

Good innings: Jackie Robinson's successor

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 26, 2003](#) issue

It's high summer, and those of us who measure time by the mystical rhythms of baseball are deeply immersed in the game. We have been talking lately about the Sammy Sosa affair. The Chicago Cubs slugger embarrassed himself by getting caught—on television no less—using a “corked” bat. He was banished for seven games, during which the baseball faithful argued about the nature of the infraction: Did he know the bat was corked? Had he been using corked bats consistently? Had the cork helped him hit 70 home runs in one season? For what it's worth, I think that he knew, and that the cork didn't help him at all.

The feat of hitting a baseball thrown by a pitcher at speeds approaching 100 miles an hour, some of which are curve balls which appear to be coming toward your head and then swoop across the plate at the last moment, is something of a miracle. To hit consistently, and to hit the ball out of the park consistently, is an amazing feat. Sosa does just that.

A few days after returning from his suspension, he hit a prodigious home run that traveled 520 feet and landed in the street outside Wrigley Field. The phone rang and it was Johnny, my six-year-old grandson, who was watching the game on television. “Did you see it, Granddaddy? Did you see Sammy hit it?” We talked and oohed and aahed and shared a moment of wonder and awe.

I was reminded of my first true baseball love, back when I was just a few years older than Johnny: the 1948 Cleveland Indians. I was a Pirates fan, but somehow my eye was caught by the Indians. The team had the great pitcher Bob Feller, player-manager Lou Boudreau, and a graceful center fielder by the name of Larry Doby. Doby was an African-American, the first to play in the American League. Jackie Robinson was the first in either league, introduced by the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Doby followed later that season. My father took me to Pittsburgh to see Robinson when the Dodgers visited the Pirates that summer. My problem with Robinson was

that he was a Dodger and the Dodgers routinely beat my Pirates.

The Indians won the World Series in 1948 and I was in heaven. I have followed Larry Doby over the years: his induction into the Hall of Fame and his front-office work for the Indians. He died a few days ago, a quiet, graceful man who endured this country's worst racism and rose above it, in the process helping to change a sport and a culture. Fay Vincent, a former commissioner of Major League Baseball, commented that Doby showed a total lack of bitterness or resentment about the racism he encountered. Doby himself said, "I was never bitter because I believed in the man upstairs. I continue to do my best. If I was bitter I'd only be hurting me." Vincent wrote in the *New York Times* on Doby's death: "In an age when we struggle to identify true heroes, Larry Doby is one of mine." Mine too.