

A Truly Perfect Game

Buehrle's weekday masterpiece harkens back to a more simple time in sports

White Sox pitcher Mark Buehrle's perfect game on July 23 in Chicago had a number of noteworthy aspects. First of all, Buehrle became the first pitcher in baseball history to face the minimum 27 batters in a game twice, having thrown a no-hitter in 2007 against the Texas Rangers in which he walked Sammy Sosa but then picked him off base. Additionally, the 27 batters he mowed down on July 23 were part of a string of 45 consecutive batters Buehrle retired (a major league record), taking a perfect game into the sixth inning of his next start on July 28. But what also struck me is that Buehrle's perfect game occurred on an otherwise unremarkable Thursday afternoon in the middle of the baseball season.

We get so used to sports drama playing out before our very eyes with great fanfare that it's unusual for one of the most rare and monumental achievements in American professional sports to take place somewhat under the radar, at least while it was happening. Generally speaking, anything noteworthy in American professional sports is covered nationally, and is scrutinized frame by frame as if it were the Zapruder film. If any player is about to do something historic, we are kept up to date constantly, with all coverage shifting to the event when it happens. NFL games take place either on weekend days or in prime time when the world can tune in, or at least monitor. In the NBA, if Wilt Chamberlain's 100-point game happened today, word would be out about the time he hit 75 or 80, and we would all tune in to watch it that night. But I would venture to guess that many ardent sports fans, at least those outside Chicago and Tampa Bay (the White Sox's opponent that day), did not hear about Buehrle's perfect game until it was over.

My first reaction was to be somewhat disappointed. For instance, I would love to have been able to share in the drama of DeWayne Wise's spectacular, juggling catch, reaching over the center-field wall

By Bob Latham

in the ninth inning to rob Gabe Kapler of a home run. Would he drop it or not? I would have appreciated the opportunity to look for any hitch in Buehrle's consistent, workmanlike manner as he approached a milestone so rare that only 17 other pitchers in the 134-year history of Major League Baseball had accom-

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plished it (between April 1922 and October 1956, a span of 34 years, there were no perfect games). I would have liked to have been on the edge of my seat as Buehrle faced his 27th batter. You think it's easy to get that 27th out if you've already retired 26? Think again. Nine times a pitcher has retired the first 26 batters he faced only to lose a perfect game facing the 27th. In other words, a full 33 percent of pitchers who have been in a situation where they only needed one more out for a perfect game have not been able to get it done.

Yet, as I came to terms with my own obliviousness to what had unfolded that afternoon while I was going about my own day job, I began to think that there is something a bit refreshing about the fact that even today, when all types of communication methods would alert us to an impending historic event, such an event in our most historic of sports could take place with little contemporary fanfare or suspension of life as we know it. Buehrle's masterpiece was the first perfect game on a weekday afternoon since Don Larsen's in the 1956 World Series, and the first regular-season weekday afternoon perfect game since Addie Joss in 1908. In other words, this was the first perfect game on a work day in the era not only of the Internet

but also of cable television, and the first non-World Series perfect game on a work day in the era not only of television but also of radio. Sure there were ways to follow the game online if you were alerted to what was happening, but the chances of a substantial chunk of the nation being so alerted are reduced on a weekday afternoon.

It's interesting to contemplate what affects our sports consciousness the most: the indelible memory of something you've actually seen that is reinforced by the emotion of the moment, or the mystique of something that you only hear about later. Whichever way you prefer to capture your historic moments, I take some old-

school pleasure in knowing that such a superb sports performance can still happen before an intimate and dedicated group of fans without going viral—without Buehrle himself tweeting between innings: "only 6 more to go—hope my infielders don't screw up." It harkens back to a time before "SportsCenter," and nationally televised sporting events every night, and even before predominately night baseball, when players went to work just like the rest of us and we only talked about it at day's end.

In 1951, after Bobby Thomson hit his famous "shot heard round the world" to clinch the National League pennant for the New York Giants, he traveled home alone via public transportation—just like the rest of the day's commuters. That a lunch-bucket guy like Buehrle could, in 2009, get up in the morning, go to work at the same time as the rest of us, discharge his duties perfectly, and be home in time for dinner—interrupted only by a 30-second congratulatory call from a White Sox fan named Barack Obama—may make his pitching gem all the more perfect. ■

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