

# Bill Werber and the first televised game

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By AL FEATHERSTON

Bill Werber is a pretty obscure guy for a player Ed Barrow once called "the best player in the American League."

He was also the first basketball All-American at Duke University and became the last living teammate of Babe Ruth before his death at the age of 100 in 2009.

But Werber should be recognized for another piece of history – he is the first player in Major League history to come to the plate in a televised game.



Cincinnati Reds at Brooklyn Dodgers  
August 26, 1939

"It was August 26, 1939 — I was leading off for Cincinnati against the Dodgers," he said in a 2008 interview.

The game was televised from Ebbets Field on station W2XBS (later to become WNBC-TV) as an experiment at the New York World's Fair. There were just 400 TV sets in the New York area at the time, but

the television display at the Fair drew a large crowd.

The inaugural telecast featured two cameras – one high above home plate and the other along the third base line. Dodger radio broadcaster Red Barber did the commentary.

Werber led off against Brooklyn's Luke Hamlin to become the first televised batter in baseball history. Werber didn't recall the outcome of that first plate appearance, but he contributed a single and an RBI to the Reds' 5-2 victory in that historic game. That was the first game of a doubleheader.

The second game was also televised and Werber again led off for the Reds. He had two hits in the nightcap, but Dodger pitcher Hugh Casey went the distance to give Brooklyn the 6-1 victory and the doubleheader split.

While Werber didn't remember much about that historic afternoon, he did have fond memories of visiting the World's Fair that summer.

"We'd play Brooklyn, then after the game, we'd get off the subway at the next stop," he said. "We'd always visit the Heineken tavern and have a frosty, cold one. Those were good times."

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**REDS 5-1; DODGERS' 2-6**  
**BROOKLYN—(P)—** The Dodgers divided a double header with the Cincinnati Reds Saturday by taking the second game 6 to 1 on Hugh Casey's steady eight hit pitching and an attack featured by Dolph Camilli's 22nd homer. A five run rally in the eighth gave the Reds the opener 5 to 2 for Bucky Walters' 21st victory.  
**(First Game)**

Cincinnati	AB	R	H	Brooklyn	AB	R	H
Werber 3b	4	1	1	C'scar'rt 2b	3	0	0
Joost 2b	3	1	1	L'vag'tto 3b	2	0	0
Goodman rf	3	0	0	Walker lf	4	0	1
M'Cormick lb	4	0	2	Parks lf	4	0	0
Lombardi c	4	0	0	Camilli lb	3	0	0
Craft cf	4	0	0	Phelps c	3	1	1
Bongiovan'i lf	3	1	0	Moore rf	2	1	0
Borgagaray lf	1	0	0	Durocher ss	3	0	0
Myers ss	3	1	0	Hamlin p	2	0	0
Walters p	3	1	1	Tamulis p	1	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

Cincinnati ..... 000 000 050—5  
 Brooklyn ..... 020 000 000—2  
 Errors—Lombardi, Phelps 2. Runs batted in—Werber, Joost, Goodman, McCormick 2. Two base hit—McCormick. Stolen base Joost. Sacrifice—Goodman. Double play—Walters, Lombardi and McCormick. Left on bases—Cincinnati 3; Brooklyn 3. Bases on balls—off Walters 5; off Hamlin 2. Struck out—by Walters 1; by Hamlin 2; by Tamulis 1. Hits—off Hamlin 4 in 7 1-3 innings; off Tamulis 1 in 1 2-3. Passed ball—Lombardi. Losing pitcher—Hamlin. Umpires—Stewart, Campbell and Magerkurth. Attendance—about 32,000.  
**(Second Game)**

Cincinnati	AB	R	H	Brooklyn	AB	R	H
Werber 3b	4	0	2	C'scar'rt 2b	5	1	2
Joost 2b	5	0	0	L'vag'tto 3b	5	1	1
Goodman rf	5	1	1	Walker cf	4	0	0
McCormick lb	4	0	1	Parks rf	3	2	2
Hershberger c	4	0	2	Camilli lb	3	2	2
Craft cf	4	0	0	Phelps c	1	0	0
Bongiovan'i lf	4	0	1	Todd c	2	0	0
Myers ss	3	0	1	Koy lf	4	0	2
Niggeling p	1	0	0	Durocher ss	4	0	0
Moore p	1	0	0	Casey p	3	0	0
Gamble x	1	0	0				
Grissom p	0	0	0				
Riggs xx	1	0	0				
<b>Totals</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>

x Batted for Moore in 7th.  
 xx Batted for Grissom in 9th.  
 Cincinnati ..... 000 000 010—1  
 Brooklyn ..... 024 000 00x—6  
 Errors—Myers, Lavagetto, Camilli. Runs batted in—Camilli 3, Lavagetto, Koy 2, Bongiovan'i. Two base hits—Lavagetto, Camilli. Home run—Camilli. Stolen bases—Lavagetto, Parks. Left on bases—Cincinnati 11; Brooklyn 8. Bases on balls—off Casey 2; off Moore 1; off Grissom 3. Struck out—by Casey 3; by Moore 3; by Grissom 1. Hits—off Niggeling 7 in 2 1-3 innings; off Moore 1 in 3 2-3; off Grissom 1 in 2. Losing pitcher—Niggeling. Umpires—Campbell, Magerkurth and Stewart.

## Bill Werber [2 of 3]:

Werber would have a lot of good times in his athletic career ... which was followed by a long, successful career in business.

He went to Duke out of Berwyn, Md., because he wanted to play baseball for Jack Coombs, the former ace right hander for Connie Mack's pre-World War I champion Philadelphia A's.

But Werber was considered such a good prospect that before he arrived on Duke's Durham, North Carolina, campus, he signed a deal in June of 1927 with the New York Yankees. Actually, the deal was consummated between Ed Barrow and Werber's father. The Yankee GM thought so much of the young shortstop that he arranged for Werber to travel with the '27 Yankees – to take batting and fielding practice with the team of Ruth, Gehrig, Combs and Lazzeri.

Werber spent two weeks with that famous team, but soon got bored.

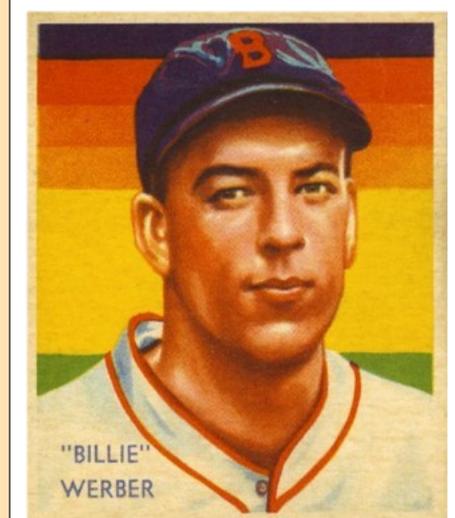
"[Barrow] was a big admirer of Miller Huggins, the Yankees manager at the time, and thought it would be to my benefit to sit on the bench and travel with the team, learning how Miller ran the ballclub," he said. "I was lonesome because I lived in a hotel by myself, and the ballplayers had little time for a college kid. After all, they were in a pennant chase. They would push me out of the batting cage."

He left the team to play summer ball and enrolled at Duke that fall. He enjoyed four splendid years playing baseball for Coombs and demonstrated his athleticism when he became the star of Eddie Cameron's basketball team. Werber led the Blue Devils to the Southern Conference championship game in both 1929 and 1930.

Soon after his graduation in June of 1930, he finally re-joined the Yankees. Less than a week after joining the team, Werber found himself in the starting lineup.

Almost eight decades later, he could still remember how scared he was when he made his Major League debut on June 25, 1930 against the St. Louis Browns at The Yankee Stadium.

"I was more than scared – I was frozen," he said. "George Blaeholder was on the mound for the Browns. I can remember standing in there and watching his first pitch come right in there. I was so scared that I couldn't move. I took it for a strike. The next pitch came in and the same thing – I couldn't move and I took it for another strike. But being frozen saved me. Blaeholder's next four pitches were just off the plate and I took them all and drew a walk.



Bill Werber played 11 seasons in the major leagues, leading the American League in stolen bases three times (1934,1935,1937) ... the second big league player from Duke University, Werber's 1935 Diamond Stars (#61) is valued at \$100.00 in N/M condition.

"As I was running down to first base, all my teammates were shouting "Good eye! Good eye!" but having a good eye had nothing to do it with. I was frozen. I couldn't have swung if it had been right down the middle."

Werber was followed in the batting order by Babe Ruth, who promptly deposited one of Blaeholder's offerings into the

### Bill Werber Year by Year:

Year	Team	League	Lev	AB	HT	2B	3B	HR	RBI	AVG	
1930	Albany Senators	Eastern	A	316	107	14	7	4		.339	
1930	New York Yankees	AMERICAN	AL	14	4	0	0	0	2	.286	
1931	Toledo Mud Hens	American Assoc.	AA	221	61	4	4	4		.276	
1931	Newark Bears	International	AA	142	30	3	0	0		.251	
1932	Buffalo Bisons	International	AA	422	122	16	7	17		.289	
1933	2 Teams	AMERICAN	ML	427	110	30	6	3	39	.258	
1933	New York Yankees	AMERICAN	ML	2	0	0	0	0	0	.000	
1933	Boston Red Sox	AMERICAN	ML	425	110	30	6	3	39	.259	
1934	Boston Red Sox	AMERICAN	ML	623	200	41	10	11	67	.321	
1935	Boston Red Sox	AMERICAN	ML	462	118	30	3	14	61	.255	
1936	Boston Red Sox	AMERICAN	ML	535	147	29	6	10	67	.275	
1937	Philadelphia Athletics	NATIONAL	ML	493	144	31	4	7	70	.292	
1938	Philadelphia Athletics	NATIONAL	ML	499	129	22	7	11	69	.259	
1939	Cincinnati Reds	NATIONAL	ML	599	173	35	5	5	57	.289	
1940	Cincinnati Reds	NATIONAL	ML	584	162	35	5	12	48	.277	
1941	Cincinnati Reds	NATIONAL	ML	418	100	9	2	4	46	.239	
1942	New York Giants	NATIONAL	ML	370	76	9	2	1	13	.205	
<b>Major League Totals</b>				<b>11 Seasons</b>	<b>5024</b>	<b>1363</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>539</b>	<b>.271</b>
<b>Minor League Totals</b>				<b>3 Seasons</b>	<b>1101</b>	<b>320</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>.291</b>

### Bill Werber [3 of 3]:

right-field seats for his 25th home run of the season. Werber remembers sprinting around the bases and waiting at home plate to shake the Babe's hand.

"I had to wait awhile," Werber said. "When he finally got there and shook my hand, he said, 'Kid, when I hit 'em, you don't have to run so hard.'"



His fear gone, Werber played the rest of his debut game to the best of his ability. He had two singles and a second walk. He scored another run ahead of Ruth's 26th home run of the season.

It was a pretty auspicious debut, batting in front of future Hall of Famers Ruth, Tony Lazzeri, Lou Gehrig (who for some reason batted fifth in the lineup that day – although he did triple and homer) and Bill Dickey. Another future Hall of Famer, Red Ruffing, was on the mound, winning his fifth game of the season as the Yankees cruised to a 16-4 victory.

Unfortunately, Werber would spend less than a week with the 1930 Yankees before he was demoted to the Yankees' farm team in Albany. The Yankees were solid at short with veteran Lyn Lary and wanted Werber to play every day at shortstop. He would get that chance in Albany, Toledo – where he'd play for future Yankee manager Casey Stengel – Newark and Buffalo.

Going into the spring of 1933, Werber thought he could beat out 22-year-old Frankie Crosetti, who had hit just .241 as the regular shortstop for the World Champion '32 Yankees. But after looking at both candidates that spring – along with another young shortstop named Robert "Red" Rolfe – Yankee manager Joe McCarthy decided to give the job to Crosetti. He sent Rolfe back to the minors to learn how to play third base, then sold Werber to the Boston Red Sox for cash.

That turned out to be one of the few deals with the Yankees in that era that paid off for the Red Sox. Werber became the team's regular third baseman and leadoff hitter. He twice led the American League in stolen bases and in 1934, he batted .321, stole 40 bases, scored 129 runs and finished 12th in the American League MVP vote. That was the year when Barrows called Werber "the best player in the American League."

Werber would end up playing 11 seasons in the Major Leagues with a career .271 batting average. He was traded to the Philadelphia A's in 1937, where he got to play for Connie Mack, who acquired him on the advice of Duke baseball coach Jack Coombs.

But Werber and Mack clashed over his contract after two seasons in Philadelphia, so Mack sold his third-baseman to Cincinnati before the 1939 season, setting up his historic first TV appearance.

Baseball historian Bill James credits Werber as the catalyst for turning the Reds into a championship team. It was Werber who invented the Jungle Club; the team's four infielders were all "Jungle Cats" — second baseman Lonnie Frey was Leopard; shortstop Billy Myers was Jaguar; Werber at third was Tiger. First baseman Frank McCormick wanted in, but Werber told him, "You don't hustle enough." McCormick worked harder and eventually Werber named him Wildcat.

The Reds won the 1939 pennant, barely edging the Cardinals, but were swept by the Yankees in the World Series. A year later, Cincinnati coasted to an easy pennant and beat the Detroit Tigers in seven games to win the World Series — with Werber batting .370 for the series.

He finished his career with the Giants in 1942, finally retiring because of a chronic foot injury. Washington Senators manager Clark Griffith tried to lure him out of retirement in 1943, offering to top his 1942 salary of \$13,000. But Werber was finding success in the insurance business, reporting that he ended up making \$100,000 in 1943 — \$20,000 more than Babe Ruth made in his best season.

Werber lived to become the oldest living ballplayer before his death at age 100 in Charlotte, N.C.