

# Almost A Pelican

By  
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The winningest pitcher in Cleveland Indians history, in 1962 Feller became the first pitcher since charter member Walter Johnson to be elected to the Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility. Though regarded as the fastest pitcher of his day, he himself attributed his strikeout records to his curve and slider. Blessed with a strong arm and an encouraging father, young Feller pitched to a makeshift backstop on the family farm near Van Meter, Iowa. Cleveland scout Cy Slapnicka signed him for one dollar and an autographed baseball.

His velocity became an immediate legend when he struck out eight Cardinals in a three-inning exhibition stint. He came up as a 17-year-old at the end of 1936 and fanned 15 Browns in his first ML start and 17 Athletics shortly thereafter. But he was extremely wild. In 1938 he became a regular starter for the Indians. He won 17 and led the AL in strikeouts with 240. He also set a ML record with 208 walks. Although he led the AL in walks three more times, his control progressively improved. Meanwhile, he led the AL in both strikeouts and wins from 1939 to 1941.

In 1940, he won his personal high with 27, including an Opening Day no-hitter against the White Sox. Yet the year was tarnished, first when Cleveland veterans, including Feller, earned the nickname Crybabies by asking Cleveland owner Alva Bradley to replace stern manager Ossie Vitt. Then Feller lost the season's climactic game and the pennant to Tigers unknown Floyd Giebell, despite pitching a three-hitter.

He lost nearly four seasons to the Navy during WWII, earning eight battle stars. When he returned, he was better than ever, rejoining a powerful pitching staff that would soon include Bob Lemon, Mike Garcia, and Early Wynn. He won 26 games in 1946 and broke Rube Waddell's strikeout record with 348 (later research indicated Waddell may have fanned 349). He also threw his second no-hitter, against the Yankees. All told, Feller threw three no-hitters and 12 one-hitters.

In 1948 he started to decline, although he led the AL in strikeouts for the seventh and final time. He salvaged his season with six straight wins down the stretch to help the Indians to their first pennant in 28 years. He opened the WS against the Braves, but lost 1-0 on a controversial call. He'd apparently picked Boston's Phil

Masi off second base, but the Braves' catcher was called safe. Masi then scored the game's only run when Tommy Holmes singled.

After two mediocre years, he bounced back with a 22-8 season in 1951 to lead the AL in wins for the sixth time and in winning percentage for the only time. He spent his final seasons as a highly effective spot starter, but was not used in the 1954 WS.

One of the first of the modern businessman-players, he was incorporated (Ro-Fel, Inc.) and made nearly as much money from barnstorming and endorsements as from playing. In 1957 his number 19 was the first to be retired by the Indians. And in 1969 he was voted baseball's greatest living right-handed pitcher in ceremonies for professional baseball's centennial. Always outspoken, and a natural promoter, he remains a popular ambassador for baseball.

Bob Feller's blazing fastball set the standard against which all of his successors have been judged. "Rapid Robert" spent his 18-year career in Cleveland, amassing 266 victories and 2,581 strikeouts, while leading the league in strikeouts seven times. He missed four years in his prime serving his country during World War II, for which he was decorated with five campaign ribbons studded with eight battle stars. Fresh from high school, Feller struck out 17 Athletics in 1936. He authored three no-hitters and shares the major league record with 12 one-hitters.

**Did you know ...** that Bob Feller struck out 15 batters in his first big league start, a 4-1 victory over the St. Louis Browns, August 25, 1936?

Feller was born on Nov. 3, 1918, on the family farm outside Van Meter, Iowa. While his father Bill farmed, his mother Lena was, at various times, a schoolteacher and a nurse.

When he wasn't helping out on the farm, Feller learned to pitch by throwing to a makeshift backstop his father set up. In the spring of 1936, he was signed by Cleveland scout Cy Slapnicka for \$1 and an autographed baseball. The 17-year-old high school junior was assigned to a farm club in Fargo-Moorehead, where he was supposed to report after school ended.

But Slapnicka had plans for the right-hander that didn't include seasoning on the North Dakota-Minnesota border. Promoted to general manager, Slapnicka violated the rules by transferring Feller's contract from Fargo-Moorehead to the New Orleans Pelicans to the Indians without so much as a visit by the pitcher to either of the first two teams.

The paperwork shuffle caught up with Slapnicka when the owner of the Western League's Des Moines club, who had tried to sign Feller in 1935, protested to Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis. He said the Indians had broken the

regulation prohibiting major league teams from signing schoolboys to big league contracts.



After a three-month investigation, Landis made it clear that he did not believe anything Slapnicka and Cleveland president Alva Bradley said about the matter, but awarded Feller to the Indians anyway (though he fined them \$7,500). Landis based his decision partly on the testimony of Feller and his father, who wanted Bob to play for Cleveland.

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