

Bob Feller Taking Baseball To The People

Ambassador for baseball.

That seems like a good title for Bob Feller.

The Hall of Famer and former Cleveland Indians pitching great visits over 100 towns each summer on behalf of baseball and enjoys every minute of it.

Much of his time is spent in speaking engagements, like last Thursday night when he was in Kings Mountain to speak at the Babe Ruth state tournament banquet; but Feller seems to get his biggest kick out of donning his old Cleveland uniform for a clinic or old-timers game. And he keeps his pitching arm in shape by signing thousands of autographs.

Feller took time out during his KM visit to talk about the changes baseball has gone through since his heyday.

"It hasn't changed much on the field," he says. "They've tried the phoney grass and it proved very unsatisfactory."

"They lowered the mound three inches. When I came up there was no regulation for the mound. It could be three inches or three feet."

"The pitchers probably have more stuff as a group," he states, "but they're not as good as the best ones of my time and before. I don't think the righthanders are doing a good job of holding men on base. They make it tough on the catchers."

Hitting, he says, has fallen off sharply because of the crave of the home run.

"There's no morale victory in not striking out," he says. "There's money in power pitching and power hitting. You can't hit the ball out of the park by just trying for a base hit. So, there's not as much pride in not striking out. They know if they take a good swing three times they're more apt to hit the ball out of the park."

"The first time the American League averaged more than three strikeouts per team per game was the year I broke the strikeout record in 1946," he said.

Feller said there was some dispute as to whether or not he broke the record. He registered 348. Some people during that time claimed the record was 344. Others claimed 349.

"I wrote the league office during the middle of season and asked them if it was 344 or 349," Feller recalled. "They wrote back and said 344. I still have the letter and have it framed. If it had been 349 or more, I could have pitched a few more innings."

After his strikeout feat, Feller said the strikeouts began to pile up because of the hard swinging.

"Walter Johnson was probably the fastest pitcher ever," Feller said, "but he didn't get as many strikeouts as I got because in his day the guys with the big heavy bats just choked up and went for singles. They weren't hitting home runs because of the dead ball."

"Then, after World War One they started the live ball and Ruth came along and put the rabbit in it and it started taking off."

But now, getting to some of the changes, most of which are coming off the field, Feller says the owners, business agents and player representatives have changed the game.

"When I was player rep of the American League many years ago we recommended that the players select the commissioner along with the owners, and also pay for his office."

"If that were the case today," he added, "the disputes would end in his office and not in the civil courts and Washington."

"But the owners didn't want that. They wanted a one-way street. They wanted to hire and fire the commissioner and say 'we'll take care of the money and you take care of the balls and bats. And when you're through, bye bye.'"

"The club should have some hold on the player," he went on, "but the player should also have some hold on the club. They don't have. If they sign this agreement they have now, the guys that thought they were going to be free agents in the fall won't be free agents at all. They have to sign their contracts at a 25 percent cut if the club wants them to. However, if they've been around for a while, they'll be free when they get their five or six years in, or whatever the agreement calls for in the small print that nobody seems to know anything about except Marvin Miller."

In his travels in the minor leagues, Feller says he's learned to love the minor league parks because of their "personality."

"Maybe the showers aren't the greatest, or the



GARY STEWART

fields, or the seats," he says, "but they've got personality. They're all different. In the major leagues parks, you could wake up in the morning and not know what town you were in... they're all so much alike."

Of the major league parks, Feller says he favors the old ones, like Cleveland, Detroit and Yankee Stadium, which provide challenges for the pitchers and hitters.

"Can you imagine Ted Williams hitting in Cleveland or Detroit with those short right field fences? He'd have hit a thousand home runs. And take DiMaggio with that big leftfield in Yankee



Bob Feller autographs another picture.

Stadium. I don't know how many balls he hit 420 feet that were cans of corn."

Farm life, Feller said, helped him and most other players of his time because as youngsters they were working themselves into shape without even realizing it.

"I used to work on the farm where there was a lot of manual labor involved in the use of your hands and legs. You were walking, always on your feet. I pitched 36 complete games one year out of 39 starts. We didn't have relief pitchers in those days. You didn't need them."

"They say relief pitchers are specialists," he went on. "They're not specialists. They can't do anything else. Have you ever seen Rhyne Duren start a ballgame? I have. He'd go four innings and not have anything more than my kid sister. All great pitchers still complete a lot of ballgames and always will. The saying is 'go out there and throw as hard as you can and we'll pick you up with somebody else.' If that were the case, all you'd need is just nine pitchers and pitch one inning a day and never lose."

Feller says television has turned baseball into show biz, which is good in some ways.

"It pays for our pension plan, which I'm a part of and helped work on as a player rep."

"Marvin Miller would like for everybody to believe that he invented the pension plan," says Feller. "He didn't. I didn't. It came in in 1946 because all of the players were jumping to Mexico. They said they'd give them a pension plan and maybe they'd come back. And they did."

Feller who signed his first contract at the age of 16 after playing four years of American Legion ball and one year of semi-pro, could have become a free agent himself once and demanded some big money.

"I was signed illegally by C. C. Slapnicka, a scout for Cleveland. But I lied and said I was signed by the manager of the Fargo club. When the judge declared 183 players free agents for being signed illegally, he asked if I wanted to be free and my father said no."

Feller says his father was the most important influence on his career. As a boy, he recalls playing baseball with his father "between the

barn and the house...out there in the hog lot.

"I still have my dad's old mitt that he caught me with. I won't let Cooperstown have that. I have it in a museum of my own."

Feller's pro career was interrupted by WWII, like so many other greats, like Williams. But he doesn't regret serving his country, even though he could have set many more records during that 44-month tour of duty. He was 23 years old when he joined the Navy.

"When I came back from the war, everybody was wondering if I was washed up," he said. "In fact, on my first trip to Yankee Stadium after I returned, Joe Riker wrote a story that I was all washed up. That afternoon I pitched a no-hitter and beat them 1-0."

"That had to be one of the highlights of my career," he said, "because I knew all of the Yankees. We traveled with the Yankees and Giants all over the southeast during the exhibition season."

"On exhibition tours, you got to know everybody real close," he said. "I enjoyed that. Now, they play a ballgame and everybody goes in different directions."

Feller says Rogers Hornsby was the toughest righthand hitter he ever pitched to but calls Williams the best hitter of all time. "because he hit the ball with power. Ty Cobb maybe was a better hitter but he choked up and just met the ball."

"Ted always had his natural swing except when he was trying to be funny like when they pulled the Williams shift. I saw him hit a home run about three feet fair down the leftfield line one time when we pulled the Boudreau shift in Cleveland. He just walked around the bases cause everybody were to the right of second base. So he just dropped one down the leftfield line and walked....laughing all the way."

"Ted hit me for an average of about .238," he went on. "But nobody had his number. He'd wear you out, then maybe you'd get him out for awhile, then he'd wear you out again...4-for-4, extra base hits...shots going out of there like bullets to the fans in the stands."

Feller says one of his biggest gripes about baseball today is the difference in the rules...like the designated hitter.

"I don't say the DH is wrong," he says, "but it is wrong in that all rules in pro baseball should be the same. The parks can't be the same so the rules should. If they want to experiment, let them experiment in high school and college. Don't use the World Series as a guinea pig test."

"What's to prevent them from having a designated runner designated catcher, or anything else? If you have one exception, why not have two or three?"

Looking back, Feller says he has no regrets. He's proud to be a record-setter and proud to be in the Hall of Fame. He's proudest, though, when he's carrying the game of baseball to the fans in Kings Mountain and other towns like it.

SPORTS

Ed O'Herron knows how to get things done.

Ed O'Herron is a successful businessman who made it on his own. He wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

As a boy, Ed delivered newspapers to earn spending money. His first full-time job was in the stockroom of a small drug store. During World War II, he volunteered for the Marines, and sent his paychecks home for house payments.

Ed knows the value of an honest day's work. It was the key to his success during his 30 years in business and 14 years in government. And it will be the key to his success in providing the firm, mature leadership needed to get North Carolina moving forward again.

Ed knows the value of a dollar, too. He'll see that we have an efficient state government—one that will provide a dollar's worth of service for every dollar of the taxpayers' money. He will put people ahead of politics. His team will be chosen for what they can do for you, not for what they have done for politicians.

Ed hasn't made any political promises. And, he won't. When you elect Ed O'Herron governor, the only debt he'll have is to you.

He's concerned about your problems.

People can't afford to have their bills going up faster than their incomes.

The cost of living in North Carolina is going up as fast as anywhere, but the average family income is not. We need direction and leadership from the governor's office to bring more skilled industries to our state. Industries that will use our people's skills, so they can earn more money.

From my 30 years of business experience, I know these industries. I know how to sell them on North Carolina. And I'll make better paying jobs my biggest job.



We need stricter laws to improve the discipline in our schools.

The biggest problem in the public schools is discipline. Without order in the classroom, children cannot learn to read or write—no matter how good their teachers are.

As governor, I will provide the leadership needed to revise state laws, and give principals and teachers authority to maintain a climate for learning. My goal is to provide every child in North Carolina an education to prepare him for a full and abundant life in tomorrow's world.

North Carolinians pay enough taxes.

It's hard enough for people to buy food and pay their everyday bills without paying more taxes. I am opposed to any increase in taxes.

Our state already has a \$3,400,000,000 budget! We don't need higher taxes if this money is managed efficiently. As governor, I'll see that more of your tax dollars are spent on services for people, instead of a bureaucracy for politicians.



We must protect people from criminals, and our children from becoming criminals.

I believe that swift apprehension, speedy trials, and stiff sentences are deterrents to crime. We have to stop pampering criminals. I will use the full power of the governor's office

to get repeat offenders off the streets and into the prisons.

But we must also fight crime by giving all young people the opportunity to earn a good, honest living. This means giving our children a meaningful education and bringing better paying jobs to North Carolina.

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