

Fifty years later: The legend of Big Klu still lives large



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Posted June 9, 2009*

The area once referred to as Argo is located eight miles west of old Comiskey Park, a decidedly blue-collar town known for a corn milling and processing plant that is among the largest of its kind. As the barely 10,000 residents would tell you, it has the odor to prove it, too.

But to many Chicago baseball fans, especially those on the South Side, the location is known for something of far greater significance. It also was home to Ted Kluszewski, the 6-foot-2, 225-pound mountain of a man with the famous 15-inch biceps, whose legend in White Sox history will live even longer than the home runs he hit decades ago. "I remember the first time that I saw Ted in those cut-off sleeves," former White Sox pitcher Billy Pierce still recalls his trademark style nearly a half century later. "They were good-sized. He was a big man. A *big* man."

Says Bill "Moose" Skowron, the former White Sox and New York Yankees first baseman who crossed paths with Big Klu many times in their careers. "Everybody knows Ted could hit a baseball. What some people don't know is that he was a helluva first baseman and a helluva nice guy, too. And he always played in those short-sleeve shirts. He was built like a rock, you know."

How can the South Side of Chicago ever forget? There Kluszewski will forever be remembered as one of the greatest Brinks jobs in White Sox history, a local boy who made very, very good one unforgettable season. In the 1959 World Series, Kluszewski hit .391, slugged three home runs and drove in 10 runs. His 1.266 OPS was just plain silly.

Kluszewski mashed two of the taters in an 11-0 rout of the Los Angeles Dodgers in the opener. "Oh, man, the two home runs that Ted hit . . .," Pierce smiles at the thought of them. "That was exciting. I mean, there we were in the World Series . . . the fans were excited, we were excited, everybody was excited."

To this day, witnesses will tell you that ol' Comiskey Park never rocked like it did in the moments after Kluszewski took reliever Chuck Churn for a ride to the upper deck in the fourth inning. The two-run blow not only sealed the deal, but it did much to chuck Churn, as it turned out. The pitch was his last in the big leagues.

Until outfielder Scott Podsednik went deep to decide Game 1 of the 2005 World Series, the monster blast stood as the most memorable home run in team history. "There was a similar feeling about the two home runs," says John Kuenster, who covered the 1959 pennant-winners as a Chicago Daily News beat writer. "They gave White Sox fans a reason to think, 'My gosh, maybe we will win this thing, after all,' although in the case of the 1959 team, it didn't turn out that way."

When Kluszewski arrived at Comiskey Park on Aug. 25, a few hours after he was acquired from the Pittsburgh Pirates in return for outfielder Harry "Suitcase" Simpson and minor-league pitcher Bob Sager, not even the most optimistic White Sox fan would have thought any such heroics to be possible. As a member of the Cincinnati Redlegs three years earlier, he had suffered a back injury in a clubhouse scuffle. The disk problem proved to be Delilah to Klu's Samson, as he would never be the same power hitter again. After the 1957 season, one in which Klu was limited to a half-dozen homers and 21 RBI in 69 games, he was dealt to Pittsburgh in return for Dee Fondy, another veteran first baseman.

In 1958, his only full season with the Pirates, Kluszewski produced a mere four home runs and 37 RBI in 100 games, but he had a positive influence on a young, talented team that was on the come. Before he left, Klu made history at Forbes Field on May 9, when he went deep against Philadelphia Phillies pitcher Robin Roberts in the 12th inning, the 19th walk-off homer to decide 1-0 game since the turn of the century.

While the 34-year-old Kluszewski was deep into the back nine of his career at the time, news of his return to Chicago was well received by South Siders who required no introduction. "Certainly, the attitude of the fans was positive about the trade," Kuenster said. "Ted was a nice guy, a popular guy. He was well known in the area and his return was very well received there." At the very least, the consensus went, Klu could do no worse at the position than 35-year-old warhorse Earl Torgeson, a .226 hitter at the time, and 24-year-young prospect Norm Cash, a .231 hitter who was new to the pressure of a pennant race.

Besides, the righty-dominated line-up had been rather Klules for months. The veteran lefty would provide a much-needed option for a Go-Go Sox team that was overly dependent on speed and defense at the time. "We didn't have a regular firstbaseman," Pierce recalls. "When we got Ted, we all thought it was very, very good thing for us, because he gave us a strong left-handed hitter with a good reputation. We never thought he was past his prime but that he would help us. We were very glad to have him on our ballclub."

What Kluszewski lacked in glitzy numbers, he made up for in stature. His mere physical presence gave The Second City a sliver of security, a reason to flex its own muscles for a change. "Ted was a quiet fellow, but he had been with a winner in Cincinnati and had many accomplishments in his career," Pierce says. "A fellow like that is a kind of automatic leader on the team. He gave us stability, which was very good for us."

As it turned out, Kluszewski didn't quite turn back the clock in the final weeks of the regular season, but he did have his moments. The most significant took place on Sept. 7, when the White Sox beat the Kansas City Athletics in a doubleheader. In the opener, Kluszewski contributed a key hit in a 2-1 victory, then in the nightcap, he clubbed a pair of homers and drove home five runs in a 13-7 rout. As a result of the twin wins, the White Sox maintained a 4 1/2-game lead over the second-place Cleveland Indians, who scored an emotional sweep of the Detroit Tigers by 15-14 and 6-5 scores the same day.

While Kluszewski had rather modest statistics in the final 32 games of the regular season -- .297 batting average, two homers, 10 RBI -- the hidden numbers suggest the White Sox were deeper and better because of him. "Ted was a great asset for us," Pierce says. "He was an important cog in the middle of the line-up." With Klu as protection in the clean-up spot, outfielder Jim Landis immediately picked up the pace in the third hole. The offense produced scored more runs (4.5-4.3 per game) and team won at a higher rate (.625-.607) with Big Klu than without him.

Kluszewski left the team in the expansion draft after the next season -- he hit .293 and five homers in 81 games -- but not before he was involved in the most controversial play of the 1960 campaign. In a game at Baltimore on Aug. 28, Kluszewski hit a dramatic pinch-hit, three-run homer against Orioles starter Milt Pappas in the eighth inning to give his team a 4-3 lead. Or so it seemed. The umpire crew agreed that time-out had been called before the pitch had been thrown and the homer was wiped out. After teammate Nellie Fox was ejected from the game, Kluszewski flied out to kill the threat. The White Sox went on to drop a 3-1 decision and fell three games out of first place.

Before Kluszewski retired one year later, he exacted a sliver of payback at the same site. In the first game in Los Angeles Angels history, Big Klu took Pappas deep with a man on base in the first inning, the first four-bagger in franchise history. One inning later, he greeted rookie John Papa with a three-run homer to set the wheels in motion for a 7-2 victory. Kluszewski finished the season with .243 batting average, 15 homers and 39 RBI in 107 games.

Decades later, a case can be made for Kluszewski as one of the most underappreciated players of the post-World War II era, one whose accomplishments as a player and a coach have remained under the radar far too long. In the mid-1950s, he was the original big red machine, a long-ball hitter and run-producer without peer. In the four seasons from 1953 to 1956, he averaged 179 hits, 43 home runs and 116 RBI, numbers every bit as impressive as those of Eddie Mathews (152-41-109) and Duke Snider (180-42-123) in the same period. It's not a stretch to believe that, if Kluszewski had stayed healthy and productive for four or five more years, he would have joined Mathews and Snider in the Hall of Fame eventually. Despite an abbreviated career, he ranks fourth in homers (251) on the Reds all-time list.

In 1953, Kluszewski experienced a breakthrough, as his .316 batting average, 40 home runs and 108 RBI translated into a seventh-place finish in the Most Valuable Player vote. A career year followed in 1954, when he led the National League with 49 home runs. He also hit .326 (fifth overall), slugged .642 (third), drove home 141 runs (first) and finished a close second to New York Giants outfielder Willie Mays in the MVP vote. In the All-Star Game at Cleveland, he delivered an RBI single and two-run homer in consecutive innings, the latter of which broke a 5-5 all tie in an eventual 11-9 loss. Klu was at his best when the stars came out, as he hit .500 in four mid-summer classics.

Kluszewski did the brunt of his damage at the cozy confines of Crosley Field, which produced one of the highest home run rates of the decade. He was known for tape-measure blasts, though, not front-row jobs. As Reds star Pete Rose would say later, "Big Klu could hit 'em out of Yellowstone National Park."

What separated Kluszewski from the rest of the muscle men was his off-the-charts discipline at the plate. Incredibly, he totaled 31 fewer strikeouts (140) than home runs (171) in his four peak seasons. Of the 10 times in major league history that a player hit at least 40 homers with fewer strikeouts, Kluszewski owns three of them. The others on the list: Lou Gehrig (twice), Johnny Mize (twice), Mel Ott, Joe DiMaggio and Barry Bonds.

Not bad for a guy who once said, "How hard is hitting? You ever walk into a pitch-black room full of furniture that you've never been in before and try to walk through it without bumping into anything? Well, it's harder than that."

Then there's the myth that Kluszewski was a "big, lazy Polack," as crusty Reds manager Rogers Hornsby once put it as only he could back in the day. Well, Rajah was two-thirds correct, anyway. Klu was so patient at the plate, so determined to stay within himself as they say, so intent not to give away a pitch let alone and out, that he was a big, *smart* Polack.

"Everybody moves at his own pace," Pierce says. "I mean, we had a Nellie Fox who jumped around all the time. Sherm Lollar couldn't move very fast no matter what happened. But both gave you everything they had on the field, and Ted was the same way. He worked at his own pace, and he had a pretty good career that way."

Kluszewski didn't make many mistakes in the field, either, although his detractors argued that the low error totals were the result of an inability or reluctance to move more than one step in either direction. If you believe in range factors, then Big Klu was well above average in this regard before his achy back came into play. He led the league in fielding percentage in a record five consecutive seasons, largely the result of excellent hands and nimble footwork.

Born on Sept. 10, 1924, Kluszewski attended Argo High School, where he excelled in football. As a youth, his baseball experience consisted mostly of sandlot games. Indiana University recruited him primarily as a football player, but he also played baseball there, and his 1945 season ranks as one of the best for a two-sport athlete in school history. As a centerfielder, Kluszewski hit .443, a school record that would stand for 50 years. Then the star end and kicker helped lead the Hoosiers to the Big Ten football championship. The squad that also included future NFL players Pete Pihos and George Taliaferro finished with a 9-0-1 mark, still the only unbeaten Hoosiers football team ever.

If not for World War II, then Kluszewski probably would have embarked on a professional football career. During that time, the Reds trained at the Indiana campus as a way to cut costs. One day they invited the kid to take some hacks at batting practice. As legend has it, Big Klu promptly launched a few rockets over an embankment nearly 400 feet away. After they picked up their jaws off the ground, team officials offered him a \$15,000 contract, which he accepted.

In 1947, at 22 years of age, Kluszewski made his Reds debut, the first of his 10 seasons with the team. It wasn't long before his supersized biceps prompted Klu to cut off the sleeves of his jersey, one of the boldest fashion statements in baseball history. "At first, I did it because the sleeves were restricting me from swinging," he would explain later. "They could never make a uniform for me that would give me enough room. So I asked them to shorten the sleeves on my uniforms, but they gave me a lot of flak. So one day, I just took a pair of scissors out and cut them off. After awhile, it became kind of a symbol."

Kluszewski returned to the Reds after his retirement as a player, and his impact on the team was no small one. He served as Reds hitting coach for nine seasons in 1970s, a decade that the Big Red Machine dominated like few offenses in National League history. In 1986, after he had become a hitting instructor in their minor league system, Kluszewski suffered a heart attack and underwent emergency bypass surgery. On March 29, 1988, a massive heart attack took his life. He was 63 years old.

That the funeral services in suburban Cincinnati were a virtual Who's Who said as much about Kluszewski the person as Big Klu the athlete. In addition to Rose, Reds greats Johnny Bench, and Tony Perez were among those who paid their respects. Golden oldies Stan Musial and Joe Nuxhall did, too. "There are a lot of coaches who have received more notoriety than Klu, but I don't think anyone's had more success," Rose said at the time. "He was a prince. I never heard a bad word said about him. He was a nice man, a gentle giant."

In the 1988 season, the Reds wore black armbands in memory of their late teammate. There wasn't an arm large enough to do justice to Big Klu, a big man in more ways than one.

(Editor's note: A similar version of this story appears in the book *Go-Go to Glory: The 1959 Chicago White Sox*, which the Society for American Baseball Research published earlier this year.)

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