

Anniversary of '59 pennant-clincher is golden for White Sox fans, players

By Paul Ladewski

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Even all these years later, long-time White Sox fans can still tell you where they were on Tuesday, Sept. 22, 1959, the night that the White Sox beat the Cleveland Indians to capture their first American League pennant in 40 years.

“We can’t help but remember it,” former outfielder Jim Rivera said of his career highlight almost 50 years to the day later. “That was the only thing a lot of us ever did in baseball.”

“No, it doesn’t seem like 50 years ago,” said Billy Pierce, who helped anchor the pitching staff that season. “I remember it well. How can you forget it? We tried to win a pennant for a long time, and we finally won one.”

The pennant-winner would be the defining moment for the White Sox in the 1950’s decade, the so-called Go-Go era in which they won 90-or-more games four times.

“It’s very, very surprising, but when I talk to people, they seem to remember 1959 better than 2005 -- and we didn’t win the World Series and that team did, you know?” Pierce said. “The 1950s were a very exciting time for baseball as a whole. Nostalgia-wise, they seem to remember the players an awful lot.

Not long after the 4-2 victory, civil defense sirens wailed in the night to signal the news but set off a near panic instead. Because the country was in the throes of the Cold War at the time, some of the non-baseball population braced for an attack and ran for cover.

“For a long time, we never did know who took responsibility for it -- the fire chief or Mayor Daley,” said Pierce, 82, who makes his home in Lemont now.

Meanwhile, in Cleveland, White Sox team members were on such a natural high that they didn’t require a plane to return home. At approximately 1:15 a.m., their United charter touched down at Midway Airport, where a reported 25,000 slightly crazed, pennant-waving fans were on hand to greet the American League champions.

“When we got home, there were lots and lots of people at the airport,” Pierce said. “There were people who had been White Sox fans for many, many years. Finally, they got something that they wanted, and it was great to see the excitement. It was a good time for Chicago, especially on the South Side.”

Said former infielder and Chicago-bred Sam Esposito, 77, who lives in Concord, N.C., “When we got to the airport, it was hard to move around because

so many people were there. So some of the players went to a bar across the street, where he had a few more colds ones.”

Along with first baseman Earl Torgeson, Pierce rode a cab to the Shoreline Hotel in Hyde Park, where they resided while the season was in progress. He recalled people glued to their radios on porches and flares lit on lawns along the way.

“The people had a right to be excited,” former outfielder Jim Landis said. “When was the last time they had seen something like that?”

The clincher was hardly the typical of a White Sox team that thrived on pitching and defense the entire season.

The White Sox took a 2-0 lead against Indians starter Jim Perry in the third inning, when Luis Aparicio and Billy Goodman stroked two-out, RBI doubles. Three innings later, with Jim Grant on the mound, Al Smith and Rivera hit back-to-back home runs, only the 92nd and 93rd for the team.

“Hell, yeah, I remember it,” Rivera said, 87, a Fort Wayne, Ind., resident. “Mudcat Grant. Right-center field. I didn’t know if we had enough to win, but I knew damn well that we had them down.”

In relief of staff ace Early Wynn, Bob Shaw took a 4-2 lead into the ninth inning. After the right-hander struggled to get through the seventh and eighth innings -- the appearance was his third in five days -- Pierce and Gerry Staley began to warm up in the bullpen.

After Woodie Held grounded out, Jim Baxes beat out an infield hit. Ex-White Sox Jack Harshman singled. Jim Piersall followed with another single. At that point, manager Al Lopez called on Staley to face Vic Power with the bases loaded.

As broadcaster Jack Brickhouse made the dramatic call on the rare WGN road telecast, “Here we go . . . Power has 1 for 4, an infield single . . . There’s a groundball . . . Aparicio has it, steps on second, throws to first . . . The ballgame’s over! The White Sox are the champions of 1959! The 40-year wait has now ended! . . . The White Sox have won it! The White Sox have won it! A double play by Looie! He grabbed the ball, he stepped on second, he fired to first and pandemonium reigns in Chicago, I know! Start those sirens! Blow those whistles!”

The White Sox entered the game with a 3 1/2-game lead in the race, but the clincher couldn’t come soon enough for them.

“It was a great relief because of the kind of season we had gone through,” said Landis, 75, who resides in Napa, Calif. “We won 35 one-run games. We battled our butts off day in and day out.”

After a commercial break, a giddy Brickhouse recounted “the happy totals,” as he liked to call them after a Cubs or White Sox victory Except that, in this case, they were the happiest totals of all.

“For the White Sox, the American League champions for 1959: four runs, nine hits, one error. Winning pitcher, Wynn, 21 and 10. And for Cleveland, two runs, 11 hits and no errors. The losing pitcher, Perry. Time of the game – I don’t have any idea how long it ran, and I’m not going to bother to look now. Fifty-four-thousand-two-hundred-ninety-three people (in attendance). It’s all over in the American League. And we want you to stay with us now for The Tenth Inning show, because you know and I know that the Tenth Inning is going to be a real big ball down in that clubhouse . . .”

“Oh, yeah, we *did* have a ball,” recalled Rivera, who was the life of the party.

Radio voice Bob Elson intercepted Sherm Lollar near the clubhouse entrance, where he conducted an interview with his oversized WCFL microphone. The players began to douse one another with champagne. After an interview with WGN color man Lou Boudreau, Rivera put a fedora on his wet head and did the tango in front of teammates. “I don’t know what it was, but it something crazy” he said.

First baseman Ted Kluszewski grabbed Rivera by collar.

“Hey, you’re going to have a drink, Jungle,” Big Klu said.

“No, I don’t drink,” Jungle Jim begged off.

“You’re drinking tonight,” Kluszewski would have none of it.

“OK,” Rivera said.

Kluszewski dragged Rivera into the shower, uniform and all, and they couldn’t have cared less. Minutes later, Esposito joined Rivera in the bathroom, where they closed the doors, pulled up stools and talked baseball over bottles of beer.

“Naturally, we were half-numb,” Rivera said. “We didn’t feel nothin’. We couldn’t believe that we won the pennant. We were on Cloud Nine.”

Fifty years later, White Sox die-hards haven’t come down yet.

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