



Sox historian's view: 'Billy the Kid' a sure Hall of Famer

Editor's Note: This year's Baseball Hall of Fame Golden Era Veterans' Committee votes on Sunday, Dec. 7, in San Diego to elect up to four new members of the National Baseball Hall of Fame. The results of the vote will be announced on Dec. 8. The Chicago Baseball Museum will be in San Diego covering this historic vote.

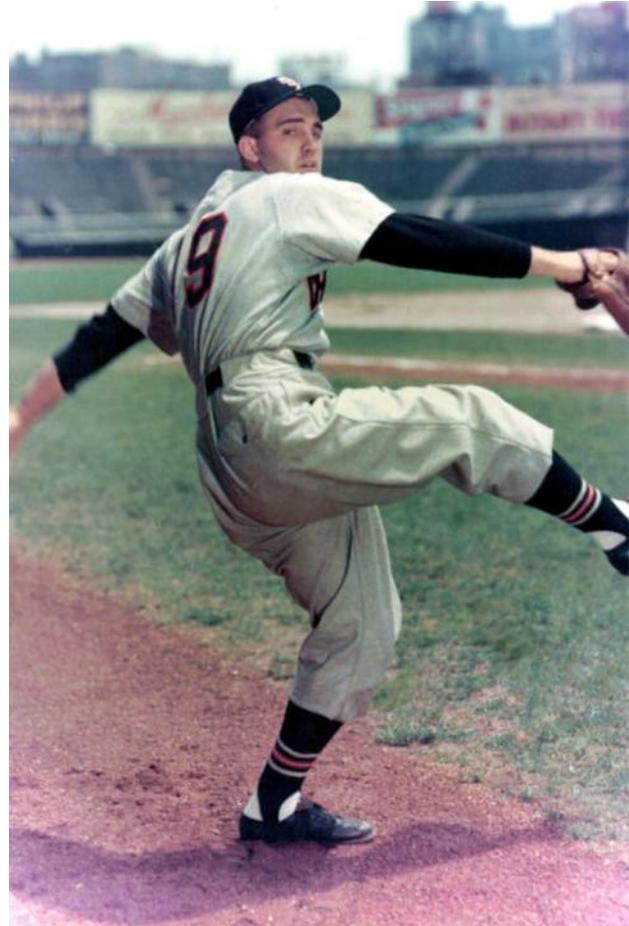
This year the White Sox have five former players on the 10-person ballot (Minnie Minoso, Billy Pierce, Jim Kaat, Dick Allen, and Ken Boyer) — the most of any big-league franchise.

CBM will be advocating for the Sox candidates. Before the vote, the CBM will feature stories on several of these players.

The first entry features Billy Pierce, who has not been on a Hall of Fame ballot since dropping off that of the Baseball Writers Association of America's main vote in 1974. Former ace lefty Pierce was considered by the Historical Overview Committee for inclusion on Veteran's Committee ballots in 2003, '05, '07 and '09, but never made the final cut.

He barely got the time of day from the BBWAA voters, lingering in the 1-2 percent range in five years on the ballot (1970-74). He peaked in 1971 with a mere seven votes. Pierce never made any Veterans Committee-type ballot before 2014.

*As Sox historian Mark Liptak argues in his piece below, Billy Pierce is deserving of the Hall of Fame. Michigan judge Mark J. Plawecki, in a 2006 book, *How Could You Trade Billy Pierce?* (Work Association Publishers), argues why Pierce deserves to be*



Billy Pierce shows off his pitching form in Yankee Stadium, site of many of his duels with Whitey Ford.

included with his peers, including Whitey Ford and Bob Lemon. Plawecki makes the case for the historically-overlooked Pierce as the most outstanding American League pitcher in the 1950s. Pierce was the AL's best pitcher in the 1950s according to WAR (43.7) while running second in both ERA+ (128) and wins (155). While Pierce's 211-169 career record is not awe-inspiring, he pitched brilliantly in big games, as Liptak details in this story.

By Mark Liptak

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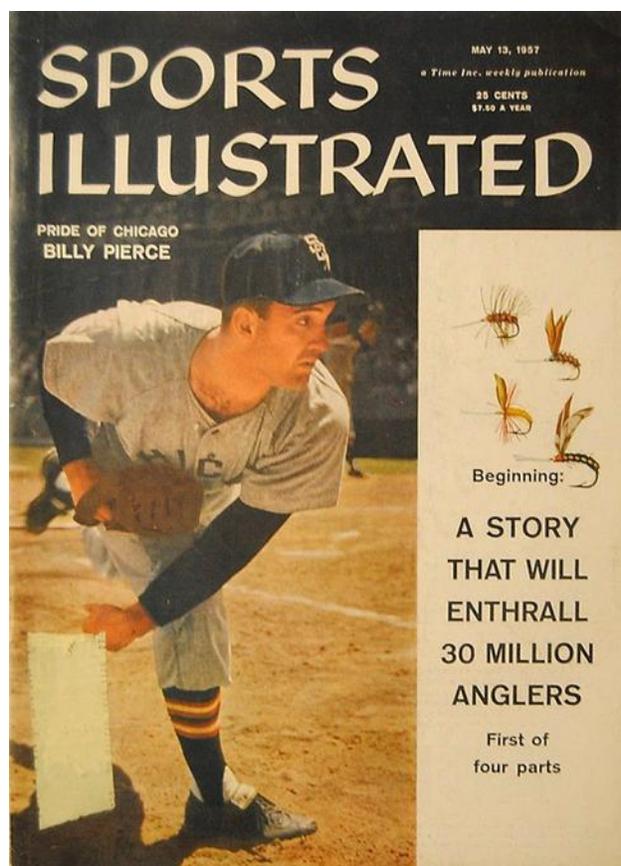
Among all the players on the Golden Era ballot this fall, the one name that stands out far above all others is William Walter "Billy the Kid" Pierce.

Why? Well, you first dismiss some of the peripheral issues like the positive way he conducted himself as a player and representative of the team, or the millions of dollars he has raised over the years for Chicago Children's Cancer Charities or the fact that he was so popular nationally that he was the cover boy for both *Sports Illustrated* (May 13, 1957) and *Sport Magazine* (Oct. 1957). Based on performance, Billy belongs in the Hall of Fame because he was a dominating pitcher in his era.

During the 1950s and early 1960s three left handed pitchers were far and above all others in baseball: Warren Spahn of the Braves, Whitey Ford of the Yankees and Pierce. Spahn and Ford are in the Hall, so should Pierce. In head-to-head meetings between Pierce and Ford, Billy won eight of the 14 games.

Spahn and Ford played on dominating teams that made multiple World Series appearances. But the White Sox weren't chopped liver in that time period. They and the Yankees were the only consistent contending teams in that time frame in the American League. Just because the Sox only made one World Series doesn't dismiss how good that team was.

Pierce played with three Hall of Famers in that time period in Early Wynn, Luis Aparicio and Nellie Fox. Another teammate and Golden Era candidate, Minnie Minoso, can make a strong case for admission, too, so it's not like there wasn't talent on the South Side. Al Lopez was the manager for many of those years and he's in the Hall of Fame.



At the peak of his career, Billy Pierce was a Sports Illustrated cover boy.

An AL pitching leader

Pierce, though, was the anchor of White Sox staffs that usually were near the top statistically in major categories. The personable southpaw did something that very, very few pitchers have done in baseball -- he led the American League in multiple categories at various times.

Which ones?:

- Complete games: 1956, 1957, and 1958 (he had 193 in his career).
- Strikeouts: 186 in 1953 (he had 1,999 in his career).
- Wins: 20 in 1957 (he also won 20 games in 1956 and had 211 in his career).
- ERA: 1.97 in 1955 (that was the lowest ERA in 20 seasons to that time).

Now add in 12 double-digit win seasons (11 with the White Sox), 38 shutouts (35 with the White Sox), 38 saves (19 with the White Sox), four one hitters and seven All-Star appearances and you are left to wonder what the problem is with his admission.

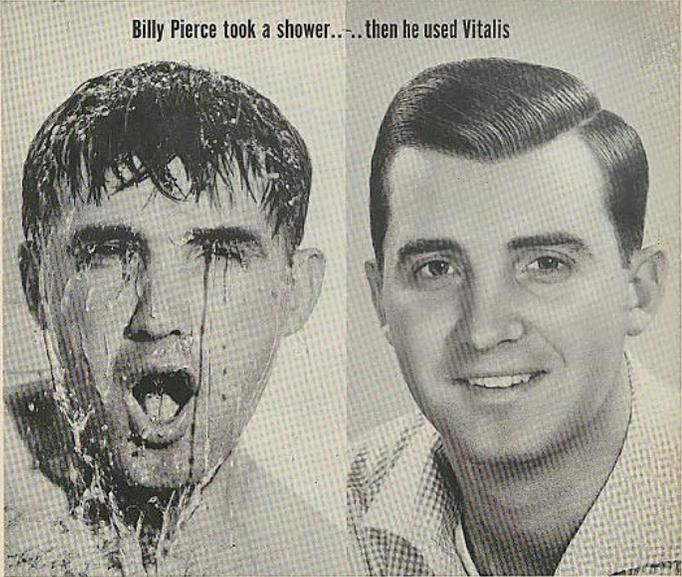
Pierce was also at his best on the biggest stages.

He started three All-Star Games for the American League (1953, 1955 and 1956) and appeared in four of them. In 10.2 innings he allowed four runs, struck out 12 and had an ERA of 3.38. As a starter he threw nine innings, allowing one run on only four hits while striking out nine of the best hitters the National League sent up to the plate.

In two World Series (White Sox 1959, Giants 1962) covering five games. Billy had a 1.89 ERA in 19 innings with eight strikeouts. He started two games in the 1962 Series against the Yankees. In Game 6, he went the distance in a 5-2 victory.

Of course, the Giants would never have gotten to the Series without Pierce, who revitalized his career in San Francisco after he was traded by then-Sox GM Ed Short. Counting the

Billy Pierce took a shower.... then he used Vitalis



Pitcher Billy Pierce rarely goes in the shower before the game ends. Last year he was a leader in pitching except to games.

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Friendly and clean-cut, Billy Pierce landed endorsements such as Vitalis.

post season, Billy went 12-0 in Candlestick Park in 1962 (16-6 on the season) and in the three-game playoff series with the Dodgers he won Game 1 8-0, beating Sandy Koufax while throwing a complete game. Then in Game 3, he saved the 6-4 win, retiring three in a row in the ninth inning to send San Francisco to the Fall Classic.

Little lefty, big fastball

Pierce, despite being only 5-foot-10, 160 pounds, threw very hard. He had 23 games with nine or more strikeouts in his career and another 27 games with eight. How hard did he throw? Most felt it was in the mid-90s mph range, but it was impossible to say for sure.

“I wish I could tell you,” Pierce said. “I know I read where Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams both said I threw very hard, but we didn’t have radar guns in those days.”

His endurance and stamina were unbelievable. On Aug. 6, 1959 at Memorial Stadium in Baltimore, Billy pitched 16 *innings* in a game called by curfew after 18 innings. Consider that in today’s context where pitchers are on a pitch count and often don’t even throw seven innings. That drive was noticed and respected by baseball people.

“That little guy had more courage per ounce than any ballplayer I ever saw. You didn’t need a relief pitcher when he pitched. If he had a one run lead going into the seventh or eighth inning, the ballgame was over.” Those words were from former Sox GM Frank “Trader” Lane, the man who stole Pierce from Detroit on Nov. 10, 1948 for catcher Aaron Robinson.

His four one-hitters came in 1950 against the Yankees (Billy Johnson had the hit), 1953 versus the St. Louis Browns (Bobby Young), 1958 against Washington (Ed Fitz Gerald) and 1959, also against the Senators (Ron Samford).

But it was the 1958 game that is most remembered and one pitch has probably kept Billy out of the Hall of Fame to this point.

The White Sox were uncharacteristically below .500 on June 27 and needed a shot in the arm. Billy did all that and more on this night at Comiskey Park. Locked in a 1-0 game with future Sox pitcher Russ Kemmerer, Billy had the added pressure of knowing that not only was he throwing a no-hitter, but he also was tossing a perfect game. His teammates finally broke through in the eighth inning on a two-run single from catcher Sherm Lollar to give him some breathing room. Now the crowd wondered if they were going to see a miracle.

He knew perfect was developing

“Of course I knew I had a perfect game going, knew it all the way,” Pierce said to the *Chicago Tribune’s* Dick Dozer. “Every time I got somebody out in the later innings the fans set up such a yell...how could I help but know?”

In the ninth inning, Billy retired Ken Aspromonte on a groundout. Steve Korcheck struck out. That brought up pinch hitter Fitz Gerald, a right-handed hitter, batting for Kemmerer.

“He was a first ball, fastball hitter,” Pierce said. “Sherm thought we’d fool him by throwing him a breaking ball. I threw him one that was low and he hit it. Things happen... it was in an area that nobody had a chance to get it.”

The ball was sliced just fair inside the right-field line and the perfect game was gone. Pierce retired Albie Pearson on a strikeout to settle for a one-hitter. At the time Billy said he was just happy to win the game, but when I spoke to him decades later he admitted feeling differently.

“Over the years, however, I’ve had so many people tell me they were listening to the game on the radio or were at the park watching, that I’ve wanted that one pitch back more now than I ever did then,” he said.

I asked him if he could remember how he felt on the mound or if anyone came out to talk with him after the bloop hit.

“No...I just remember thinking that I’ve got to get this next hitter because we need to win this game,” he responded.

Pierce belongs in the Hall of Fame because of sustained excellence on the field at a time when the talent level in major league baseball was probably at its highest.

When asked how he’d feel if he does get the call on Dec. 8, Billy replied, “I would be so proud. I go way back with baseball and you look at the Hall of Fame and see guys like Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio, Willie Mays, Mickey Mantle...I’ve never seriously thought about joining them, but to be in that same building with them, I’d be so grateful as would my family.”

On Nov. 11, 2011, Billy was part of a contingent of former Sox and Cuban players -- on the Golden Era Ballot -- who participated in a Sox symposium advocating for the Hall of Fame election of Minoso.

It was typical Pierce, who was not self-promoting himself at the symposium but telling the audience how deserving Minnie was to be in Cooperstown.

How ironic that three years later longtime Sox teammate Pierce will join the Cuban Comet on the Golden Era Ballot.

And how special would it be to have Pierce and Minoso getting inducted at the same time at Cooperstown and joining other Go-Go Sox era teammates Luis Aparicio, Nellie Fox, and Early Wynn in the Hall of Fame?