

Opinion

Guest Column: Remembering Stan 'The Man' Musial – A Pennsylvania Guy

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By Rich Westcott
Times Guest Columnist

There can be no question that Stan Musial was one of the greatest players who ever stepped upon the hallowed grass of a baseball field. He was also one of the classiest gentlemen ever to pull on a uniform.

When the icon known as “Stan the Man” ascended to that great Hall of Fame in the sky last Saturday, amid all the accolades, one point was generally overlooked. Musial was a Pennsy guy through and through. Western Pennsylvania to be sure, but although he spent much of his adult life in the St. Louis area, there is not a baseball fan in the state who would be opposed to claiming that Musial was one of our own.

Born in Donora, a town about 30 miles from Pittsburgh, Musial never forgot his Pennsylvania roots. Even as a big-time star, he often returned home to visit his family and friends, to attend class reunions, to donate to worthy causes, to attend funerals, to build a house for his aging mother. Pennsylvania was his home state, and Musial was always proud of that distinction.

While those in Donora rightfully celebrated their native son, we in the Philadelphia area could enjoy a certain connection with Musial, too, even if he was endlessly whacking the offerings of local pitchers. During a 22-year major league career that ran from 1941 through 1963, he spent a considerable amount of time here every summer, playing at Shibe Park—later to be renamed Connie Mack Stadium—when his St. Louis Cardinals came to town. Those of us who are old enough to have seen him play hold fond memories of that very special privilege.

Stan Musial wasn't just a great ballplayer with a lifetime batting average of .331, seven batting titles, six seasons when he struck 200 or more hits, three Most Valuable Player awards, and the leader of three World Series winners. No indeed. Musial played hard, he worked hard, he never rested on his laurels, and he always hustled, a rare commodity for many great players.

Once when the Cardinals were playing the Cincinnati Reds, Musial struck out. But when the ball eluded the catcher, Musial sprinted down the line. The catcher had trouble coming up with the ball, and Musial kept running, winding up at second base. The effort prompted Reds manager Bucky Walters to make the observation that: “Even when Musial strikes out, he gets two bases.”

Musial was as good off the field as he was on it. He was the ultimate gentleman. Modest, humble, honest, and with an ego about as large as a pinhead. Musial, who one time asked for a cut in pay after he'd had a sub-par year, was one of the classiest athletes you'd ever want to meet.

Many years ago when the Hall of Famer was in this area for an appearance at a memorabilia show, I had the good fortune of landing an interview with him. Among many subjects, we discussed the practice of athletes signing autographs for fans. “I always enjoy signing autographs for fans,” he told me. “Signing autographs is a very important part of the game, and players should be happy to do it.”

How many great athletes would say something like that about signing autographs?

At a time when steroids have recently—and disparagingly--dominated the headlines, when showboats flaunt their disgusting egos in football, a sport in which the local team cares for little but itself and making money, and when basketball stars ignore the word “teamwork” and owners like those of the local club are trying to destroy the game with their crass sideshows, Musial represented the direct opposite. His political affiliation is unknown here, but as a candidate for any office, he would’ve won in a landslide.

Musial, who won one of his batting titles in 1946, the same year as Mickey Vernon’s first batting crown, seldom shunned the rare art of complimenting another player. “You were a great hitter and a credit to baseball,” he once said about Vernon.

And so was Musial. He was a fantastic player. But he was also a good citizen, a role model, a pillar in his community, the kind of person you’d want you kids to emulate. Our country today, could surely use a lot more Stan Musials.

Rich Westcott is a baseball writer and historian, and the author of 23 books, including a forthcoming book on Philadelphia’s 50 greatest baseball players.

A long time ago, he was a Daily Times sports writer.

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