

I Should've Retired a Couple Years Ago

A presentation by Jim Rygelski at the Bob Broeg SABR Chapter Hot Stove League meeting January 24, 2009, at Mike Shannon's Steaks and Seafood, Downtown St. Louis.

One of the toughest decisions a major league baseball player, especially a great one, will make is when to retire. By the time he begins to admit in his mid- to late thirties that his skills are lessening and that he may lose his starter's status to a younger player, the veteran has probably already been a professional athlete for two decades. And for as long as he can remember into his boyhood, all he's done is play baseball.

Few things for the fan are more painful than to watch a once great player struggle in his twilight years. Who hasn't winced at seeing the film clip of Babe Ruth in one of his last seasons with the Yankees striking out with a terrible swing then trying to keep himself upright by bouncing around on one foot because he'd pulled a muscle. Who wasn't embarrassed for Bob Gibson when, during the last month of his career in 1975, he gave up a grand slam home run to Pete LaCock, who batted .229 that year.

Yogi Berra, who managed Willie Mays on the Mets during Mays' last season, 1973, recalled the Hall of Famer that year in this way: "I managed Willie Mays ... although he wasn't Willie Mays anymore. He was 41 and couldn't do what he used to, so it was a tough situation. He wanted to go out on a high note in New York, where he'd started his career. He had a couple of embarrassing moments on the field. That wasn't the Willie Mays anyone wanted to remember, so he quit, a couple seasons later than he should've."

Willie Mays was able to help the Giants win the Western Division crown in 1971, but he wasn't able to help either them or the Mets much in 1972 and '73.

When Mickey Mantle announced his retirement on March 1, 1969, forgoing his plans to play one more season, he stated what many fans and teammates had privately thought about the Mick's declining abilities. Yet, in his comments at a retirement press conference, Mantle gave several reasons for hanging it up that showed how classy he was for considering not only his reputation but also the well being of his teammates and the goodwill of the fans who still rooted for him:

"I can't play anymore. I don't hit the ball when I need to. I can't steal when I need to. I can't score from second when I need to. . . . I never wanted to embarrass myself on the field or hurt the club in any way or give the fans anything less than what they are entitled to expect from me."

Certainly it's better for a once-great athlete to declare his retirement, as did pitchers Mike Mussina and Greg Maddux after the 2008 season, than to realize, as did Barry Bonds sometime last summer, that he'd been retired by the unwillingness of any team to sign him to a new contract.

We Cardinals fans should be thankful that one of our greats wasn't forced into retirement when even his manager thought he should hang it up. Going into the 1979 season, manager Ken Boyer, once Lou Brock's teammate, thought the Cardinals speedster was finished after he'd hit only .221 for a miserable Cardinals squad in 1978. Boyer gave Brock one month to prove that he should still be with the club. Brock, needing 100 hits entering the year, did more than that and was among the N.L.'s leading

hitters throughout the first half of 1979 and gained that 3,000 career hit in August. Brock said he wanted to go with a bang, and certainly did.

Mussina's decision led some observers to speculate that he was retiring too early. At age 39 in 2008, he became the oldest player to win 20 games in a season for the first time. That brought his career total to 270. In his 18 seasons, Mussina won an average of 15 games a year, so, many speculated, he conceivably could have reached the coveted 300 plateau in two years.

But Mussina had topped 15 wins only twice in the last five seasons. It seems to this observer that Mussina made the right decision. Better to quit now after such a stellar season than chase the 300-win barrier against the odds and fall short. He also cited family reasons for retiring: his children were still young and he wanted to spend time with them.

Wanting to spend more time with the kids also were the primary reasons Will (the Thrill) Clark gave for retiring after he'd spent two-and-a-half wonderful months in a Cardinals' uniform in 2000, helping them win the Central Division title. He was only 36 and conceivably had at least a couple more productive seasons. But what a way to go out: in 51 games for the Cardinals he hit .345 and drove in 42 runs with 12 homers. Plus he had some big hits in the first-round sweep over the Braves. He reportedly was motivating J.D. Drew to perform better, not that we noticed any improvement in the younger player's attitude after Clark left.

Fans are supportive of a great reaching a lofty place in the baseball pantheon that few are able to dwell in. The White Sox were criticized for releasing Early Wynn at the end of spring training of 1963 with him just one win shy of 300. Wynn signed with Cleveland, for whom he'd done great work the previous decade, and got his 300th – his only win that year in 20 appearances, mostly in relief.

But I suspect the fans have their limits, too. Imagine that the Cardinals had wanted to add a veteran lefthander to their starting rotation and had dealt to bring to St. Louis a southpaw who enters the 2009 season needing five wins to reach 300 (Randy Johnson). And say management had finally caved in to manager Tony LaRussa's hopes of putting in the Cardinals' lineup an aging outfielder who still is short 65 hits of attaining 3,000 for his career (Barry Bonds). Watching two over-the-hill performers pursue lofty personal goals can give bring fans in during a bad season; but would Cardinals fans want those two in the lineup in a late September game against a divisional opponent with first place on the line, especially if both were having very bad seasons?

In an amusing yet insightful op-ed in last November's Sports Illustrated, writer Joe Posnanski

http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2008/writers/joe_posnanski/11/19/retire/index.html wrote about the large number of seemingly over-the-hill ballplayers still in the majors. He recalled watching Steve Carlton in his next-to-last season getting lit up one night while pitching for Cleveland, one of four teams he pitched for in two seasons after being released by the Phillies. Some leatherlunged fan heckled Carlton as he was walking off the field, taunting him by shouting, "Why don't you quit, you bum?" Another fan answered: "Would you quit?" if you were being paid the money he was?

I personally have wondered for the past few seasons why Greg Maddux has stuck around. Since the end of the 2004 season, in which he won his 300th game, and which was a great thing for Cubs fans in a year in which they were far behind the Cardinals in the standings, Maddux has been 50-53 and really hasn't been the mainstay of the pitching

staffs of the Cubs, Dodgers and Padres, for whom he's pitched. Watch Maddux pitch and he looks like a shadow of his former self.

But now I realize: if someone wants to pay you good money to keep playing, why quit? That's why I'll always admire Mark McGwire for retiring when he did (though he should have told his employer first rather than doing so in a fax to an ESPN reporter). He could have stayed on for another year after two injury-plagued ones and received a lot of money; but he realized that at age 38 he no longer had it, so why waste the team's money that could be better spent on someone else.

Let's look specifically at two greats from the past, Mickey Mantle and Stan Musial. Should they have retired earlier than they did?

Mantle certainly thought so. Berra again recalls: "Mickey once told me he wished he'd retired after the '64 season. He liked to remind me I sucked the last good season from him."

Mantle hit .303 with 35 homers and 111 rbi in 1964 and is remembered for hitting a towering home run on the first pitch he saw from Barney Schultz leading off the bottom of the ninth in the third game of the World Series with both the score of that game and Series tied 1-1. Mantle was more than just a guy who'd put up great numbers over an 18-year career. After DiMaggio retired, his teammates looked to him as the team leader. Berra recalls that in the 1950s guys would say "Thanks, Mick," when they got their weekly paychecks. Mantle's winning homer in the third game of the Series was even more noteworthy because, according a reminiscence of teammate Jim Bouton, Mantle told teammates before going to the plate that he was going to end the game with a homer.

Had Mantle retired after 1964, his lifetime batting average would have been .309. Apparently he was quite upset when told by a Yankees front-office person in late 1968 that his lifetime batting average had dipped below .300. His final career average was .298.

But had Mantle retired after 1964, there would have been immense speculation on its impact on the 1965 Yankees and beyond. According to a Sporting News poll of its sportswriters, the Yankees were favored by most to win a sixth straight pennant entering 1965. With Mantle slumping to .255, they fell to sixth place, eight games under .500, and finished that way for a variety of reasons unrelated to Mantle's bad year. Berra also notes that Mantle helped a young Bobby Murcer in those years. Murcer was up briefly with the Yankees in 1965 and 1966, and became a regular in 1969.

My opinion is that Mantle probably should have quit after 1967. That was the year he entered the 500-homer club, certainly the haven of all true sluggers. He hit only .245 for a ninth-place team after a decent .288 for the Yankee tailenders of 1966. But had he quit after 1967 his lifetime batting average would have been .302.

Musial, after gaining his career 3,000th hit in 1958 (a year in which he was hitting over .400 into mid-June), hit over .300 in only one of his last five seasons. He didn't play as much as usual in spring training in 1959, and his average plummeted to .255. The next year manager Solly Hemus benched for awhile as part of a youth movement that never worked out. But Musial did help the Cardinals make a run at the Pirates and ended at .275. In 1961 he hit .288 then in 1962 was among the league leaders, ending third in the batting race at .330 (and with exactly the 502 plate appearances needed to qualify).

Stan the Man often owed his surge in 1962 to younger pitchers being in the majors because of expansion. But he was being unfair to himself. The collective batting

average for the National League dropped a point, from .262 to .261 from 1961 to 1962. Also, the top five individuals in the N.L. batting race of 1961 all showed significant drops in their averages for 1962.

Musial hit only .255 in his last season, 1963; but shortly after his announcement to retire, made at the club's annual Ball-B-Que that August, the Cardinals went on their 19-1 dash that almost let them overtake the Dodgers. Helping Stan go out on a winner was an extra motivation for that club. And Musial contributed what he could during the three-game showdown with the Dodgers, homering off Johnny Podres in the first game to tie the score late in the game of a contest the Cardinals later lost 3-1. Of that home run, Musial's 475th and last, Bob Broeg wrote: "it darn near tore down the house."

The next night, Musial broke up Sandy Koufax's no-hitter with a single in the seventh in a game Koufax won 4-0. And Stan got two more hits the next night, in a game that Dick Nen helped tie and send into an extra inning Dodger victory with a pinch homer in the ninth.

Who could forget Musial's 2 for 3 farewell in the final game of the 1963 season, his last single whipping by a sprawling rookie second baseman named Pete Rose.

Musial lasted as long as he should have, and went out the great player we still think of him as.

So, in summary, I wish that all great ballplayers would consider three things in deciding when to retire: how continuing on might affect not just their lifetime stats but the public's perception of them as a winner; the effect their staying on would have on their teammates; and whether staying on too long might cheat the fans.