

Baseball great Stan Musial dead at 92

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Stan Musial, one of Major League Baseball's all-time greatest hitters and a member of the Hall of Fame, died January 19, 2013 at the age of 92. Musial's 22-year career with the St. Louis Cardinals, which began in 1941, spanned three decades, ending in 1963, just before Musial turned 43.

During his career Musial won seven batting titles, three World Series titles, was voted the National League's Most Valuable Player (MVP) three times and was named to a record-tying 24 All-Star teams (from 1959-1962 there were two All-Star games a season). When he retired he held or shared 17 Major League records, 29 National League records, and 9 All-Star Game records. His career batting average of .331, is the 26th highest in baseball history.

Musial had one of the greatest seasons in baseball history in 1948. He was one home run away (he hit one in a game that was rained out) from leading the league in batting average, home runs and runs batted in (i.e., the so-called Triple Crown), as well as runs scored, hits, doubles, triples and slugging percentage. This would have made him the only player in the 20th century to accomplish such a feat.

Stan Musial was born and raised in Donora, Pennsylvania, a small coal-mining and steel-making town south of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Musial's Polish immigrant father worked in the town's zinc and steel mills.

Ironically, in 1948 Musial's birthplace was the scene of the infamous "Donora Smog" in which an air inversion trapped industrial air pollution from the American Steel and Wire plant and the Donora Zinc Works. Within three days, twenty residents died. After the inversion lifted, another fifty people perished, including Musial's father. Hundreds of others would spend the rest of their lives afflicted by damaged lungs and hearts. This tragedy is credited with helping initiate the clean air movement that ultimately resulted in the

passage of the Clean Air Act and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency.

This tragedy certainly contributed to Musial's well-known refusal to appear in any cigarette advertisements, something that was common for ballplayers to do at the time.

Musial became widely known as "Stan the Man," a nickname that originated in 1946 during one of his especially productive games against the Brooklyn Dodgers. The Brooklyn fans began to chant "Here comes the man" whenever Musial would come to the plate. Soon thereafter, out of admiration and respect, fans throughout the country would refer to Musial as "Stan the Man."

Musial was still a relatively young player in 1947 when the Dodgers' Jackie Robinson became the first African American player in Major League Baseball. Robinson, whose presence was opposed even by some of his fellow Dodgers, was met with particularly harsh treatment from certain rival teams and players.

Musial's team, the St. Louis Cardinals, was not only a strong competitor of the Dodgers, it was located in the southernmost professional sports city at the time and had one of the largest contingents of Southern-born players in the National League. St. Louis was also the home to the Sporting News, a popular magazine known as "The Bible of Baseball," which had previously come out against baseball's integration.

Various accounts have been given about what took place on the Cardinals as they were about to play Robinson and the Dodgers for the first time in 1947. There are allegations that some players called for a strike and that there were threats from the Baseball Commissioner's Office to suspend any players if they followed through with such an action.

Despite the controversy, Musial privately let it be known that he was not a fan of the "rough and racial" talk that went on in the Cardinals' clubhouse and

denied that a strike vote among the team was ever a consideration. For his part, Robinson maintained that Musial “always treated me with courtesy.”

Some have criticized Musial for what they term his “passive” support for Robinson. However, it should be recalled that when fellow Dodger and Southerner Pee Wee Reese famously placed his arm around Robinson’s shoulder as he was being heckled by fans in Cincinnati, he was supporting his teammate. To expect Musial to have done something similar is perhaps unrealistic, particularly when at the time fraternizing with opposing players, irrespective of race, was considered unacceptable and even punishable behavior.

As a youth, Musial played on integrated teams, one of which featured African-American teammate Buddy Griffey, the father and grandfather of future Major League stars Ken Griffey Sr. and Ken Griffey Jr. (both also born in Donora).

Following Musial’s death, former New York and San Francisco Giant star and Hall of Famer Willie Mays told ESPN, “It is a very sad day for me. I knew Stan very well. He used to take care of me at All-Star games, 24 of them. He was a true gentleman who understood the race thing and did all he could. Again, a true gentleman on and off the field—I never heard anybody say a bad word about him, ever.”

Mays’ comments echoed those of Bob Gibson, the African-American Hall of Fame pitcher who played with Musial on the Cardinals for five years: “Stan Musial is the nicest man I ever met in baseball, and to be honest, I can’t relate to that. I never knew that nice and baseball went together.” (*Sports Illustrated*, August 2, 2010)

After his playing career Musial remained in the Cardinal organization and served as their general manager until 1967. He thereafter tended to his restaurant and other business interests.

Musial, who was married for 72 years and had four children, remained an iconic figure in St. Louis, revered just as much for his decency and common touch, as for his brilliant playing career.



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