

[Baseball Hero, Ted Williams](#)[| Print |](#)

Written by Jack Kenny

Friday, 17 September 2010 00:00

0

Like

0



Ted Williams had just returned from a hunting trip in Minnesota, about 40 miles north of Minneapolis, when he heard the news that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. Most American League pitchers, the Japanese, and later the North Koreans and Communist Chinese, no doubt wished he had stayed there.

Absorbed in his trinity of pursuits — hitting, hunting, and fishing — Williams had paid little attention until then to the war that began in Europe in 1939. But Pearl Harbor got the attention of Ted Williams and millions of other heavy hitters in America. The Germans, their hands full with Russia, Great Britain, and other implacable foes, knew better than to wake a sleeping giant in North America. Japan did not.

Williams has often been compared to John Wayne's on-screen persona, and the comparison is apt. Essentially a loner, Williams loved the cowboy movies, especially those starring Hoot Gibson, and all his life he played the loner who needed only the open trail and a reliable means of transportation (I don't know if he ever rode horses) to fulfill his life's mission. The drifter in the cowboy films, who formed no close permanent ties other than to his horse, must have inspired Williams, who had the same affection for his bat. Have bat will travel, to New York, Philadelphia or Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, Baltimore, or Washington, D.C. It is ironic that the determined young man from San Diego finished his 22-year major league career with the Boston Red Sox just before baseball's westward expansion brought big league ball to the Gold Coast.

His fast wrists for hire heeded the calling wind. He was more than a little like the post-Civil War hero Johnny Yuma of television's *The Rebel*. Yes, "Teddy Ballgame" was a rebel. He was, to paraphrase Johnny Cash, "panther quick" with the bat and "leather tough" with his tongue. And no one had to push him very far or for very long before "he figured that he'd been pushed enough." Few characters in American life or fiction have been more naturally combative than Theodore Samuel Williams, a Hall of Fame baseball star, war hero, and humanitarian.

Putting It All out There

"I hit better when I'm mad," said Williams, who may have spent more money on newspapers than on meals, looking for sports columns that gave him reason to be mad. North Korean and Chinese pilots also gave him reason. "I fly better when I'm mad," he said. The anger brought his tremendous skills and relentless determination the edge that made him even more dangerous. Fortunately, I never saw Ted Williams mad. But you needed not to observe him for very long or in any particular setting to see him annoyed, irritated, vexed, and above all, argumentative.

I saw him for the first time in Nashua, New Hampshire, in 1984, long after he had retired from Major League Baseball. He had come up north in the dead of winter to help his friend and part owner of the Red Sox Sam Tamposi hawk some real estate in Florida. Williams had a home in Citrus Hills, one of the many developments of Tamposi, a real estate mogul living in southern New Hampshire. He had come up to pitch similar properties, with all their charming amenities, to the good folks of New Hampshire

When it was over, I prevailed on him to sit with me at a table for an interview for a now-defunct Manchester weekly. He agreed immediately and was surprisingly cordial, as he settled his long and still lanky, six-foot-three inch frame into a chair and said, "Shoot."

There are many questions a reporter would like to ask Ted Williams, which was why he had heard them all hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times. I began with the incident I had read about and found most intriguing. Williams, the story goes, announced in his rookie season, possibly while still in spring training, that his goal was simply to be the best there ever was and ever would be — at least in his lifetime.

"All I want out of life," he famously said, "is that when I walk down the street, folks will say, 'There goes the greatest hitter who ever lived.'" Just how lofty a goal that was can best be appreciated by recalling that Williams came along not long after the likes of Cobb,

Ruth, and Hornsby had finished their fabulous record-setting careers and Lou Gehrig was very nearly at the end of his. And Williams, nearly as astute a student of the history of the game as he was of the science of hitting, knew well what they had done. He was also well aware of what his new teammate Jimmy Foxx was doing in his assault on the rec-ord books.

“Wait’ll you see Foxx hit,” teammate Bobby Doerr was said to have advised Williams when the rookie arrived in Sarasota for his first spring training.

“Wait’ll Foxx sees me hit,” Williams supposedly said in reply. I would read years later that Williams denied ever having said that, but acknowledged it would not be out of character for him if he had. So I had to know if the “greatest hitter who ever lived” quote was authentic.

“Yeah, I said that,” he answered with just a touch of defensiveness in his voice — as if to say, “Why not?” or even “So what?” Indeed, many, if not most, knowledgeable baseball men had been saying for decades that Williams was the greatest hitter who ever lived. Now I wanted to learn the great slugger’s own assessment of his place in baseball history.

“Well,” I said, “do you think you accomplished that?”

“Well, I’d say I come pretty close,” he said with a charming display of modesty. “I’d say I’m in the top 20.” Then, before I could scribble “top 20” in my notebook, he amended his rating.

“Make that top ten,” he corrected himself. Surely baseball’s greatest hitter — arguably at least — should have the same privilege as a mere Congressman to “revise and extend” his remarks.

“Maybe the top three,” I suggested, opening a can of worms. Williams responded only with an expressionless stare, as though waiting to hear more.

“Who are the other two?” someone at the table asked. I said I guessed they would be Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth. That got Mr. Williams going.

“Oh, yeah? What about Eddie Collins? What about Al Simmons?” Williams mentioned two or three other “what abouts” before settling on an old teammate.

“What about Jimmy Foxx? You think he could hit?”

“Yeah, he could hit,” I agreed.

“Ho-ho, I guess so!” Williams exclaimed.

The record on that speaks for itself. Foxx had a .325 career batting average (the exact equal of Joe DiMaggio’s) to go with his 534 home runs — 13 more than the impressive 521 Williams racked up, though Williams’ career was interrupted by nearly five years of wartime service. Yes, Foxx could flat out hit.

But now I have wandered into the field of statistics while writing about one of the most fascinating personalities the game of baseball, or indeed, the history of America has ever known. It was said of Douglas MacArthur that if he had gone on stage instead of into the Army, we never would have heard of John Barrymore. If Ted Williams had chosen to make the military his fulltime career, he might have eclipsed MacArthur or Patton or heroes of the air like Eddie Rickenbacker. Because whatever he turned his hand to, Williams worked at tirelessly because he wanted to be the best — and usually was.

“There’s nobody in heaven or earth knows more about fishing than I do,” he once boasted.

“Sure there is, Ted,” someone dared to contradict him.

"Who?" Williams demanded in that thunderous voice that one writer claimed flushed Florida's flamingos from their nests.

"Well," his companion observed, "God made the fish." Williams pondered that for a moment.

"Well, all right," he grudgingly acknowledged. "But you had to go back a hell of a long way."

And go back we must, quite a long way, into the rec-ord books to get an appreciation of the man's accomplishments in baseball. Even those who seldom dwell on the numbers may find the Williams record breathtaking. It was as though he were born hitting .344, the average he achieved in just his second big league season and his career batting average. In his third season, he batted .406, becoming, thus far, the last player to bat over .400 for an entire season. The following year, his batting average dropped 50 points to a mere .356 and he still won baseball's mythical Triple Crown, leading the league in batting average, home runs, and runs batted in. He would win another Triple Crown in 1947, the only player other than Rogers Hornsby to achieve that twice. At age 39, he made another run at .400 and might have made it with a little more speed to beat out "leg hits." As it was, he finished the season with a league-leading .388, leaving runner-up and reigning MVP Mickey Mantle in the dust at .365. Not even Ty Cobb hit for such a high average at such an advanced age.

"I may not be the best hitter who ever lived," Williams announced with a peculiar mix of modesty and triumphalism. "But I'm the best old hitter."

He won his sixth and final batting title the following year at age 40, barely beating out a young upstart, teammate Pete Runnels, by hitting a more earthbound .328. The following year, through a combination of age and injuries, he slumped to an incredible .254, barely respectable by big league standards and pathetic in the life and career of "Teddy Ballgame." Many, if not most, baseball people thought he was finally done, a mere shadow at age 41 of the game's most dangerous hitter. But Williams would not leave the game as a vanquished "has been." He would come back for a final season. And what a season it would be.

It was 1960, and Williams would be ending his big league career 21 and a half years after it began. He started in the spring of 1939, roughly six months before Hitler marched into Poland and ignited World War II. He was 23 when he hit .406, and he would finally bow out, dramatically, an aged warrior of 42, in the age of *Sputnik*, space travel, and intercontinental ballistic missiles that traveled even faster and farther than line drives by Ted Williams. His career numbers, remarkable in their own right, would be more impressive still if his relentless assault on American League pitching had not been interrupted by his military training and service in two wars. He did what he did despite spending nearly five of his best years away from the diamond. Even in the war year of 1942, his last before leaving for Marine aviation duty, Williams won the Triple Crown *while* undergoing his preliminary training for military duty.

His Battles

To his immense physical and mental skills, 20-10 eyesight, and relentless hard work, add his tremendous ability to ignore distractions and focus on the job at hand. That was no small feat for a man capable of hearing a fan in the last row heckling him while 30,000 others were cheering. But Williams, who endured a good deal of ridicule over the draft deferment he obtained as the sole support of his mother, asked to have his status changed to 1-A in May of 1942, and he signed on with the Navy soon after and volunteered for combat aviation. At the end of the '42 season, he was off to war with the rest of baseball's able-bodied stars.

The game went on, but such was the paucity of genuinely big-league talent that by 1945, a one-armed outfielder named Pete Gray played for the St. Louis Browns. The stars returned in 1946 and the Red Sox lost to the Cardinals in the World Series, the only one in which Williams played. He batted a feeble .200 for the seven-game series and gave the boo birds another reason to taunt him. He failed when it counted most, they claimed. Williams would fold in the big games. He couldn't come through in the clutch.

Never mind that, absent Williams, the Red Sox never would have made it to the World Series. The stigma stuck, especially after Williams flopped in the 1948 playoff game after the Sox and Cleveland Indians finished in a dead heat atop the American League when the 154-game season was over. And he did not come through in the final two games of the season in 1949, when the Red Sox needed only to win one of two at Yankee Stadium to clinch the American League championship. Characteristically, they lost both.

His heroics in the glorified exhibitions known as All-Star games added fuel to the claim that Williams didn't come through when it mattered. He broke an arm making a spectacular catch against the left field wall in the first inning of the All-Star game in Chicago in 1950, and did not come out of the game until the eighth inning. Amazingly, he singled home a run to give the American League the lead in the fifth.

In 1952, he was off to war again, this time in Korea. He was not happy about being called up again, but apparently a man of his keen eyesight, lightning fast reflexes, and aviation experience was needed in the skies over Korea more than on a baseball field. As a pop singer would say years later after Elvis Presley had been drafted, "Uncle Sam needs you, boy."

America nearly lost Ted Williams in Korea. His plane was hit and he probably should have parachuted to safety, but chose instead to stay with his damaged plane. He crash-landed, jumped out, and ran from it just before it blew up. After that, it must have been a little easier to do what Williams had always done, stand unflinching when Bob Feller threw a 100-mile-an-hour fastball high and inside.

Williams himself blew up at fans and, especially, sportswriters more times than can be chronicled here. His barracks language and single-fingered salutes to his critics in the press box earned him the title the "Exquisite Vulgarian," a name only slightly less endearing than "the Splendid Splinter," which was meant to be complimentary. His elaborate display of contempt for the Fenway fickle, methodically spitting toward each set of stands, in the summer of 1956 brought him a \$5,000 fine by the American League and a suggestion from New York writer Red Smith that Ted could save a lot of money if he would refrain from spitting in Puritan New England and save his saliva for the subways of Gotham, where the fine was only two dollars. The next night Williams won the game with a home run in the ninth inning and circled the bases with both hands clasped firmly over his mouth to avoid the temptation of spitting again at the now wildly cheering crowd.

He decided early in his career he would never again tip his cap to acknowledge the cheers, a vow he kept through the rest of his brilliant but turbulent career. He did not tip his cap in that final and redemptive 1960 season, when he batted a very respectable .316 and whacked 29 home runs off a variety of pitchers, including one whose father had served him a homerun ball a generation earlier. He did not tip his cap after hitting a dramatic home run in the bottom of the eighth inning in his final at bat in his final game at Boston's Fenway Park. He refrained again when, after he had trotted out to his position in left field, manager Billy Jurges sent out a replacement for him so he could come trotting in to still more cheers from the fans, who must have felt like they were watching Moses retire from the heights overlooking, but not reaching, the promised land of a World Series championship.

Away from the field, he was cordial to fans, including those who somehow took pleasure in telling him how much they enjoyed screaming insults at him from the left-field stands. For the most part, he shunned the press, but could not keep them from reporting on the tremendous good he did, away from the spotlight, in support of the Jimmy Fund to combat cancer in children and in visiting sick and crippled kids in hospitals around the country. One could spend days researching and recounting the man's generosity to his friends and his selfless dedication to charitable causes, but it would be hard to improve on this tribute on the Jimmy Fund website:

He would go anywhere, and do anything, in the name of The Jimmy Fund — as long as there were no cameras to record his selfless deeds. Over the years Ted has personally raised millions of dollars for this charity. Today there is a permanent Williams exhibit at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute and members of the "406 Club" (named in honor of Ted's .400 season) have raised more than \$2 million for cancer research in Williams's name.

Thirty-one years after his final game, in a ceremony at Fenway Park commemorating the 50 years since he had batted over .400, Williams, now age 73, pulled a Red Sox cap out of his back pocket, put it on his head and then in one grand gesture, tipped it to the baseball fans in Boston, New England, and the world. He might also have tipped it to the brave men with whom he had served in World War II and those whom he fought both with and against in Korea.

The gallant warrior who had fought so many battles and stirred so many passions left the large baseball spotlight with a sincere and moving gesture of peace and good will. He continued to offer his accumulated wisdom and unequivocal judgments to the world until his death in July of 2002, less than two months shy of his 84th birthday. He and we were lucky he lived so long. We are lucky as well that he returned safely to the game he loved after having fought so brilliantly and with such dedication for the country he loved. John Glenn, the first American to orbit the Earth, a U.S. Senator from Ohio, and a Marine pilot who served with Williams in Korea, had only

the highest praise for his distinguished Marine Corps teammate.

“He did a helluva good job. Ted only batted .406 for the Red Sox. He batted a thousand for the Marine Corps and the United States.”

— *Photo: AP Images*