

Five Major League Baseball Heroes from Iowa

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Iowa has produced comparatively few major league baseball players, but furnished more than its share of diamond heroes. Cal McVey of Montrose, Fred Clarke of Winterset, Dave Bancroft of Sioux City, Jack Coombs of LeGrande, and Bob Feller of Van Meter rank among these exceptional players. McVey, Iowa's earliest diamond hero, starred as right fielder and catcher for Cincinnati (1869-1870), baseball's first professional club, Boston (1871-1872, 1874-1875) and the Lord Baltimores (1873) of the National Association and the Chicago (1876-1877) and Cincinnati (1878-1879) National League squads. Left fielder Clarke excelled for Louisville (1894-1899) and Pittsburgh (1900-1911), while shortstop Bancroft starred for the Philadelphia (1915-1920), New York (1920-1923, 1930), Boston (1924-1927), and Brooklyn (1928-1929) National League clubs. Right-hander Coombs pitched brilliantly for the Philadelphia Athletics (1906-1914) and Brooklyn Dodgers (1915-1918), while Feller hurled masterpieces for Cleveland (1936-1941, 1956-1956).

These Iowans performed dazzling feats offensively and defensively. Although never winning batting titles, McVey, Clarke, and Bancroft pounded opposing pitchers. McVey, who hit .419 in 1871, made superb .362 and .328 career National Association and National League batting averages, respectively. A .315 lifetime batter, Clarke made 2,708 base hits, batted above .300 eleven times, and attained a .406 mark in 1897. Although not a natural batsman, Bancroft surpassed 2,000 hits, batted over .300 five times, and made six hits in one game. McVey and Clarke supplied considerable power, the latter slugging 357 doubles and 224 triples (fifth all-time) and knocking in 1,015 runs. Clarke and Bancroft exhibited considerable speed, the former pilfering 506 career bases. Defensively, Clarke paced National League left fielders percentage-wise nine times, while Bancroft led shortstops twice and ranked second in fielding chances per game.

On the mound, Coombs and Feller performed heroic feats. Coombs compiled a splendid 158-111 won-loss record, won at least 20 games three times, struck out over 1,000 batters, recorded 35 shutouts, and surrendered only 2.78 earned runs per game. In September, 1906, he pitched all 24 innings defeating Boston 4-1 in the longest American League game. Besides winning 31 of 40 decisions in 1910, he broke the league record with thirteen shutouts and yielded only one run twelve times. Despite extensive World War II service, right-handed Feller captured 266 of 428 decisions and relinquished only 3.25 earned runs per game. Besides tossing three no-hitters, Feller entered the 20 game victory circle six times and achieved a career high 27 triumphs in 1940. He paced the American League six times in victories and seven times in strike-outs, including a major league record 348 in 1946.

These stars made enormous impact on the diamond. McVey, Clarke, and Bancroft each helped their respective clubs capture four pennants, while Coombs and Feller hurled their teams to three and two flags, respectively. Clarke slugged two home runs in the 1909 World Series, while Coombs the next year tied a major league record by defeating the Chicago Cubs three times. In the 1948 fall classic, Feller lost a heart-breaking two hitter. Clarke managed Pittsburgh to four National League pennants, while McVey, Bancroft, Coombs, and Feller provided inspiration field leadership. In 1940 The *Sporting News* selected Feller Major League Player of the Year. Clarke, Bancroft, Feller, McVey, and Coombs made the Iowa Sports Hall of Fame, the former three the National Baseball Hall of Fame.