

Ex-Yankee has place among legends



Photo by [Jennifer Simonson](#) , Star Tribune

Former Yankees baseball player Johnny Blanchard, now a Wayzata resident, spends a lot of his time these days at Sundance Golf club in Maple Grove.

From Babe Ruth to Derek Jeter, those who have called themselves New York Yankees are legendary. But can you name the guy who once hit four home runs in four at-bats over three days in 1961? And who has 10 pinch-hit at-bats in five World Series appearances? (That's a record, by the way.) He's Johnny Blanchard, a Minneapolis native and Wayzata resident who, for the most part, flies under the radar here -- and that's just fine with him.

JOHNNY BLANCHARD BY THE NUMBERS

516 Games played

.345 Batting average in five World Series (29 at-bats)

21 Home runs in 1961, one of six Yankees players with 20 or more that season

8 Major League Baseball seasons with three teams, mostly the Yankees

4 Home runs hit in a row in 4 pinch-hit at-bats

3 Career grand slams

2 Career stolen bases and triples

From Babe Ruth to Derek Jeter, those who have called themselves New York Yankees are legendary. We've all heard of the Babe's called shot in the 1932 World Series, Joe

DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak in 1941 and the millions upon millions of dollars Alex Rodriguez claims each season. But can you name the guy who once hit four home runs in four at-bats over three days in 1961? And who has 10 pinch-hit at-bats in five World Series appearances? (That's a record, by the way.) He's Johnny Blanchard, a Minneapolis native and Wayzata resident who, for the most part, flies under the radar here -- and that's just fine with him. "In Minnesota, practically nobody knows who I am," he said. "Which is all right." These days, you'll most likely find Blanchard on a golf course, where he plays nearly every day. Brian Stensaas caught up with Blanchard earlier this summer for a trip down baseball memory lane. Blanchard's answers have been edited for space and clarity.

Q How did you get into baseball?

A It's all there was to do. There was no money, no cars, no TV. The Minneapolis Park Board had all these little parks around. I was at 25th and 4th Avenue, which is 35W now. And Clinton Field is right near there. That's where I started. And I went from there. I was on state champion teams when I was 12 or 13 -- they called it Midget then, it's Little League now. I went to Central High School. I had a scholarship offer to Notre Dame and a basketball scholarship with Minnesota. But pro teams came by then in 1951 and I never went on to college. I worked out with the White Sox, the Tigers, a Triple-A team here called the Giants and then the Yankees.

Q Do you remember your first experience with the Yankees?

A They put me right into Triple-A from high school. And I'll never forget my first pinch-hit -- a triple. Then in the second game, I got a single. I was 2-for-2. Move over, pal. Well, I went the next 30 times without a base hit! So the manager called me and said the Yankees are sending this young kid to Triple-A, Mickey something. So I was sent down to Single-A in 1951 so Mickey Mantle could take my place at Triple-A, and that's the first time I met him. And we became real, real close friends. Even though he kicked me out of a job.

Q How about being at Yankee Stadium?

A I led the Eastern League in home runs and RBIs in 1955, and after our last game I was at a pizza parlor with the ballclub. The phone rang and this guy says 'John, this is George Weiss. I want you in New York tomorrow morning.' I hung up. I thought it was a prank call. The phone rings again, and all I hear is 'Don't you ever hang up on me again!' I knew it was real then. I drove to the Bronx, and it was a doubleheader. A full house. I had never seen that many people in my life. I was sitting in the bullpen in about the eighth inning and the coach said I was going in to pinch hit. You talk about butterflies. I almost had a great case of dysentery. And then everybody started laughing. It was a joke on me. And they got me good.

Q You played parts of eight seasons with the Yankees, but the summer of 1961 must have been the best. What do you remember about that season?

A As a team, we enjoyed it more than the fans did. We couldn't wait to get to the park, because it was [Roger] Maris and Mantle, Maris and Mantle. Who's gonna hit [a home run] today? They'd go back and forth. I was in right field in Baltimore when Roger hit his 60th. That was a big thrill for me. And when he hit 61 on the last day of the season in New York, that was really exciting. Everybody had a good year -- we all had good stats. I was one of the six guys who hit 20 or more home runs. And without a designated hitter. I don't think you can have a better year in professional athletics. It was unbelievable.

Q You were a pallbearer at Mantle's funeral [in 1995], a sign you guys all stayed in touch from those years. Do you still?

A Oh yes. Bobby Richardson, Tony Kubek, Moose Skowron, Ryne Duren. I see those guys three or four times a year at card shows and things like that.

Q Any good Yogi Berra stories?

A Don Zimmer is another good friend of mine. He told me that he was talking with Yogi not long ago and they got to talking about that AFLAC commercial [Berra] is in. Yogi tells Zimmer that he watched as the trainers worked with that duck to get him to do all those things at the right time. They worked a lot of hours to make sure the duck does certain things. And all of a sudden, Yogi then goes 'But he don't really talk!' People almost died laughing.

Q What's your reaction to some of the paychecks today's players take in?

A Jealousy [laughs]. A lot of people come up to me and say these ballplayers today are ruining the game. I can't think of anything more idiotic than to make a statement like that. It's not the players. It's the agents that get their percentages. The bigger the salary, the more the agent gets.

Q Did you have an agent?

A Sure did. She was about 5-foot-3 and weighed about 100 pounds [referring to his wife, Nancy].

Q This has been dubbed the "Steroid Era" of Major League Baseball. Does that bother you?

A They cheated. I played with Hank Aaron [in 1965] and he was asked this same question a couple of years ago. And his answer was two words: They cheated. And then he walked away. But from a business standpoint, baseball won't do anything about it. If Barry Bonds came to the Metrodome, they'd pack the joint. People want to see him, even though people think he cheated. We never had steroids. Roger Maris did it with milk and pop and a couple of beers. I don't even know how to spell it, and I have a rule that I don't put anything into my stomach that I can't spell.

Q Do you get to see any amateur baseball around here?

A I coached town ball in Hamel in the 1980s. And my son Paul is a college coach. But mostly now, it's watching my young grandkids.

Q How about the Twins? Any advice for them from a veteran?

A [Joe] Mauer hurt his knee when he was 22. And Mauer's young enough still to recoup. But not forever. Ron Gardenhire's got his hands full, no doubt about it. He's an excellent coach. But sometimes I damn near want to call him up and say get Mauer out from behind the plate and into the field. If he keeps him there, he won't be around at age 28.

BRIAN STENSAAS