Tribute to *"The Kid"*

by Earl P. Holt III

By the end of the 1941 season, no major league baseball player had hit .400 since Rogers Hornsby, 17 years before in 1924. However, in a magical season that had already witnessed Joe DiMaggio's 56 consecutive-game hitting streak, Ted Williams was batting .39955 on the next-to-last day of the season. Baseball statisticians would have *rounded-up* his average to the nearest three-digit number, which would have officially achieved the magical ***gold standard*** of .400.

Boston Red Sox Manager Joe Cronin approached Williams to ask if he intended to play in the double-header scheduled for the final day of the season, or did he want to sit it out and protect his .400 average? Williams emphatically replied that he wanted to play: he then went *two-for-three* in the first game, and *three-for-four* in the second, finishing with a .406 average that didn't require any *rounding-up*. No one has hit .400 since, and no one will ever do so again because today's pitching is just too damned good.

In his first-day of spring training in 1954, Williams attempted to catch a softly-hit line-drive to leftfield when he tripped and fell, breaking his collarbone or *clavicle*. The team orthopedist performed a surgical repair by using a six-inch metal wire *"pin"* to hold the broken ends together. Williams didn't return to the *Red Sox* lineup until a month later, and repeatedly complained that he could feel the *pin* each time he swung.

After his return, he went hitless in his first two at-bats as a pinch-hitter, and was seriously considering sitting out the rest of the season with his injury. However, the next game was a double-header scheduled against the *Detroit Tigers* at ***Briggs Stadium*** where Williams usually hit well. He went ***8-for-9*** in that doubleheader, with two home runs, a double, and

five singles! Who else could have done such a thing? Ironically, his greatest admirer was Casey Stengel, the rival manager of the ***New York Yankees,*** who vowed to sportswriters the following day that he was going to get pins inserted into the shoulders of all *his* hitters.

After mustering out of the Korean War as a ***Marine*** Fighter Pilot, one day in July of 1953 Williams strolled unannounced into the offices of *Boston Red Sox* owner Tom Yawkey. Yawkey was being interviewed by a cub reporter who had once been the *Red Sox* batboy. The reporter observed Williams and Yawkey shake hands and have a friendly conversation for an hour or so. Then, out of the blue Yawkey suggested to Williams ***"Why don't you go down and hit a few?"*** Very much in character, Williams stubbornly rejected the idea at first, claiming that he was tired, but eventually, he got talked into it and suited up.

Marine Pilot in Korea

At the time, there were only about 300 people in the ballpark. In addition to Yawkey and the reporter, there were ushers, vendors for the concession stands, the ***Red Sox*** and the visiting team which was warming up before the gates were opened for that day's game. After loosening up with a couple of pitches, Williams hit the next nine pitches over the fence in right field, and only quit when his hands started bleeding. Everyone in the park -- including the opposing team -- went nuts over what they'd just witnessed. Ted Williams hadn't picked up a bat in two years, but sent nine straight pitches into the cheap seats. Who else could have done such a thing? The answer is ***"NO ONE."***

When teams began to shift the infield on him -- and move their shortstop to the right field side of the infield -- he learned to hit outside pitches to left field instead of pulling the ball to right. In early September of 1957, he missed two weeks after being hospitalized with pneumonia, but then hit four homers in his first four at-bats after returning to the lineup. That season, at the age of 39, he won the ***American League Batting Title*** for the sixth time with a .388 batting average. The next highest average was Mickey Mantle at .365.

Ted Williams was to hitting a baseball what Mozart was to classical music, or Michelangelo was to painting. Even at 12 years of age, he single mindedly vowed to become the greatest hitter baseball has ever seen, and it's hard to argue that he didn't achieve that goal. When he was 15, he was playing in California's highly competitive semi-pro baseball leagues against seasoned ballplayers in their 20s and 30s. *Red Sox* Manager, Joe Cronin, himself a ***Hall of Famer***, once stated that if he could hit like Ted Williams, ***"...I'd play the game for free."***

His obsession with hitting a baseball drove other players nuts, and he would become a nuisance bombarding the best hitters he met with endless questions. One teammate recalls Williams standing on a train track while their train was temporarily stopped at a station, and swinging

a pillow like a bat because he didn't have anything else to swing at that moment. He would seek out the greatest living hitters during his career, and pester them endlessly about their theories on hitting.

Pestering Joe DiMaggio

Pestering *The Babe*

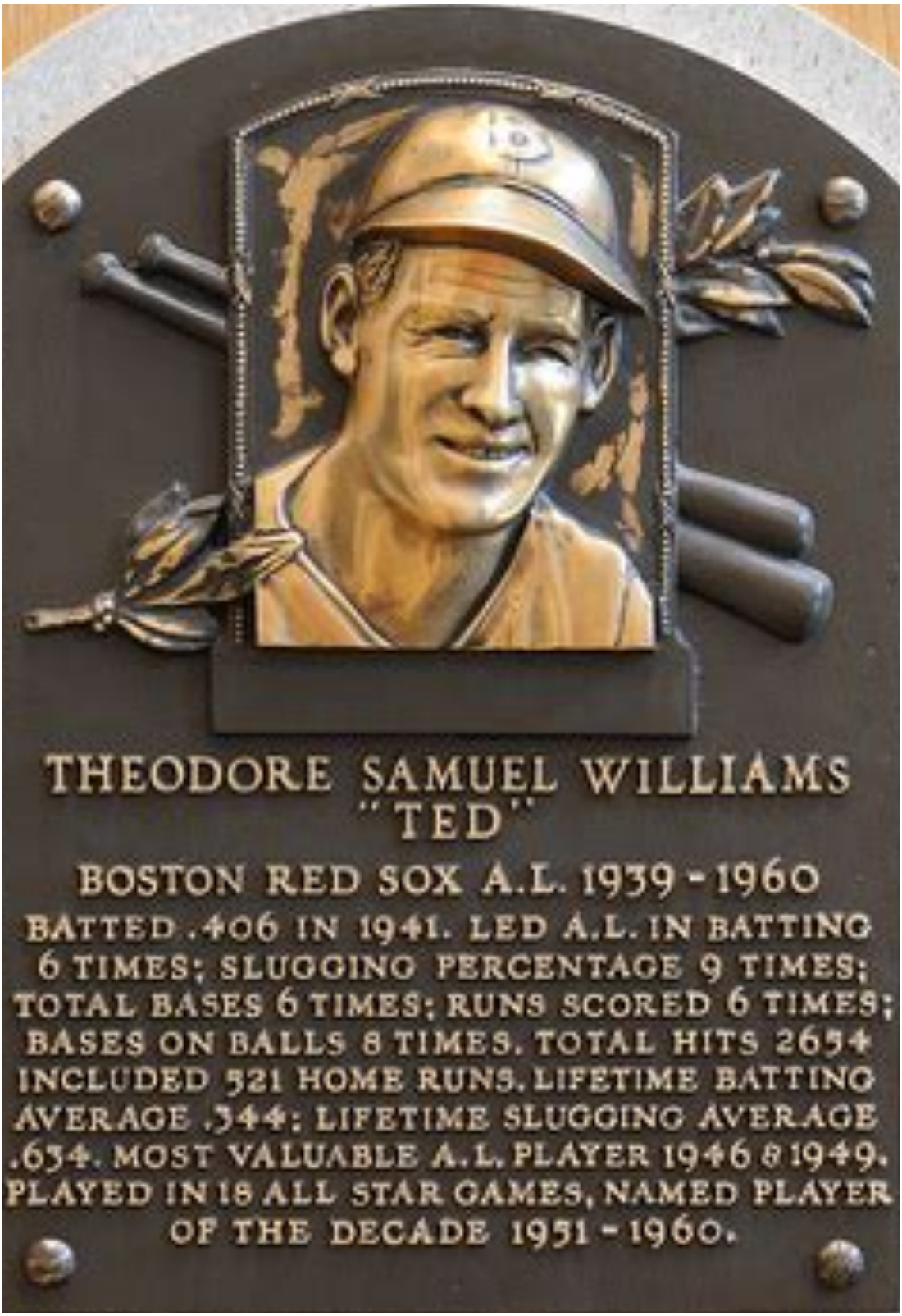
Late in his career he developed a pinched nerve in his neck that nagged him for the entire season. It reduced his batting average 100 points below his eventual lifetime average of .344. At the end of the season, when he entered Tom Yawkey's office to negotiate his contract for the next season, he insisted that he receive a pay cut of $35,000 from the previous year's salary of $125,000. He felt he had been so mediocre the prior season that he had a moral obligation to demand a lower salary. Yawkey argued with him about it, but eventually relented. When was the last time you heard of a major league player negotiate in such a manner and with such principle? The answer is ***NEVER*** !

Serious baseball fans may recall that Ted Williams lost five-and-one-half years of his career to World War II and the Korean War. One can only interpolate what his hitting totals might have been were it not for his

military service, but he enlisted in the Marines in 1942, the year after he hit .406 and was at the very peak of his talent. One of his coaches in the California semi-pro leagues once told him ***"...never let anyone change your swing."*** The fact that no one ever did was evidenced when he hit his 521st home run in his last at-bat in major league baseball.

Number 521

Five years after retiring from baseball and in the first year he became eligible for *Cooperstown*, he was voted into the ***Baseball Hall of Fame*** on the first ballot, a rarity, receiving more than 93 percent of all votes cast. The vote wasn't unanimous because 20 of 302 ballots cast by the baseball writers of America didn't vote for him. Casey Stengel, with his usual wry humor, called them incompetent and stated, ***"If they'd had to pitch to him, they'd have voted for him."***


THEODORE SAMUEL WILLIAMS
"TED"
BOSTON RED SOX A.L. 1939 - 1960
BATTED .406 IN 1941. LED A.L. IN BATTING
6 TIMES; SLUGGING PERCENTAGE 9 TIMES;
TOTAL BASES 6 TIMES; RUNS SCORED 6 TIMES;
BASES ON BALLS 8 TIMES. TOTAL HITS 2654
INCLUDED 521 HOME RUNS. LIFETIME BATTING
AVERAGE .344; LIFETIME SLUGGING AVERAGE
.634. MOST VALUABLE A.L. PLAYER 1946 & 1949.
PLAYED IN 18 ALL STAR GAMES, NAMED PLAYER
OF THE DECADE 1951 - 1960.