

Forgettable Finishes, "Johnny Vander Meer"

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"I guess I just don't have it anymore."
Johnny Vander Meer, May 8, 1951

"For Vander Meer, the memories of the past hardly balance with thoughts of the future."
Oscar Fraley, United Press, May 8, 1951



May 7, 1951, Cleveland Stadium, Cleveland, Ohio

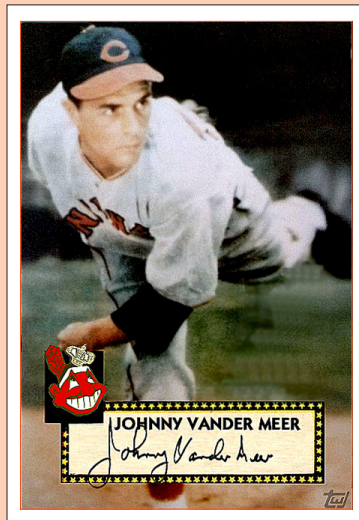
As 36-year-old Johnny Vander Meer approaches the mound that evening in Cleveland Stadium, the hourglass on his notable 13-year career is nearing its completion. With the late 8:30 start, most of the 3,261 spectators on hand are comfortably seated in the massive 78,000-seat structure. By the time he finishes his warmup pitches with veteran catcher Mike Hegan, tickets were still most assuredly available.

Father Time had taken some feet off of his once-feared fast ball, but the broad-shouldered left-hander still feels that he has something to offer Al Lopez's Indians. For a pitcher who gained eternal fame for turning in back-to-back no-hitters as a rookie in 1938, this will be his first appearance for Cleveland since the start of the season. The Indians (11-5) start the day in second-place, two games behind the New York Yankees (14-4) and a half-game in front of the Washington Nationals (11-6), that night's opponent.

Vander Meer has this opportunity to start because of minor ailments to three Cleveland starters - Bob Lemon strained his back hitting against Boston five days earlier, Bob Feller missed his turn the day before with a minor back problem and Steve Gromek was bed ridden with influenza.

Vander Meer's starting assignment that night is the 286th in his career, but his first in the American League. He enters the game with a 119-120 career mark and a 3.42 ERA. A four-time all-star but never a 20-game winner, his best year is in 1942 when he is 18-12 with the second division Cincinnati Reds.

For three straight years - in 1941, 1942 and 1943 - Vander Meer is strikeout king of the National League. After serving two years (1944-45) in the Navy during World War II, he returns to go 44-55 with a 3.93 ERA in four years with the Reds and one season with the Chicago Cubs. With Cincinnati in 1948, he is 17-14 with a 3.41 ERA and a team-high 14 complete games. That's his last winning season in the majors and following a 5-10 season in 1949, he is sold to the Chicago Cubs on February 10, 1950. After working in the obscurity as a non-descript reliever for the Cubs he is given his unconditional release the following March before being picked up by the Indians.



Through the first three innings, Vander Meer shows flashes of his former self limiting the Nationals to one run on two hits. Trailing 1-0 entering the fourth inning, he yields successive singles to Sam Mele, Mike McCormack, Cass Michaels, Sam Dente and Frank Sacka, producing three runs. Reliever Jerry Fahr yields two more tallies that results in a 6-0 Washington lead. After the game he says, "I figured this would be my only chance to stick. I guess I just don't have it." Van Der Meer remains on the roster for the next four weeks and outside of two appearances in exhibition games against Pittsburgh he remains firmly seated in the Tribe's bullpen until the morning of June 28 when he draws his second unconditional release in as many years.

It's said that you can't get by on reputation alone in the big leagues and that a soft oblivion eventually claims all the old heroes. The "stolid Dutchman with the poker face" must have seen it coming. Some say he was never great, but for two games in 1938 no player was greater.

May 7, 1951

Washington Nationals at Cleveland Indians Cleveland Stadium, Cleveland, Ohio

Washington	AB	R	H	Cleveland	AP	R	H
Yost 3b	3	1	1	Mitchell lf	5	1	4
Coan lf	5	1	3	Avila 2b	5	0	2
Noren cf	5	0	1	Simpson 1b	4	1	0
Mele 1b	4	2	1	Rosen 3b	4	2	2
McCormick rf	5	2	2	Doby cf	5	3	3
Michaels 2b	5	2	3	Clark rf	5	2	2
Dente ss	5	2	2	Boone ss	3	0	0
Sacka c	5	1	3	Hegan c	4	1	0
Consuegra p	3	0	1	Van Meer p	1	0	0
M. Harris p	1	0	0	Fahr p	0	0	0
				a-Nielsen	1	0	0
				Rozek p	0	0	0
				Zuverink p	0	0	0
				b-Stirnweiss	0	0	0
				c. Harris p	0	0	0
				c-Klein	1	0	0
				Gromek p	0	0	0
				d-Tebbetts	1	0	0

Totals 41 11 17 Totals 39 10 13

a—Flied out for Fahr in fourth.
b—Walked for Zuverink in sixth.
c—Struck out for C. Harris in eighth.
d—Flied out for Gromek in ninth.

SCORE BY INNINGS:

Washington010 550 000—11
Cleveland000 430 012—10
E—Sacka. RBI—Sacka 2, Michaels, Dente 3, Consuegra, Coan, Clark 2, Boone, Noren 2, Mitchell 2, Doby 4, Avila, 2BH—Mitchell, Clark, Dente. 3BH—Mitchell 2, Noren. HR—Doby 2, Clark. S—Yost. DP—Avila - Boone - Simpson; Boone-Simpson. LOB—Washington 11, Cleveland 8. BOB—off Consuegra 2, M. Harris 4, Vander Meer 1, Zuverink 2, C. Harris 2, Gromek 1. SO—by Consuegra 2, M. Harris 4, Vander Meer 2, Zuverink 2, Gromek 1. H&R—off Consuegra 9 and 7 in 4½ innings, M. Harris 4 and 3 in 4½, Vander Meer 8 and 6 in 3 (none out in 4th), Fahr 3 and 0 in 1 (none out in 5th), Rozek 3 and 3 in 0, Zuverink 1 and 2 in 2, C. Harris 0 and 0 in 2, Gromek 2 and 0 in 1. HBP—by Zuverink (Yost). WP—Zuverink. Winner—Harris (2-1). Loser—Vander Meer (0-1). U—Duffy, Summers, Grieve and Stevens. T—3:05. A—8,261.