

This Day in History... October 20, 1931

Birth of Mickey Mantle

Mickey Charles Mantle was born on October 20, 1931, in Spavinaw, Oklahoma.

Named after Hall of Fame catcher Mickey Cochrane, Mantle grew up playing baseball with his father and grandfather. As a teenager, Mantle developed great strength from summers working in the lead mines and doing farm chores. That strength enabled him to hit long home runs. He learned at a young to hit from both sides of the plate – batting left-handed against his right-handed father's pitches and right-handed against his grandfather's left-handed throws. He also played basketball and football and was even offered a football scholarship to the University of Oklahoma.

When he was a sophomore in high school, Mantle nearly lost his athletic career. He was kicked in the shin during a practice game and developed osteomyelitis. The bone infection had been incurable just a few years earlier, but his parents rushed him to a hospital in the middle of the night. Doctors gave him penicillin to treat the infection and avoided the possibility of amputating his leg.

Mantle ultimately chose to focus on baseball and started his professional career with the semi-professional Baxter Springs Whiz Kids in Kansas. In 1948, a scout for the New York Yankees came to watch one of Mantle's teammates play. Mantle hit three home runs during that game, leaving a lasting impression on the scout. The scout returned the following year after Mantle graduated from high school and signed him to a minor league contract. Mantle played on the Yankees's minor league teams for the next two seasons before making his big league debut on April 17, 1951. He had played shortstop in the minors but struggled, so he was moved to right field.

Mantle went into a slump and was sent back to the minors, but when he returned to the Yankees, his record improved. That post-season, he tripped while running to catch a ball and suffered the first of many injuries in his career. The following season, Mantle replaced the retiring Joe DiMaggio in center field. He was selected as an All-Star had an impressive record in the World Series that included an on-base percentage of more than .400 and a slugging percentage over .600.

Injuries took their toll over the next couple seasons, but Mantle rebounded in 1954, with his first 100+ RBI season with a percentage over .300. Many considered 1956 to be Mantle's breakout season – and he called it his "favorite summer." He earned the Triple Crown (leading the league in batting average, home runs, and runs batted-in) and the Most Valuable Player Award. He's the only switch hitter to earn the league's Triple Crown. He also received the Hickok Belt, which is given to the country's top professional athlete of the year.

Mantle was selected MVP again in 1957 and performed well the next few seasons. In 1960, he hit what some considered to be the longest home run ever – estimated to have traveled 643 feet. Mantle and teammate Roger Maris chased Babe Ruth's single season home run record in 1961. For much of the season, they took turns leading the league, but Mantle suffered yet another injury that September which put him out of the race. Mantle still led the league in runs scored and walks was only a few points behind Maris for the MVP award.

Mantle had a few more years hitting over .300, but his stats started to decline in 1965 – though he did hit the first home run in the brand-new Astrodome in Houston. He moved to first base in 1967 and became the sixth player to hit 500 career home runs that season. Mantle announced his retirement in 1969 and gave a farewell speech at Yankee Stadium in June that year, which had been proclaimed Mickey Mantle Day. At the time of his retirement, he had the highest stolen base percentage in history, the third-highest career home run count (536) and was the Yankees's all-time recorded holder for games played (2,401) – a record that stood until 2011.

Mantle spent his entire 18-year career with the Yankees. He was a 16-time All-Star, three-time MVP, and won seven World Series. He holds World Series records for most home runs, RBIs, extra-base hits, runs, walks, and total bases. He has the second highest on-base percentage for a center fielder and had a .984 fielding percentage in center field. Over the course of his career, he over .300 ten times and is tied as the career leader in walk-off home runs. He's also the only player to ever hit 150 home runs from both sides of the plate.

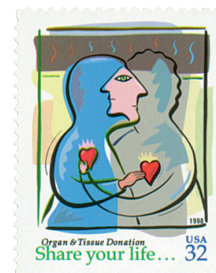
After retiring, Mantle worked as a commentator and opened a couple restaurants. A long-time drinker, he suffered from liver cancer and died on August 13, 1995.



From the 2006 Baseball Sluggers issue



Mantle suffered frequent injuries throughout his life that impacted his playing abilities. Yet he was still one of the greatest players in history.



Mantle founded the Mickey Mantle Foundation to promote organ donations.

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