

Regardless of record, Score went out a winner

By Paul Ladewski

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Pitcher **Herb Score** was unable to resuscitate his star-crossed career with the White Sox, but that so many teammates, acquaintances and even strangers were in his corner spoke for an even greater accomplishment.

On Tuesday morning, Score passed away after a lengthy illness at age 75 at his home in Rocky River, Ohio, remembered not as man who was bitter about his unfulfilled potential but grateful for what baseball had given him.

"Herb was a first-class person," said John Kuenster, a Daily News sportswriter who covered the White Sox while Score was a team member. "A real gentleman is what I would call him."

Said **Billy Pierce**, a former White Sox pitcher and teammate, "Herb was such a nice, unassuming fellow that we all tried to help him. Everybody with our team liked him. But sometimes no matter what you try to do, it doesn't work out."

Three years after Score was struck in the face by a line drive then developed elbow problems shortly after his return, White Sox acquired the 26-year-old left-hander from the Cleveland Indians in return for pitcher **Barry Latman** on April 18, 1960, the eve of their regular-season opener. The hope was the one-time 20-game winner would regain at least some of his former dominance and become the final piece to the rotation that included Pierce, Bob Shaw and Early Wynn, holdovers from the 1959 pennant-winners of the previous season.

"Our manager **Al Lopez** had managed the Indians earlier in his career, and he knew what Herb had done there," Pierce said. "Al gave him every chance in the world to succeed, because he still wasn't that old at the time."

But when Score struggled in his White Sox debut seven days later -- he lasted only 3 2/3 innings in a 6-1 loss versus the Athletics in Kansas City -- there was reason to believe that his best days were behind him.

"When Herb was with us, he tried to throw as hard as he could almost to the point that he looked up to the sky in order to get his whole body behind the pitch and pick up some extra speed," Pierce said. "We recommended to him, 'Don't try to throw quite so hard,' because what happened was, he would pick up the target late and become wild. Maybe if he took something off his fastball, he could locate the plate better."

Three months later, after numerous sessions with pitching coach **Ray Berres**, there were signs that Score had worked out the kinks in his mechanics. On July 3, he limited the Baltimore Orioles to one run in nine innings, as the White Sox went on to post a 2-1 victory in 11 innings. The performance began a stretch in which Score pitched at least seven innings in 8-of-10 starts. He lowered his earned run average from 8.38 to 3.52 in the process.

Score failed to get out of the first inning in his next two starts against the Orioles and Detroit Tigers, however, and his career was over for all intents and purposes. He had a 5-10 record and 3.72 ERA in what would be his last full season in the big leagues.

In 1963, Score retired as a player to embark on a radio-television career. He broadcast Indians games on radio and television for 34 years, the longest tenure for any person in Cleveland history.

While the beaning was a horrific blow to his career, Score believed his decline had more to do with elbow problems that he confided were the result of a heavy workload at the start of the 1958 campaign. In the first 16 days of the season, he made four starts and one relief appearance. Included was a 7-5 victory against the Tigers on the road in which he faced 38 batters in nine innings. Pitch counts aren't available for the game, but it's conceivable that he totaled upward of 200 pitches that afternoon. Three months later, Score was placed on the disabled list.

"Herb told me the real problem was all those innings that he had pitched in bad weather," said Kuenster, who last spoke with him at the 1997 World Series. "When he came back the next season, (manager) Bobby Bragan went to him a lot early in the season. It wasn't long after that that he began to have arm problems."

Able to overcome occasional fits of wildness with a mid-to-upper 90 miles-per-hour fastball and sharp curveball, Score appeared to be on the fast track to the Hall of Fame in his first two seasons in the major leagues. In 1955, he posted a 16-10 record and was afforded Rookie of the Year honors. His 245 strikeouts were a rookie record that stood for 29 years.

At 23, Score was even more dominant one year later, as he turned in a 20-9 record and led the league in strikeouts (263) again. As Lopez was quoted to have said at the time, "Wait until he puts on some weight. He'll get even better."

On May 7, 1957, Score saw his life change dramatically on one pitch. In the first inning of a game in Cleveland, New York Yankees infielder Gil McDougald lined a pitch that struck the pitcher near his right eye. The ball was hit with such force that it broke his nose, cut his right eyelid and left his cheekbone and eyebrow grotesquely swollen. The immediate fear was he would lose vision in his right eye.

The sight of the prone Score in a pool of blood on the mound made for one of most gruesome images in baseball history. "His mother was very devoted to St. Jude, so she named him Herbert Jude Score," Kuenster said. "Herb told me that, when he was on the ground after he got hit, he said, 'St. Jude help me' or something to that effect. I remember that distinctly." McDougald was so distraught about the incident that he contemplated retirement briefly.

Score was beset with health issues throughout his life. As a youth, he was struck by a bakery truck that crushed his legs. He also encountered pneumonia, rheumatic fever and appendicitis. In the minor leagues, he suffered a broken ankle and dislocated collarbone.

In October, 1998, Score was involved in a near fatal automobile accident outside of Cleveland. En route to a vacation in Florida, he drove his car into the path of a tractor-trailer. Score was taken unconscious to a hospital and placed on a ventilator with a bruised brain and lungs, facial cuts, a broken bone above an eye and three broken ribs. More recently, Score suffered a stroke that left him confined to a wheelchair in his final years.

Despite the numerous setbacks on and off the field, Score was never heard to complain about his fate and discouraged attempts to portray him in a sympathetic light.

"I never heard Herb say a word or anybody quote him about that sort of thing," Pierce said. "His career was off to a great start. It's a shame what happened, because he had a great future in front of him."