

Jackie Collum

By Duane Winn

Jackie Collum never enjoyed giving the “razzberry” when he played Major League baseball.

More than four decades later, the Victor, Iowa, native refuses to indulge in sour grapes when he reviews his career.

“I never dreamed that I would play Major League ball,” said Collum. “I thank God I was lucky enough to play.”

Of course, this statement doesn’t quite ring true.

Luck had something to do with it. Baseball, like acting and other human endeavors, often hinges on being in the right place at the right time and being seen by the right person. But Collum had something else going for him. He had pluck.

Joe DiMaggio personified grace. Willie Mays embodied God-given talent. And Mickey Mantle oozed the charisma of a Hollywood star.

Collum, however, displayed the grit and determination of many journeymen of his era. He was quick to fasten on to any strategic subtlety to help his team gain the upper hand and hone a specialized skill to ensure himself another season in the sun.

Collum played nine seasons for seven teams. When he hung up his cleats for good in 1962, following a brief stint with the Cleveland Indians, the diminutive southpaw had amassed a record of 32 wins and 28 losses as a reliever and spot starter, and a respectable earned run average of 4.15 in a hit-happy era that boasted a bevy of iconic players in their prime.

Roy Campanella, Stan Musial, Jackie Robinson, Ernie Banks, Eddie Matthews, Duke Snider, Ted Williams, Frank Robinson, Henry Aaron, Roberto Clemente, Mickey Mantle Few decades before the 1950s (and no decade since) have unveiled such rare talent.

Other veteran Major Leaguers grabbed the spotlight for a brief instant in time. Witness Don Larson’s perfect game for the Yankees against the Dodgers in the 1956 World Series or Bobby Thomson’s storied home run which won a 1951 playoff game for the New York Giants.

Albert Francis Gionfriddo provided the golden age of baseball with its most poignant fadeout, a case in point about the fickle dame called celebrity.

Within a span of 11 months, "Little Gi" went from obscurity as a part-time player to a World Series hero, snaring Joe DiMaggio's rifle shot to the very edge of the bullpen in left field in the sixth inning of the sixth game on Oct. 5, 1947. This once-in-a-lifetime stroke of defensive genius preserved the Dodgers' lead in the game, although they ultimately lost the World Series in the seventh game.

The ink was hardly dry on the World Series history written by Gionfriddo when he was released the following spring by the Dodgers to their Montreal farm club.

It seemed that Collum, at five feet, seven inches tall, was destined to always stand in the shadows of larger men. Like the sidekick of the hero in a John Tunis boy's book of the same era, he was fated to toil in obscurity, his golden moments almost always overlooked.

No *Street & Smith* baseball annual of the period chose him among the most promising rookies or as an impact player who could help turn around the fortunes of a ball club. His 1954 Bowman baseball card, while taking note of his strikeout of Joe DiMaggio in a 1947 exhibition game, ventured the nugget that Collum was most likely the shortest pitcher in the Major Leagues.

Roots

Collum was born in Victor, Iowa, on June 21, 1927. The family moved to Newburg near Grinnell two years later when his father purchased a farm there.

While Collum was performing farm chores in the mid-1930s, another corn-fed Iowa lad from Van Meter was hypnotizing Cleveland Indian scout Cyril Slapnicka with his blazing fastball.

Robert Feller would soon pin the baseball world on its ears by inking a Major League contract and serving up 15 strikeouts in his Major League debut in 1937.

It would take the baseball world a little longer to uncover Collum's virtues.

Collum led his high school baseball team to a state tournament berth in the 1940s. Because there were only 11 boys on the team, Collum pitched nearly every game and was counted on to provide most of the offense. Still, no scouts came knocking on his door.

If they appeared to watch him play, Collum said, "They would have all said I was too small."

Uncle Sam, though, thought otherwise.

Shortly after Collum graduated from Newburg High School in 1944, he joined the Army. He didn't turn 18 until he set foot in the Philippines for the beginning of a 22-month military stint. Transferred briefly from the infantry to the utilities division, Collum caught the eye of Captain Gordon Maltzberger one day when he was playing catch with a Japanese prisoner of war.

Maltzberger had kicked around in the minor leagues for nine years before he was given a shot in the Major Leagues. He became the American League's top reliever in 1944, winning 10 games and saving 12.

The lanky Texan's stock-in-trade was pinpoint control, a quality he must have noted in Collum.

"He asked me if I wanted to play a couple of games over the weekend," said Collum. "I said, 'Sure,' and I got permission from the colonel."

When he returned to the base, the colonel informed Collum that he was in need of a typist. He asked Collum if he would like the job. Collum passed the typing test and began working for the colonel.

Evidently, his stint on the mound must have impressed someone.

"That was fine with me," Collum remembered. "Hell, my unit was practicing landings for Okinawa."

"As a member of the Fifth Army baseball team, Collum pitched a gem of a game in Japan against the Seventh Fleet during the Allied Occupation. Collum's opponents included the likes of Pee Wee Reese, Stan Musial and Joe Garagiola.

"That's when I gained the foresight that I could do this for a living," said Collum. "You figure that these guys are Major League ballplayers, but I could get them out."

Career Beginnings

Collum's baseball exploits on the faraway military base had drifted toward the states.

Walter Shannon, the father of future Cardinals' third baseman Mike Shannon, traveled to Iowa to sign Collum to a contract in the winter of 1946. He received a tip from Bernie Gerl, a St. Louis farmhand who had served with Collum in the military, that the lowan might be worth a contract.

"He (Shannon) had to stay over two days because of a snowstorm," said Collum.

Any notion that he would have an easy route to the Major Leagues was quashed when he traveled the following spring to Florida to take part in spring tryouts.

“Why, you never saw so many ballplayers,” said Collum. “You know, everybody was back from the war. I didn’t have a chance.

“Nobody wanted me. They said I was too small, too tiny. They said I wouldn’t make it.”

But the manager of the Cardinals’ affiliate in St. Joseph, Missouri, wanted him. Collum became a starter with the Class C team, and he began assembling a scrapbook of noteworthy press clippings.

“Versatility and skill is the rare combination adding up to the rise of fame rapidly being achieved by Jackie Collum, pitcher for the St. Joseph Cardinals in the Western Association,” shouted the caption underneath an ACME newspaper wire photo that touted his 15-game winning streak to begin the 1947 season. “In addition, he does a worthy job of filling in as a pinch hitter and relief outfielder.”

The following year, Collum attained even greater heights. He won 26 of 28 decisions, gaining him another invitation to spring training in 1949 with the Cardinals.

It was the second chapter in the same story.

“They had five left handers in camp,” Collum said.

The Cardinals’ southpaw ranks featured Harry Brecheen, Howie Pollett, Max Lanier and Al Brazle. The quartet combined for the majority of the Cardinals’ victories that season.

Secretly, Collum hoped he would be traded to another team so he might have a chance of cracking a Major League lineup.

“Back then, you didn’t have any say whatsoever. No free agency, nothing like that. You were just a cow in the pasture,” said Collum.

“Before Collum packed his bags for another trip to the minors, Brecheen offered the dejected youngster some advice and a quick tutorial.

“He told me that I needed another pitch,” Collum said. “He showed me how to throw the screwball. I found that it came natural to me. And it was real effective for me.”

Collum was sent to Omaha where he was among the league's ERA leaders. A lack of run support, however, enabled him to win just 2 of 11 decisions.

The next time the Cardinals contacted him, Collum thought that he was being made the butt of a practical joke.

"They told me they were sending me to Rochester," said Collum. "I said "They don't have a team in Rochester."

Collum thought that the Cardinals' brass was referring to Rochester, Minnesota. Instead, they were promoting Collum to their Triple A affiliate in New York, a team with an illustrious heritage.

Collum pitched for Rochester from 1949 to 1952, compiling a record of 35-26. The 1951 season was particularly memorable: Collum amassed a record of 15-8 at Rochester with a gaudy ERA of 2.80, prompting a late-season promotion to the Cardinals.

The Cardinals gave him a chance on September 21, and he delivered in a big way.

Collum recalls that the Cardinals had no choice but to give him the ball when their ace, Jerry Staley, suddenly announced that he was too ill to make his scheduled start.

"To this day, I think Jerry just pretended that he was sick," said Collum. "He told manager Marty Marion, "I don't feel so good today. Why don't you pitch that kid over there?"

Collum responded with a two-hit shutout victory over the Chicago Cubs. He finished the season with the Cardinals at 2-1 with a sparkling ERA of 1.59.

Despite pitching so very well, Collum was unable to find a place in the Cardinals starting rotation the following year. He appeared in just two games, allowing no runs in three innings.

"It was Eddie Stanky (the Cardinals manager)," said Collum. "He didn't like me for some reason. He was the only manager I didn't get along with."

"I pitched 27 scoreless innings in spring training, and he never recognized it. I hit a home run in an exhibition game once in Atlanta. Stanky was the third base coach. As I rounded third, he shouted, "I suppose you think you're Babe Ruth now?"

Again, Collum was sent back to the minor leagues. Characteristically, he parlayed adversity into success.

At first blush, Collum's 9-10 season for Rochester in 1952, with a 3.77 earned run average, doesn't appear to be especially noteworthy. But Collum played a key role in helping the Red Wings secure their first Junior World Series in several years.

On Sept. 5, Collum threw a no-hitter against Ottawa in his final regular-season start. He added a complete-game victory in the first round of the playoffs against Syracuse.

Collum outdueled Eddie Erault in the Red Wings' championship series against the favored Kansas City Blues, the champions of the American Association. Collum handcuffed the likes of Bob Cerv and Bill "Moose" Skowron for five innings in the decisive seventh game before he tired in the sixth inning, surrendering four runs. Jack Crimian finished the game, and Rochester won the game 8-4 to claim the title.

Collum pitched just seven games for the Cardinals in 1952 before he was traded to Cincinnati for Erault, the man he beat in the Junior World Series.

The move gave Collum the opportunity he had been waiting for since he signed as an amateur free agent. Collum, in 1953, forged a 7-11 record in 30 games as a starter, with a 3.75 ERA.

In 1954, Collum saw even more action as a reliever. In 36 games, he won seven of 10 decisions and fashioned an ERA of 3.76.

Collum found an appreciative audience in manager Rogers Hornsby and general manager Gabe Paul.

"Rogers was a different kind of cat. Most of the players didn't get along with him, but I did. I don't know why," said Collum. "Maybe he liked my determination."

Paul often shoved a \$100 bill in Collum's pocket after he had pitched well. Paul even signed a check for \$2,500 to help Collum make a down payment on a house.

Everything broke right for Collum in 1955. He was again made a starter and responded to the confidence showed in him by pitching extremely well. In his first start on May 28, he defeated the Cardinals and Harvey Haddix, 5-1. The Reds and Collum also claimed early-season victories over Robin Roberts and Bob Friend.

Yet, adversity was stalking Collum once again.

Following a start that summer, Collum said he woke up the next morning and discovered that he couldn't move.

"I thought I had polio for sure," Collum recalled. "My wife tried to help me up, and I just couldn't move."

Collum was rushed to the hospital where doctors told him that he had contracted pleurisy.

"I won two or three games after that, but I wasn't nearly as good," said Collum.

On Jan. 31, 1956, Collum was traded back to the Cardinals for pitcher Brooks Lawrence and utility man Sonny Senerchia.

Collum finished 20 of the 38 games he appeared in, winning six of eight decisions and saving seven games.

Despite the solid year, the Cardinals in the offseason dealt Collum, minor leaguer Wally Lammers, Ray Katt and Tom Poholsky to the Chicago Cubs for Hobie Landrith, Jim Davis, Sam Jones and Eddie Miksis.

The Cubs were Collum's favorite team as a youth, although it was difficult to tune in their broadcasts because his father preferred to listen to boxing.

It would be a brief and turbulent stay for Collum in the Windy City.

"That was a different kind of clubhouse," said Collum. "We had some really good ballplayers, but things were kind of negative."

"I popped off one day. I said, "You've got Triple A management in a big league town."

The Cubs traded Collum on the spot to the Brooklyn Dodgers.

"I cried all the way to Brooklyn. I went from an eighth-place team to first place," he said.

However, the Brooklyn Dodgers wouldn't finish first in 1956; they finished third at 84-70, as Roy Campanella and Pee Wee Reese battled nagging injuries and were never able to establish their respective rhythm at the plate.

The pitching was still solid. Don Drysdale emerged as the ace of the staff. Don

Newcombe and Johnny Podres pitched well, as did Sal Maglie and Danny McDevitt in limited duty.

Clem Labine and Ed Roebuck held sway over the bullpen, and Sandy Koufax was moved from the starting rotation to the bullpen due to his wildness. "You knew they (Drysdale and Koufax) were going to be great pitchers. They could both throw hard, and their fastballs just jumped. It was just a matter of them getting the ball over the plate," said Collum.

Koufax, Collum's roommate at the time, announced one day that he was going to quit baseball after a prolonged bout with wildness.

"I told him that he just had to concentrate on getting the ball over the plate," said Collum. "At that point in his career, it was ball one ... ball two ... and then he would let up and they would hit the hell out of the ball."

It was the same problem Collum wrestled with when he made the leap to the big leagues.

"I was always up high with my fastball. I just decided to throw the ball over the plate," recalled Collum. "Later in the year, I finally started getting the ball over the plate and got ahead of the hitters."

Drysdale, who conquered his wildness before Koufax, was a pitcher with an attitude, Collum said.

"Drysdale was just plain mean," remarked Collum. "But it didn't always work. I saw him knock Henry Aaron down one day. I mean he just flattened him. Aaron dusted himself off and slammed the next pitch over the center field fence. That's how it was in those days."

In Campanella, the pair of pitching phenoms had an experienced catcher who would help them realize the maximum in their potential.

"Campanella was a great catcher. He loved to play baseball. He was always smiling. It was just like throwing to Santa Claus," said Collum.

Collum remembered a period with the Dodgers when he wasn't able to get his curveball over the plate.

"I lost confidence in my curveball," recalled Collum. "He (Campanella) told me that when he wanted the curveball, he'd call for it," said Collum.

"He loved to catch me. I could throw the ball pretty much where I wanted when I was on. Drysdale and Koufax," said Collum, "were all over the plate."

Collum got to know Jackie Robinson. Although Robinson had recently retired, Collum said the baseball pioneer still had plenty of charisma.

“Boy, there was a competitor,” said Collum. “Helluva nice guy, too.”

Collum asked Robinson how he was able to withstand the prejudice he encountered when he first broke in with the Dodgers.

Collum said, “Jackie just said, “I promised Mr. Rickey. “

In 1958, the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles. Something noble and fine, Collum said, was lost in the transition.

“I loved the Brooklyn fans. They knew baseball, and they were very appreciative,” said Collum. “One time I was pitching, and we lost in extra innings. They still applauded me like I had just won the World Series. It made you feel good.”

In 1958, the Dodgers sent Collum to Vancouver.

The manager in Vancouver was Jack McKeon, who led the Florida Marlins to a World Series championship in 2003.

McKeon used Collum in novel ways, batting him as high as fifth in the lineup to take advantage of Collum as an offensive weapon.

“We had a very, very weak hitting club. Whenever (Collum) pitched, he knocked in most of the runs. He could hit for power, too,” said McKeon.

Collum also spent time in St. Paul in 1960, joining the likes of Willy Miranda, Don Bessent and Art Fowler. The quartet helped the Saints finish fourth to make the playoffs that year.

Collum pitched briefly for the Minnesota Twins in 1962. He was then dealt to the Cleveland Indians. In nine games with both clubs, he had an ERA in double digits. He promptly quit.

Collum said the difference in umpiring between the two leagues never allowed him to feel comfortable on the mound.

“I just couldn’t get the low strike. When you’re in the groove and they call ball, ball, ball, ball, you lose your rhythm,” said Collum. “One time, I faced Rocky Colavito and he told me afterwards that the first three pitches to him were strikes, right at his knees. But the umpire called each one a ball.”

Collum, however, knew the real reason behind his sudden ineffectiveness.

“My fastball was gone. It didn’t move any more,” said Collum. “Once that happens, you’re done. It doesn’t matter how fast you can throw; if it’s straight, it’s no problem to hit.

“It was just too many years of throwing fastballs, that’s all.”

Sparky Anderson offered Collum a post as the Cincinnati Reds pitching coach. Collum declined, and he purchased a gas station in Grinnell, Iowa.

“I turned Sparky’s offer down because all I had done since 1943 was travel. I just got tired of it,” said Collum.

Opinions

Collum avidly watches the Cubs on TV, but he doesn’t get caught up in comparisons between the players of his era and today.

“There are some good players today,” opined Collum. “But it’s hard to compare. We had 200 players in the National League total. Today, you’ve got 200 players on the injured reserve list.”

Collum remembers a time when he was overcome with heat exhaustion while pitching a minor league game one summer.

“They just walked me around like a horse,” said Collum. “I finally came out of it. You didn’t ever want to come out of the game because there was always someone to take your place.”

However, some players like Stan Musial, Carl Furillo and others, even the owners realized, were irreplaceable.

“Musial was the best all-around player I ever saw. People forget that when he came up he was fast. He could get from home to first really fast. He was a great baserunner, too. I never saw him get thrown out when he took the extra base. He was uncanny,” said Collum.

As for his hitting skills, Collum said Musial had few, if any, peers.

“I remember one night in Pittsburgh. Vern Law was pitching for the Pirates,” recalled Collum. “It was a heavy humid night at Forbes Field. Stan grabbed a bat and told us that he was going to get us some runs.

“He hit the ball over the centerfield fence on a line. I’m telling you, that thing just kept going. I think it was only one of two or three that were ever hit over the centerfield fence.”

Furillo, who led the National League in hitting for three consecutive years, stands out in Collum's mind as a player whom history has forgotten.

"There wouldn't be enough money today to pay someone like him," Collum said. "If you threw him outside, he would take you to right field. If you threw a fastball over the plate, he'd kill you."

Collum said he had his best luck against sluggers such as Willie Mays, Ralph Kiner and Henry Aaron, three of the most dangerous hitters of the era.

"I had good success with the power hitters because they're swingers," said Collum. "The ones who would kill me were guys like Red Schoendienst. He must have hit .500 off me. I'd pitch low and away, and he would just go with the pitch. Plink! He'd throw out his bat and get a hit."

Collum said he learned early on that pitching was a matter of concentration and determination. Like many players of his era, he credits military service in helping him acquire the fortitude to succeed in the Major Leagues.

"Crowds never bothered me. I never heard anything out there, even stuff from the opposing bench. They'd have to come out to the mound if they wanted to talk to me."

Keeping Track of the Count

Keeping track of the count becomes second nature for a pitcher. The offering to a batter is almost always determined by whether he is ahead or behind the batter in the count.

Collum now mostly keeps the count of his teammates and peers who have their names etched on tombstones, as once their names were inked in to the starting lineup by their managers.

Hank Sauer, Ted Kluszewski, Johnny Temple, Walker Cooper, Roy McMillan, Wally Post. All stars in their day, they are now fodder for trivia buffs.

Collum can't help but think how they might comport themselves today.

"One thing is for sure, none of us thought of ourselves as celebrities or anything like that," said Collum. "Playing ball was a job, and we all had families to support."

As for his place in baseball history, one can't help but compare Collum to Dave Leonard, a key figure in John Tunis's finest novel, "*The Kid from Tomkinsville*."

Leonard, imparting advice to a young player, said, "Courage is all life. Courage is all baseball. And baseball is all life; that's why it gets under your skin."

Collum fulfilled his dream of playing Major League baseball when all the signs pointed in the opposite direction. Collum said, "You know, it didn't matter if I started or relieved a game. It was all the same to me. It was just the chance to get out there to play the game. That was the most important thing of all."

It's a brand of self-knowledge that would escape many players with loftier statistics, even those who stand tallest in baseball history.

A Case in Point

One spring, Ted Williams ran into Johnny Klippstein and Collum at a Florida restaurant during spring training.

"He told us that he was going to pay for our meals, which was really nice of him. Then he said, "I tip more than you two guys make in a year." Boy, he could be arrogant."

Collum said the comment reflected Williams' competitive nature. Since Collum enjoyed success at getting Williams out, the Splendid Splinter's only alternative was to verbally get the best of Collum.

Collum said he and Klippstein took Williams's high-handed insult without flinching, determined not to descend to Williams's bush-league strategy.

At times like these, it is difficult to imagine that Collum ever stood in anyone's shadow, on or off the field.