

This Day in History... November 6, 1887

Birth of Walter Johnson

Baseball pitcher Walter Perry Johnson, known as “The Big Train,” was born on November 6, 1887, in Humboldt, Kansas. Johnson’s family later moved to Olinda, California, in 1902, where Johnson’s strong right arm first began to attract attention. Between working in the local oil fields and riding horses across open farmland, he spent much of his free time playing baseball. During a memorable high school game, he struck out an astonishing 27 batters in 15 innings, foreshadowing the remarkable career ahead of him.

In his late teens, Johnson moved to Weiser, Idaho, to work for a telephone company. He continued to pitch for a local semi-professional team in the Idaho State League, where his extraordinary fastball quickly drew crowds. His pitching style—smooth, powerful, and almost effortless—made him stand out even among seasoned players. In 1907, a talent scout for the Washington Senators, “Judge” Joe Cantillon, spotted Johnson during a game and was so impressed that he convinced the 19-year-old to sign with the team.

When Johnson arrived in Washington, DC, that same year, he immediately made an impact. His blazing fastball—reputed to reach speeds near 100 miles per hour—intimidated batters in an era before radar guns or batting helmets. Teammates and opponents alike told stories about how his pitches “hissed” as they crossed the plate. Yet despite his dominance on the mound, Johnson was known as one of baseball’s most kindhearted and humble players. Sportswriters often remarked on his quiet demeanor and good sportsmanship, traits that earned him universal respect.



Stamp issued for the opening the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1939.

By 1913, Johnson had cemented his reputation as the premier power pitcher of his generation. That year, he threw 55⅔ consecutive scoreless innings, a record that stood for more than half a century until Don Drysdale broke it in 1968. Over his 21-year career, from 1907 to 1927, Johnson won 417 games for the Senators—second only to the legendary Cy Young. He also led the major leagues in shutouts seven times and remains the all-time leader in career shutouts with 110. His devastating combination of speed and control revolutionized the role of the pitcher in professional baseball.

Despite his brilliance, Johnson spent most of his career with the struggling Washington Senators, a team long regarded as one of baseball’s weakest. Their fortunes changed in 1924. That season, Johnson led the league in wins, shutouts, strikeouts, and earned run average. Under his leadership, the Senators captured the American League pennant and advanced to the World Series against the New York Giants. After six fiercely contested games, the series was tied 3–3. In the dramatic seventh game, Johnson came out of the bullpen in relief and pitched four scoreless innings in extra frames. The Senators won the game and their first—and only—World Series title. Even the Giants’ players and fans applauded Johnson, recognizing that one of the sport’s most respected figures had finally earned a championship.

Over the course of his remarkable career, Johnson struck out 3,508 batters—a record that stood until 1983, when Nolan Ryan surpassed it. He won the pitching Triple Crown three times and was named the American League’s Most Valuable Player twice, in 1913 and 1924. Unlike many pitchers, Johnson was also a capable hitter, posting a career batting average of .235 and hitting 23 home runs.

After retiring as a player in 1927, Johnson stayed close to the game he loved. He managed a minor league team for one season before returning to the major leagues as manager of the Washington Senators from 1929 to 1932. He later managed the Cleveland Indians from 1933 to 1935. Though his managerial career was less successful than his playing days, he continued to earn admiration for his leadership and integrity.

In 1936, Johnson received one of baseball’s greatest honors: he was among the first five players elected to the newly established National Baseball Hall of Fame, alongside Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Honus Wagner, and Christy Mathewson. This inaugural group became known as the “Five Immortals.” Walter Johnson passed away on December 10, 1946, at the age of 59. Today, he is remembered not only as one of the greatest pitchers in baseball history but also as a model of sportsmanship and character—an enduring symbol of the game’s early golden age.



Walter Johnson stamp from the Legends of Baseball Issue

This Day in History... November 6, 1887

Birth of Walter Johnson

Baseball pitcher Walter Perry Johnson, known as “The Big Train,” was born on November 6, 1887, in Humboldt, Kansas. Johnson’s family later moved to Olinda, California, in 1902, where Johnson’s strong right arm first began to attract attention. Between working in the local oil fields and riding horses across open farmland, he spent much of his free time playing baseball. During a memorable high school game, he struck out an astonishing 27 batters in 15 innings, foreshadowing the remarkable career ahead of him.

In his late teens, Johnson moved to Weiser, Idaho, to work for a telephone company. He continued to pitch for a local semi-professional team in the Idaho State League, where his extraordinary fastball quickly drew crowds. His pitching style—smooth, powerful, and almost effortless—made him stand out even among seasoned players. In 1907, a talent scout for the Washington Senators, “Judge” Joe Cantillon, spotted Johnson during a game and was so impressed that he convinced the 19-year-old to sign with the team.

When Johnson arrived in Washington, DC, that same year, he immediately made an impact. His blazing fastball—reputed to reach speeds near 100 miles per hour—intimidated batters in an era before radar guns or batting helmets. Teammates and opponents alike told stories about how his pitches “hissed” as they crossed the plate. Yet despite his dominance on the mound, Johnson was known as one of baseball’s most kindhearted and humble players. Sportswriters often remarked on his quiet demeanor and good sportsmanship, traits that earned him universal respect.



Stamp issued for the opening the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1939.

By 1913, Johnson had cemented his reputation as the premier power pitcher of his generation. That year, he threw 55⅓ consecutive scoreless innings, a record that stood for more than half a century until Don Drysdale broke it in 1968. Over his 21-year career, from 1907 to 1927, Johnson won 417 games for the Senators—second only to the legendary Cy Young. He also led the major leagues in shutouts seven times and remains the all-time leader in career shutouts with 110. His devastating combination of speed and control revolutionized the role of the pitcher in professional baseball.

Despite his brilliance, Johnson spent most of his career with the struggling Washington Senators, a team long regarded as one of baseball’s weakest. Their fortunes changed in 1924. That season, Johnson led the league in wins, shutouts, strikeouts, and earned run average. Under his leadership, the Senators captured the American League pennant and advanced to the World Series against the New York Giants. After six fiercely contested games, the series was tied 3–3. In the dramatic seventh game, Johnson came out of the bullpen in relief and pitched four scoreless innings in extra frames. The Senators won the game and their first—and only—World Series title. Even the Giants’ players and fans applauded Johnson, recognizing that one of the sport’s most respected figures had finally earned a championship.

Over the course of his remarkable career, Johnson struck out 3,508 batters—a record that stood until 1983, when Nolan Ryan surpassed it. He won the pitching Triple Crown three times and was named the American League’s Most Valuable Player twice, in 1913 and 1924. Unlike many pitchers, Johnson was also a capable hitter, posting a career batting average of .235 and hitting 23 home runs.

After retiring as a player in 1927, Johnson stayed close to the game he loved. He managed a minor league team for one season before returning to the major leagues as manager of the Washington Senators from 1929 to 1932. He later managed the Cleveland Indians from 1933 to 1935. Though his managerial career was less successful than his playing days, he continued to earn admiration for his leadership and integrity.

In 1936, Johnson received one of baseball’s greatest honors: he was among the first five players elected to the newly established National Baseball Hall of Fame, alongside Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Honus Wagner, and Christy Mathewson. This inaugural group became known as the “Five Immortals.” Walter Johnson passed away on December 10, 1946, at the age of 59. Today, he is remembered not only as one of the greatest pitchers in baseball history but also as a model of sportsmanship and character—an enduring symbol of the game’s early golden age.



Walter Johnson stamp from the Legends of Baseball Issue