

## **Don Larsen's Perfect World Series Game: Why It Will Never Be Repeated**

by

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October 8 represented another anniversary of Don Larsen's perfect game in the fifth game of the 1956 World Series between the New York Yankees and the Brooklyn Dodgers – to date the only no-hit game (let alone perfect game) in more than one hundred years of the Fall Classic. There is of course a possibility that another pitcher will hurl a no-hit game – and perhaps even a perfect game – in the World Series. But it will never duplicate the drama of Larsen's feat.

Yankee first baseman Joe Collins – who had ten seasons with the club – told his son afterwards that it “was the most intense game he ever played in.” Yankee right-fielder Hank Bauer – an 8-year veteran and an ex-marine who had survived Okinawa and other World War II battles in the Pacific theater – shared Collins' perspective and, when Dodger outfielder Carl Furillo stepped into the batter's box in the top of the ninth inning, kept saying to himself, “Don't hit the ball to me. Whatever you do, don't hit it to me.” Even the great Mickey Mantle was a captive of the moment. “I played in more than 2,400 games in the major leagues,” Mantle later said, “but I never was as nervous as I was in the ninth inning of that game, afraid that I would do something to mess up Larsen's perfect game.”

But far more was at stake for the Yankees than Larsen's individual success. “We were thinking about winning the damn game,” remembered third baseman Andy Carey. And for good reason. This was not just any World Series. The Yankees and Dodgers

were locked in a long-time rivalry (with the teams confronting each other in six series over the course of ten years) that has no counterpart in today's baseball. And so the Yankees were especially eager – if not desperate – to avenge their defeat at the hands of the Dodgers in the 1955 series. A victory with Larsen would give them a 3-2 edge in games when the teams returned to Ebbets Field for the sixth and, if necessary, seventh games – where the Dodgers would enjoy the home field advantage.

Neither team could make any assumptions about the outcome of that fifth game – not even when the Dodgers were down to their last out in the ninth inning. The Dodgers were only losing by a score of 2-0, and, as they circulated in the dugout, they kept telling themselves, we can beat this guy. All we have to do is get someone on base. After all, in the post-World War II era, they had been the victims of only one no-hitter, and they could not believe it would happen to them again in a World Series. Dale Mitchell – pinch-hitting for Dodger pitcher Sal Maglie in the bottom of the ninth – shared that view. “We were so close,” he later said, “that we really felt we were going to win it.”

None of the Yankees could discount the Dodgers' likelihood of success at that point. They all knew about former Yankee pitcher Bill Bevens. He had taken a no-hitter into the ninth inning in a 1947 series game against the Dodgers at Ebbets Field. Still, the Yankees only had a 2-1 lead (because Bevens had walked ten batters, and one of them had scored). Bevens was able to get two outs in the ninth inning and needed only one more out to walk off the mound in glory. But Cookie Lavagetto, the Dodger pinch-hitter, slammed a double against the right field wall to drive in two men on base (the beneficiaries of walks) and turned a near-miraculous pitching performance into a tragic defeat.

Yogi Berra was the catcher in that 1947 game, and the experience loomed large in his mind when Dale Mitchell came to bat with two outs in the top of the ninth inning of the fifth game of the 1956 World Series. The Dodgers may have had only one out left, but Berra remembered thinking, “Anything can happen.” And so Yogi too was more focused on winning the game than preserving Larsen’s place in baseball history. “I wanted to win the game,” he later said. “That’s what I wanted to do.”

Victory, however, was not a goal in and of itself. The money mattered as well. Some of the players (like Mantle and Berra) had substantial salaries. But in those days, most of the players had little if no bargaining power, and for them, the World Series check represented a substantial portion of their annual compensation. The players’ share of the series earnings has grown substantially over the years (\$351,504 for the winning Philadelphia Phillies in 2008 versus \$8715 for the 1956 victors), but, in this era of free agency, the extra money means far less to the players today than it did in 1956. Indeed, the need – and expectation – of those extra dollars was a vehicle for the veterans to exhort better performances from the rookies. (“Don’t mess with my money,” Bauer would invariably tell them.)

Pitching a no-hitter in any World Series game would be a monumental achievement, but Don Larsen had to confront all of these additional pressures – and he did so without any advance notice of his pitching assignment. He had faltered in his start of the second game of the World Series by giving up a hit and four walks before the second inning had concluded. Yankee manager Casey Stengel had sent Larsen to the showers after the fourth walk, and Larsen assumed (like his teammates) that he would not be getting another starting assignment in the 1956 series.

He found out otherwise when he walked into the clubhouse on the morning of the fifth game. Under a Yankee tradition, third base coach Frank Crosetti would place a ball in the shoe of the starting pitcher, and Larsen saw the ball in his shoe when he sauntered over to his locker – thinking that he would be spending the game on the bench or in the bullpen. Pitcher Bob Turley, whose locker adjoined Larsen’s, saw his teammate stare at the ball and gulp.

He may have been surprised, but, as time would show, Larsen was not intimidated. And so, when Dale Mitchell was called out on strikes for the last out, the Yankee pitcher could retreat to the security of the Yankee clubhouse and an immortal place in baseball history – although it escaped the grasp of at least one sportswriter at the scene, who, amidst the boisterous celebration, confronted Stengel with an important question: “Is that the best game he ever pitched?” We all know the answer to that one.

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Lew Paper is the author of *Perfect: Don Larsen’s Miraculous World Series Game and the Men Who Made It Happen*.

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