

Stan Musial – Our Man – On and Off the Field

In Brooklyn, where his hits rattled off the right field wall like corn in a popper, Dodger fans, filled with respect and awe, first dubbed him “The Man.” On the day of his final game, the commissioner of baseball, Ford Frick, said, “Here stands baseball’s perfect warrior. Here stands baseball’s perfect knight.”

Stan Musial earned those descriptions, just as he earned the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which he was awarded recently by President Barack Obama. Frick, once a New York sports writer, offered higher praise than the medal itself, which has been awarded to some 20,000 people since Harry Truman presided over the first ceremony in 1945.

Only eight baseball players are in this group, and Musial holds good company: Joe DiMaggio, 1977; Jackie Robinson, 1984; Ted Williams, 1991; Hank Aaron, 2002; Roberto Clemente, 2003; Frank Robinson, 2005; and Buck O’Neil, 2006.

As well-deserved as the medal was, Musial won it largely because of a fine, low-key campaign by the Cardinals, supported by the Post-Dispatch, other local media and various important figures in the St. Louis establishment.

I’ve never heard anyone say an unkind word about Musial. In 22 major league seasons he was never thrown out of a game. As a player, he was a nonpareil. Many of his records still stand.

In 1948, he had a magical season that and has not been threatened since. He led the league in batting average, runs batted in, total hits, doubles, triples, total bases and slugging percentage. In addition, he hit 39 home runs, finishing second behind Johnny Mize and Ralph Kiner, who each had 40 to tie for the league lead. Musial actually hit 40, but

one came in a game that later was rained out and the game's statistics did not count.

If the homer had counted, he would have won the triple crown (batting average, home runs and RBIs), a feat so rare it has not been repeated in the National League since the Cardinals' Joe Medwick in 1937.

The new biography, "Stan Musial, an American Life," by the New York Times sports columnist George Vecsey, offers an honest account.

Vecsey is a fine writer with a social conscience strong enough that he left the comfortable world of the sports department for several years to be a straight reporter covering Appalachia. Vecsey knows news, and he knows that there is more to the world than sports. And he lets pictures tell the story, too.

The cover picture is Musial as a stylized American baseball hero at the climax of a swing. The title page picture is Musial focused on the pitcher, poised to swing, his gaze that of an eagle tracking a rabbit. The back cover picture, with Obama shaking hands with Musial after placing the medal around his neck, evokes an emotion underlined with the realization that it might be his final public appearance.

Musial as National Hero

On one level, St. Louisans were short-changed in their knowledge of Musial because so much of what he said and did was filtered through the purple prose of Bob Broeg, long-time Post-Dispatch writer and columnist. Broeg wrote several books, many magazine articles, and thousands of words about Musial, all increasing the legend. Cardinals broadcaster Harry Caray added to Musial's local fame.

On another level, the great majority of St. Louisans never

knew how people and sports writers and broadcasters in other cities thought about Stan. And if you read the Post-Dispatch baseball coverage today, you won't know much about players from other cities. But Vecsey had the advantage of being a New York sports writer, one who traveled, and therefore was able to see the coverage that Musial received.

And he writes about Musial's last game, Sept. 29, 1963: "Despite the legend that Musial did not get attention from the national media, several New York-based magazines had requested permission to follow him step by step on his final day. This was a national hero winding up his career. Attention most definitely was paid. That final Sunday morning, Musial attended mass and then had breakfast with his actor friend Horace McMahon. Then he headed for the ballpark in his blue Cadillac, smoking a cigarillo along the way, with a photographer from Look magazine, Arnold Hano from Sport, and W. C. Heinz from Life all squeezed into the back seat."

In typical Vecsey style, he notes that Stan was smoking, and he makes several references to the fact that Stan liked a beer, or a cocktail (White Russians were a favorite). In other words, the author writes about a man, not a stuffed idol. He discusses the unfortunate falling-out with Joe Garagiola, long-time teammate and friend, and points out that there probably was fault on both sides. Stan and Joe had been long-time partners in a St. Louis bowling alley, and the Garagiolas sued the Musials over – what else? – money, with accusations of misspent funds. The suit was settled, court testimony was sealed and family members – on both sides – decline to comment.

Vecsey also shows Stan as someone who doesn't take kindly to those who would smudge his image or otherwise not show proper respect.

More recently, Musial apparently developed signs of

Alzheimer's disease. Vecsey mentioned it but did not belabor the point, but some absurdly-loyal media types responded as if the author had called Stan a child-molester.

I was 11 when I first saw him play, against my Dodgers at Ebbets Field in the spring of 1942. He came up to the majors in 1941, batting .426 in September. But we won the pennant, with the Cardinals second, and even though we lost to the Yankees in the World Series, we were happy with our first pennant since 1920.

I saw a lot of games at Ebbets Field, living just a 10-minute walk from the ballpark. Bleacher seats cost 55 cents and in the later innings we might get in free. My mom, listening at home, knew I'd arrive 20 minutes or so after the game ended.

For some night games my Dad and I would sit on the front steps, listening to Red Barber broadcast over a radio whose range was extended by the length of several extension cords. When the game was played down the street, we could hear the cheers whenever something good happened for the home team.

Watching Musial was a thrill for me and for anyone who loved baseball. He uncoiled from his corkscrew stance, always in balance, and he lashed the ball to all fields. He was a fine line-drive hitter, had great speed, was an excellent fielder, and while his arm was not the strongest, it was accurate.

Luckily, I attended the University of Missouri's School of Journalism, with dreams of becoming a sports writer, which made it possible to watch games at the old Sportsman's Park. One Sunday, in 1954, I saw Musial hit a record five home runs in a double-header against the then-New York Giants.

I met Stan later that year. As sports editor of the Columbia Missourian, covering Tiger football, I talked to him at one of the games and then briefly at another. In 1955, as a rookie sports writer with the old Globe-Democrat, I was re-introduced in the Cardinals' dressing room and he remembered our earlier

meetings. I was impressed. I never was on the baseball beat, but knowing Stan, even as tangentially as I did, always has been something to make me smile. It's a sadder smile today, given the recent news about the health problems affecting the 90-year-old Musial, but it's still a smile.

I'm not a fan of owners in the sports business, but I applaud the Cardinals for their successful attempt to honor Stan Musial for perhaps one last time.

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