

Roger Maris hits his 61st homerun (October 1, 1961)

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Roger Maris

The morning of October 1, 1961, dawned cool and crisp in New York, perfect weather for baseball. For the New York Yankees--who had clinched the American League pennant nearly two weeks earlier--it was the final game of the regular season, one that was meaningless in terms of the team's standing. But for Yankees right-fielder Roger Eugene Maris, it was his last opportunity to break what many considered the most cherished, and unbreakable, of all baseball records--Babe Ruth's single-season home run record of 60 set in 1927.

Background

The left-handed slugger's journey to this historic moment was a difficult and, in many ways, an improbable one. Born in Hibbing, Minnesota, on September 10, 1934, his family moved to Fargo, North Dakota, when he was just a youngster. There he attended Bishop Shanley High School where he starred in both basketball and football. Although the young Maris excelled in the latter sport--in one game he scored five touchdowns--it was baseball that was his true calling. He and his older brother by a year, Rudy (nicknamed Bud), were both star outfielders for Fargo's American Legion team; he batted .367 the season Fargo won the North Dakota state title.

After graduation, Maris was courted by both the University of Oklahoma to play football and the Cleveland Indians to play baseball. The young athlete initially accepted the full scholarship offered by the Sooners, but after a few days on campus, he decided that college was not for him. Upon returning home, he contacted Hank Greenberg, Cleveland's general manager, and the future home run king signed for \$5,000.

Maris spent the next four years in the minors before being called up to the big club in 1957. He was then traded to the Kansas City Athletics in the middle of the 1958 season. He showed signs of becoming a superstar with both teams, but a series of debilitating injuries limited to a great extent what he was able to accomplish.

No one was more surprised than Roger Maris when he found out secondhand in late 1959 that he had been dealt to the New York Yankees. Initially, the right fielder was not pleased with the trade. He was basically a small-town boy at heart who preferred the more laidback atmosphere of Kansas City to the hustle and bustle of a big city like New York. Even more distressing for him, as a devoted family man who hated being away from his wife, Pat, and their children (they eventually had six) for extended periods, he did not relish the idea of leaving his home in Raytown, Missouri, for half the year. But the move proved to be a good one for both the team and the player.

The 1960 season turned out to be a breakthrough one for Maris. Despite whatever misgivings he may have had about New York, he started out blistering hot for his new team, hitting two home runs for the Bombers in his very first game with them. He continued to play well before suffering a ribcage injury sliding into second base during a contest in mid-August. Although he missed two weeks due to bruised ribs and had difficulty getting back on track afterwards, Maris still managed to hit 39 home runs--just one less than teammate Mickey Mantle--for second most in the American League. More importantly, his presence in the lineup proved to be the key to leading the Yankees from a third-place finish in 1959 to the World Series in 1960. As a result, Maris received the American League Most Valuable Player Award, the first of two consecutive ones he would win in his career.

The 1961 Season

The 1961 campaign started off poorly for the second-year Yankee. He struggled at the plate during the early part of the season, not hitting his first home run until his 11th game (April 26) and his second until his 17th game (May 3). Part of the problem was that he was worried about Pat, who was having a difficult pregnancy, and began to fear that the Yankees owners might trade him because of his poor plate performance. But after his wife's health improved and the owners assured him he would remain their starting right fielder for the entire season, he was finally able to get into a groove.

Maris blasted 10 more homers in May and an incredible 15 in June, giving him a total of 27 before the summer was half over. At the same time, friend and teammate Mickey Mantle--who belted seven homers in his first eleven games--had 25 of his own. Suddenly, the public and the press became aware that Babe Ruth's sacred home run record was under assault by the duo. That was when the pressure really began to mount on the slugging right fielder.

Reporters--especially those from New York--were relentless in their pursuit of the M&M Boys. Dozens of writers surrounded them after every game, yelling out questions as they stood in front of their lockers. It became a free-for-all which no one in the Yankees organization attempted to control, leaving them both to deal with the press on their own. The resulting coverage generated such intense fan interest that the two could not go anywhere without admirers pursuing them. The only time they found any peace was when they were in the Queens apartment they shared with teammate Bob Cerv.

Mickey Mantle was much better prepared to deal with the resulting hoopla than was Maris. The Mick, who had been with the Bombers since his rookie season in 1951, had grown accustomed to fans and members of the press hounding--and sometimes berating--him. In fact, having Maris share the spotlight diverted some of the attention from him. Although Mantle could be churlish

with reporters at times, he knew how to joke around with them, how to deflect their criticisms. It did not hurt, either, that as the season wore on and the two battled back and forth for the home run lead, he became the fan favorite. After a decade with New York, Mantle was seen as the “true” Yankee. If anyone was to break Ruth’s home run record, his supporters reasoned, it should be him, not someone like Maris who was just in his sophomore season with the Yanks. The right fielder also faced intense opposition from some because his batting average was below .300 (his final average for 1961 was .269) while Mantle batted nearly 50 points higher (his final average was .317).

Roger Maris never did learn to handle the press. True to his Midwestern upbringing, he was forthright, blunt, and honest, sometimes to a fault. Jimmy Cannon, renowned sports columnist for the “New York Journal-American,” once described Maris as “a candid man who holds onto the truth as he sees it. There is no deceit in Maris and he doesn’t duck into the sanctuary of evasion when you ask him a difficult question. I don’t know of a more honest man in sports.” As baseball historian Robert Creamer noted, “Maris spoke the literal truth, and that jarred and upset people expecting ritual responses to their questions.” It was a personality trait to be admired, but one that did not serve him well under the almost-unendurable scrutiny he faced in 1961. In fact, some sports commentators began to unfairly label him as sullen, a whiner, and angry. While he could be short and abrupt with the press at times, especially when asked questions he considered inappropriate and highly personal, he was usually more than accommodating with reporters in spite of being asked the same questions over and over again. Nonetheless, this negative publicity hurt him in the eyes of many New York fans, resulting in him being booed as the season wore on.¹

The pressure on the two increased exponentially when Commissioner of Baseball Ford Frick on July 17th unilaterally decreed that for a new home run record to be “official,” it had to be broken in the same number of games (155) that Ruth had set his. The 1961 season was an expansion year in which two new teams (the Los Angeles Angels and the Washington Senators) were added to the American League. As a result, the regular season now consisted of eight additional games. Some were questioning whether these extra games gave Maris and Mantle an unfair advantage over Ruth, supplying Frick with all the rationale he needed for taking action on the matter.

Frick had consulted no one before making this announcement, not even the Records Committee of the Baseball Writers’ Association of America. It was a brazen act on his part. There was no official records book maintained by the commissioner’s office at the time, just those published by private entities like “The Sporting News,” and the commissioner had no authority to dictate to them how records should be recorded and reported. He was using his “bully pulpit” as commissioner to convince them to do as he wanted.

Frick had been a close friend of--and a ghostwriter for--the Babe, so some saw his decision as a biased one designed to protect Ruth’s hallowed record; others agreed with the Commissioner. Regardless of Frick’s true motivation, Maris and Mantle were now badgered endlessly about whether or not they thought they could break the record by the deadline established by the commissioner. And in the minds of many, Frick’s pronouncement delegitimized a new record should it be tied or broken after game 155.

Other controversies swirled around the two as they continued to pound out homers left and right. Some fans and reporters questioned the quality of American League pitching that season,

believing expansion had weakened the available talent pool. Others contended that the ball was juiced or the bats were livelier. A few players from Ruth's era asserted that playing conditions and travel was harder back in their day. All of these highly dubious claims, primarily intended to preserve the legacy of Babe Ruth, greatly increased the tension on the M&M Boys as they neared Ruth's 60-homer record.

Approaching the Record

Despite all of these distractions and the intense glare of publicity under which they labored, as September dawned Maris had 51 home runs, Mantle 48. But the last month of the season was the one that had broken previous challengers to Ruth. The mighty Babe blasted 17 home runs during that month in 1927, something no one else before or since had ever done. Although Maris needed just 10 more to set a new record, he had never been in this territory before. For Mantle, the closest he had come was 52 in his Triple-Crown season of 1956, and he was three behind his teammate. To most observers, the goal before them appeared impossible.

Mantle hit four home runs in the first week of September, but the long, grueling season took its toll on the often-ailing center fielder. He developed a bad cold that lingered through mid-month. At the recommendation of Yankees broadcaster Mel Allen, Mantle went to a physician who gave him a shot in his hip, striking the bone in the process. A huge, bleeding abscess developed, requiring his hospitalization in late September. Mantle's run at Ruth was at an end. He would hit just two more home runs for a total of 54, a new high for him, but seven short of the record. That left Maris alone in the battle with the Babe.

Tying the Babe

Maris, too, hit four homers the first week of September, but the ongoing chase and the relentless public inspection of his every move was having an impact on him as well. "Everywhere I went," Maris commented, "I knew eyes were on me. When I went out to eat, when I walked into a hotel lobby, as soon as I appeared on the field there were always eyes, eyes, eyes... It made me very uncomfortable." It was a terrible burden on someone so private and unused to being scrutinized so intensively. The stress on him grew so bad, in fact, that he began losing patches of his hair. It was a real testimony to the man's willpower and grace under fire that he continued to produce at the rate he did.²

On September 20th, the Yankees played game 155. (It was 154 for Maris, who sat out a game earlier in the season.) Maris had 58 home runs, so he needed two to tie and three to break the Ruth record under the timeframe set by Ford Frick. An improbable task at best, it was made even more difficult by the fact that they were playing the Baltimore Orioles in Memorial Stadium, a venue that proved challenging for Maris. The only home run he had hit there all summer was on July 17th (ironically, the same day as Ford Frick's proclamation), and it did not count because the game was rained out before the requisite five innings were completed. On top of that, the remnants of Hurricane Esther, with winds gusting over 20-miles-per hour, were moving through the area, which did not bode well for the slugger that night. But Maris persisted. Facing Baltimore ace Milt Pappas in his first at-bat, he took the right hander deep for home run number 59. But then nature and the Baltimore manager, who was determined that Maris would not break Ruth's record in the Babe's hometown, intervened. The winds started blowing in, causing several of his later shots to go foul or hang up to be caught. Pappas was removed, and

his reliever was successful in keeping Maris' drives in the park. His final attempt ended with an excuse-me dribbler back to closer Hoyt Wilhelm who fielded it, tagging Maris out as he raced to first.

Some may have thought Ruth's record safe, but not Maris. On September 26, the Yankees were again playing Baltimore, but this time at Yankee Stadium. In the third inning, Maris came to the plate with two gone and nobody on. On a 2-2 count, the Yankees star blasted a Jack Fisher curveball deep into the upper deck for home run number 60, tying him with the immoral Babe Ruth. Although it may have taken Maris four more games to catch the Babe, he actually hit his 60 home runs in fewer plate appearances (684) than did Ruth (687).

Breaking the Record

The stage was now set for one of the most dramatic events in sports history. Maris rose early the morning of October 1, attending mass with his wife at St. Patrick's Cathedral before making the short trip to Yankee Stadium for the afternoon game. He was remarkably calm considering this game was his final opportunity to surpass the Babe. "When I got to the park for the last game there was one more thing I was certain of--this was the end," he explained later. "There were no more games, there could be no more excitement about home runs. Whatever happened today would close the book. That, in itself, was a relief... Today I should be right on it. I just feel it."³

There were some 23,000 fans in attendance, many of them jammed into the right-field seats in the hopes of snagging his home-run ball should he be successful. Sam Gordon, a restaurant owner in Sacramento, California, offered \$5,000 (the equivalent of nearly \$45,000 today) and other inducements to the fortunate individual who retrieved the ball, which added to the excitement that afternoon.

Facing the Yankees was Boston Red Sox rookie Tracy Stallard. The young right-hander showed a lot of promise, but he was inconsistent, pitching well in one game only to be hammered in the next. But when he was on, he was nearly unhittable. This game proved to be one of his best outings, except for one mistake pitch.

In his first at-bat against the 6-foot-5 hurler with a blazing fastball, Maris was too anxious, swinging at an outside pitch, lifting it to left field where Carl Yastrzemski collared it with relative ease. The crowd let out a collective groan as the ball settled into Yaz' outstretched glove.

Maris came to the plate for the second time in the fourth inning with one out and nobody on. There was some commotion in the right-field stands as he dug in, but, as he remembered it, the crowd "was so quiet that I almost felt the Stadium was empty." The Yankees pitchers in the bullpen stood with their gloves on in the hopes of hauling in the ball. Stallard's first pitch was high and outside; the crowd booed. Maris stepped back, scratched at the dirt with his right foot, tapped both feet with his bat, took a practice swing, and settled back in. The second pitch was the opposite of the first, low and inside, almost striking the ground; the chorus of boos grew even louder. Maris again lightly knocked his right foot with the bat, pawed at the dirt several times, took three practice swings, and resumed his stance.

Stallard's third delivery was the money ball. Not wanting to walk him in a scoreless game only to face Yogi Berra, the rookie unleashed his best heater, but one that was about waist high and in

the heart of the plate. “I was trying to get him out,” he said afterwards. “Just like I want to get everyone else out. I got behind Roger and came in with a fast ball. I don’t know just where abouts over the plate it was headed, but it would have been a strike if he hadn’t hit it.” (It was the only run Stallard surrendered that day.) Home plate umpire Bill Kinnamon, who was behind the dish when Maris parked his sixtieth, remembered the pitch as being a slider that broke inside to the batter. Maris jumped all over the ball. “I was ready and I connected,” he explained. “As soon as I hit it, I knew it was number sixty-one... It was the only time that the number of the homer ever flashed into my mind as I hit it. Then I heard the tremendous roar from the crowd. I could see them standing, then my mind went blank again.”⁴

Right fielder Lou Clinton raced back to the low outfield wall thinking it was catchable, but the ball soared well beyond his reach, landing some 360 feet distant, deep into the lower right-field stands about 10 rows back. There was a wild scramble for the \$5,000 prize with 19-year-old Sal Durante, standing on his seat, coming up the winner when he barehanded the ball. Stadium security immediately surrounded the young man and escorted him into the runway while Maris, in a daze, continued his home-run trot. The crowd stood and cheered the new Sultan of Swat. One of the few not rising was Pat Maris. “When I saw the ball go into the stands, I couldn’t move.... I think I was crying, perhaps saying a little prayer. I had prayed to St. Jude that morning, asking him to help Roger reach his goal, if he thought he deserved it. I felt this was my answer.”⁵

After he crossed home and greeted Yogi Berra and the batboy, a fan jumped out of the stands near the Yankees dugout and ran onto the field to shake his hand before climbing back over the railing to disappear into the crowd. Maris briefly entered the dugout, but his teammates pushed him back out, something that was rarely done at the time. “When Roger played, guys never came out of the dugout after a homer to wave at the fans,” Yankees third baseman Cleve Boyer clarified. With a shy grin on his face, he removed his hat and waived to the fans three times before he was allowed to take his place on the bench. Radio announcer and former Yankees star shortstop Phil Rizzuto called it, “One of the greatest things I’ve ever seen here at Yankee Stadium.” As he sat with the back of his head resting against the dugout wall, the exhausted slugger let out a big sigh of relief. Roger Maris had conquered the Babe.⁶

Epilogue

The new home run champion hit one more dinger that season, this one a ninth-inning game-winner in the third game of the World Series against the Cincinnati Reds. He was voted Most Valuable Player in the American League and received the prestigious Hickok Belt as Professional Athlete of the Year after the season. The following summer, the right fielder hit 33 homers, far short of his record-setting 61, but still fifth most in the American League. He remained with the Yankees through 1966 before being traded to the St. Louis Cardinals. While much of his home-run power was gone due to an untreated hand injury he suffered a few years earlier, he brought to his new team the experience, pride, professionalism, and sheer willpower he displayed throughout his career, helping lead the Cards to a World Series victory in 1967 and the National League pennant in 1968 before retiring from the game. Sadly, he passed away at the age of 51 on December 14, 1985.

Maris was proud of his historic accomplishment in 1961, but there were times when he wished it never happened. “Hitting those 61 home runs that year had to be the most important thing I ever

did in baseball,” he said thinking back to that season of glory, “but it also brought me the most misery.” He achieved what many thought was impossible and did it under circumstances no other ballplayer before or since ever experienced. The constant glare of publicity, the negative press, the relentless sniping and criticism of his talent, and the internal pressure he put on himself would have broken a lesser man than Roger Maris. It is testimony to his courage and tenacity that he took all that was thrown at him, never once giving in no matter how bad things got. He had succeeded against all odds.

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¹ Jimmy Cannon, “Maris Side,” *New York Journal-American*, September 14, 1961; Ralph Houk and Robert Creamer, *Season of Glory: The Amazing Saga of the 1961 New York Yankees* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s, 1988), 259.

² Roger Maris and Jim Ogle, *Roger Maris at Bat* (Des Moines, IA: Meredith Press, 1962), 173-174.

³ Maris, *Roger Maris at Bat*, 210; Leonard Shecter, “Maris ‘Was Trying for It All the Way’,” *New York Post*, October 2, 1961, 52.

⁴ John Drebing, “Maris Hits 61st in Final Game,” *New York Times*, October 2, 1961, 38; “Doesn’t Feel Bad About Pitch,” *Boston Globe*, October 2, 1961, 16; Maris, *Roger Maris at Bat*, 211-212; Treavor Parks, “You Are There – October 1, 1961 – Roger Maris’ 61st Home Run,” *Referee*, May 1996, 52.

⁵ Maris, *Roger Maris at Bat*, 214.

⁶ Tony Kubek and Terry Pluto, *Sixty-One: The Team, the Record, the Men* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 127-128.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not be those of the Library of Congress.