

The Noblest Redbird of Them All

News of Stan Musial's death last Saturday fills me with memories and thoughts, which I now feel impelled to write down, albeit in a rather disorganized way.

I was an 8-year-old in St. Louis when Stan joined the Cardinals late in the 1941 season. Although I don't think I saw him play in 1941 (he played only 12 games that year), it was my privilege to see him in at least a few games every year of his career after that: 1942-44 and 1946-63. At the time, my brother Bill and I pretty much took this for granted: We loved the Cardinals, went every year to some of their games, and they had this great player. But in later years we have reflected on how unusual it is to be able to follow such a superstar through his whole career, and without making special trips to other towns just for that purpose. It's almost impossible today with superstars changing teams so often, but back then you could do it.

From the beginning, Musial put up impressive offensive numbers, but the so-called experts often described his "corkscrew" batting stance as awkward. Well, to us kids at the time, it didn't seem awkward at all: Obviously, it was producing better results than other stances, so we tried to imitate it, which is probably one of the reasons why neither I nor any of my friends of that time ever made the major leagues. Stan always claimed that this stance gave him a good view of the strike zone. Awkward stance or not, I would still describe his *swing* as the most graceful I have ever seen.

Stan's first full year, 1942, was a memorable one. He became the regular left fielder, teaming with Terry Moore in center and Enos Slaughter in right to form one of the great all-time outfielders. A close Cards - Dodgers pennant race had been expected, but by midseason the Dodgers had built a seemingly commanding lead. The Cardinals stormed back, however, playing .800 ball the last third of the season, and ended up winning by two games. The Dodgers' 104 wins (out of 154) that year is still, I think, a record for a second-place team. The Cardinals' 106 wins is also a record of sorts, most wins by a team entering the World Series as distinct underdogs. Their opponents were the feared Yankees, and so great was the mystique surrounding them that even a 106-game winning team was

given little chance. Our grandfather took Bill and me to game 1 at Sportsman's Park, and it was a dismal experience for most of the game. The Cardinals came to bat in the bottom of the 9'th, trailing 7-0, and Musial, leading off, fouled out to the catcher. The team then came to life, scoring 4 runs and loading the bases with two out when Musial came up for the second time. Alas, he made his second out of the inning, grounding to first base.

That, however, turned out to be the only game the Cardinals lost in that series, and Musial redeemed himself from making two outs in one inning by making two hits in the Cardinals' 6-run 4'th inning of game 4 in Yankee Stadium: A leadoff bunt single to 3'rd base and an RBI double that concluded the scoring.

With all MLB teams decimated by the military draft, the Cardinals repeated easily as pennant winners in 1943 and 1944, losing to the Yankees in the World Series in 1943, then defeating the hometown St. Louis Browns in the "streetcar series" of 1944. 1943 was the first year in which Musial dominated the offensive statistics of the National League, giving a hint of things to come even though the numbers might be somewhat tainted by having to face only wartime pitching and defense.

Stan served in the Navy in 1945, as the Musial-less Cards finished second to the Cubs (the all-time last Cub pennant).

In 1946, with the real major leaguers back from WW2 service, the Cardinals were expected to do well. One move they had made was to trade first-baseman Ray Sanders to the Braves, expecting rookie Dick Sisler, son of the Browns' immortal George, to fill the bill. At that time there were still plenty of people in St. Louis who could remember seeing George Sisler play, so no doubt son Dick would help with the gate too. Sisler flopped, however, the team was floundering, so finally the decision was made to demote Sisler and install Musial at first base. Up to then, he had been exclusively an outfielder, so the position was new to him, but he quickly mastered it and again completely dominated NL offensive statistics. The Cardinals won the pennant in a playoff with the Dodgers, then defeated the Red Sox in the World Series. Although Stan's numbers would be a bit more impressive in 1948, I have always considered 1946 his greatest year,

since he not only led the NL in just about everything except HR, but also changed to a new position and led the team to another World Series title.

So far, Stan had played 4 years with the Cardinals, resulting in 4 pennants and 3 Series wins. Could this continue? Alas, no. In the years 1947-8-9 the Cardinals had three strong 2nd-place years, each time being in the pennant race until the final week or two. Then came the 1950s.

I can still remember a game I saw in 1951 when the Cardinals played the Dodgers and Preacher Roe at Sportsman's Park. With the aid of Baseball Reference, one can determine the date as June 12. The Dodgers were riding high at the time, seemingly on the way to an easy pennant, although they were fated to be eventually thwarted by the Giants' comeback and Bobby Thomson's historic home run.

In this game, however, Musial went 4-for-4 including a double, all his hits screaming line drives. The rest of the team did nothing much, however, and the Dodgers won, 6-2. The next morning, the headline in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, read:

"THE MAN" LOSES TO "THE TEAM" 6-2

This headline pretty well sums up Cardinals baseball during the 1950s. They had "The Man", Musial, by consensus the NL's best player for most of the decade, but they never had "The Team", a strong enough supporting cast to produce consistent contenders. In the years 1950-59, despite Musial's continuing accumulation of records, they won no pennants, finished 2nd only once (1957), never ended fewer than 8 games out of first, and finished below .500 five times.

Things were not getting much better in the 1960s, until Musial's last year with the club, 1963, gave hope for a time of becoming a repeat of his memorable first year of 1942. Again, the Dodgers had a seemingly commanding lead, but again the Cardinals stormed back, at one point winning 19 of 20 games. I attended a number of games during that streak, with one of them being especially memorable. It was the night of September 10, and they were playing the Cubs at Sportsman's Park. That day, Stan Musial's first grandchild had been born, so it was a special

occasion for Stan. He came to bat for the first time as a grandfather in the bottom of the first, with one out, no score, and Dick Groat on first with a single. The first pitch thrown to him by righthander Glen Hobbie was parked on the right-field roof of Sportsman's Park for a home run! Certainly a record for most fewest pitches immediately after grandfatherhood before homering. The Cardinals went on to win the game 8-0, with pitcher Bob Gibson also contributing a homer, but eventually this pennant drive fell short and they had to be satisfied again with also-ran status.

The following year, 1964, without The Man, the Cardinals finally won another pennant and World Series.

Stan's lifetime offensive numbers speak for themselves: .331 BA, .559 SA, .976 OPS. He was MVP 3 times. Here are the number of times he led the NL in various offensive categories:

R: 5; H: 6; 2b: 8; 3b: 5; RBI: 2; BA: 7; OBP: 5; SA: 6; OPS: 7; TB: 6; WAR: 4

He had 3630 hits (1815 each home and road), which was the NL record until eclipsed by Pete Rose, and was the first to accumulate 6000 total bases.

Defensively, he was a good outfielder, and one of the better defensive first basemen of his time, for a while considered second only to Gil Hodges in the NL.

As a human being, Stan's reputation seems to be without a blemish. No intellectual, but certainly someone who has always tried to handle his fame responsibly. I'm sure that President Obama felt honored to have the opportunity of presenting him with the Medal of Freedom in 2011.

And for me, one of my proudest memories is that of having watched him play throughout his great career.

Alden Mead