCarver once went to the mound when Bob Gibson was pitching and was quickly told to return. "The only thing you know about pitching is that you can't hit it."

There are plenty of other stories on Gibson worth sharing, but we will end here and save others for future issues. RIP, Mr. Gibson, and enjoy being reunited with Tom Terrific, Curt Flood, Whitey Ford, Joe Morgan, and all of the rest of your fellow Heaven of Famers.

BOOK REPORT

***TRUE CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS:
The Investigation of Donald Trump***



I recently decided--against my nature--to temporarily set aside the book on Martin Luther (cleverly titled *Luther*) that I am now slogging through⁴ to start into a book that caught my attention on the bookstore shelves recently, *Crimes and Misdemeanors: The Investigation of Donald Trump*, by a fantastic and accomplished author, Jeffrey Toobin. Very much unlike *Luther*, this book is a real page-turner, and I ripped through its 451 pages in about a week. In fact, I give it nearly full credit for helping me through my recent pre-colonoscopy preparation.⁵

If any of you really want to know and understand the events surrounding the Comey firing, the Mueller investigation, the Russian interference with the 2016 election, The WikiLeaks email misappropriation, the "perfect POTUS" phone call with the Ukrainian president, and much more, then this is the book for you. Mostly facts and not opinions, it is a fascinating story, well told.

I sort of doubt that there is anyone in our *Baker's Dozen* that is still on the fence about who to vote for in the fall election, but if any of you fit into that category, I urge you to read this book.⁶ If anyone who fits the previous description wants to read the book, let me know and I will hop in my car and drive it over to you lickety-split.

I am Skipper, and I approve this message.

Have a great weekend.

Skipper

⁴ But don't worry, friends, I will finish it up later and report on it so all you Cat Lickers will know what you have been doing wrong all these many years.

⁵ I know, TMI.

⁶ For if you do, I can't imagine that you would reach any other conclusion but that any officeholder who has engaged in such behavior--much more than monkeyshines, tomfoolery and the usual dirty tricks--which can only be described as sheer mendacity, and indeed, "true crimes and misdemeanors," should not just be turned out of office, but tarred and feathered and run out of Washington on a rail.