

"KILLER" KILLEBREW:

The Kid Who Rocked the Capital

by Ed Fitzgerald

Baseball in Washington, D.C., usually doesn't cause a stir; but a muscular slugger from Idaho makes even Ike forget about golf.



A hand shake from the President meant luck for Harmon and an autographed baseball for Ike's grandson David.

Boy Scout than a cocky slugger.

"Every time he hits a home run," Senator coach Ellis Clary says, "he looks so embarrassed you get the feeling he wants to go out and apologize to the pitcher."

Francis Stann, veteran Washington baseball writer, offered other evidence of Killebrew's modesty. Visiting the ballplayer and his wife in their apartment in Alexandria, Va., he was struck by the minimum of furniture in the place. Elaine Killebrew had a ready explanation. "We didn't bother with much furniture," she said. "We didn't think Harmon would be up with the Senators for more than a month or so."

The Killer's record indicated a short stay, too. In 113 games with the Senators over a five-year stretch, he had posted a weak .224 batting average and hit only 11 home runs. Worse, he had a bad throwing arm caused by an old football injury.

"He throws like a girl," moaned his old manager, Bucky Harris. Charlie Dressen, the hard-bitten manager who succeeded Harris, didn't think much of the Killer, either. "They can't expect me to win with players like Killebrew," he told one interviewer.

But here is Harmon Killebrew one of the American League's leading home-run hitters, stealing the thunder of mighty Mickey Mantle, smashing the ball so far out of the ball park that again and again newspaper stories began with statements like: "Not since Hank Greenberg in 1937 has anybody hit a ball as far in the Detroit ball park as Harmon Killebrew, the sensational Washington rookie, did yesterday..."

It all started on opening day when Harmon whacked a home run off Jack Harshman of Baltimore. In Spring training, he had been hitting nothing but singles but now, all of a sudden, he had found the range. He pole-axed

the pitchers. During one stretch he hit seven homers in eight games; five times he hit two homers in a single game. At first, everyone expected him to collapse, but as the weeks went by and he continued to lead the American League in home runs, the experts decided he was no morning glory. Admiring his massive shoulders and arms and shaking their heads at the length of his drives, they agreed that he was the most spectacular new hero of the game since Mantle and Willie Mays first came up.

In the face of his tremendous batting feats, Harmon's modesty remains unshaken. "I haven't got Mantle's power," he insists. "Nobody has. I was playing second base in Washington one day when he hit one that crashed against the top of the stadium. I thought the ball was going right over the roof and I could hardly believe it." He'll go so far, though, to admit, "I guess if I really get hold of a ball, I can hit it as far as anybody. I guess maybe I'm getting more confidence."

He's getting more something. He has his eye on the ball and he's getting the most out of the powerful muscles that remind old-timers of such heroes as Pepper Martin and Hack Wilson.

It seems unfair, at this early stage, to compare his home-run pace with Babe Ruth's in the year he set his record of 60, but the Killer seems to have the equipment to give the great Bambino's mark a battle. If not this season, then soon. And if he ever does, his boss, Calvin Griffith, will have reason to remember the words Ossie Bluege spoke when he came back from that memorable scouting trip in 1954.

"Cal," Ossie said excitedly, "you're gonna think I'm crazy, but I'm tellin' you—this kid can hit a ball as far as Babe Ruth!"

He can, too.

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