

MLB

Bob Gibson on race, baseball and what is next

June 17th, 2020



Mike Lupica

Bob Gibson is 84 now. He has been fighting pancreatic cancer exactly as you would expect he would -- without complaint -- since he was diagnosed with it during the summer of 2019. The only thing for which he occasionally apologized during our phone conversation on Wednesday was when he would get a year or a detail wrong in the story he was telling. He would blame it on what he called “chemo brain.”

But the truth is, Gibson sounded like himself, which means tough, principled, decent and fiercely intelligent. He remains, even now, an essential baseball

voice -- not just about his game, but about his country and what he sees from it these days.

“What I’m seeing now,” Gibson said, “is that nothing has changed. Period.”

He paused.

“I remember going to my first Spring Training with the Cardinals in 1957,” he said. “I almost got jumped by four guys on a train. I had to go find a place to hide myself on that train so I wouldn’t get thumped by those four guys.”

He laughed.

“Fortunately for me,” Gibson said, “they never did find me.”

And fortunately for the St. Louis Cardinals.

Gibson made it to the Cardinals four years later and became such a brilliant and unforgettable presence in the middle of the diamond for one of baseball's greatest teams, the Cardinals of the 60s, who played in three World Series, winning two while jumping ahead of the Tigers 3-1 in '68. Gibson had a 1.12 ERA that year. He would twice be the World Series MVP Award winner. He is now in the Hall of Fame, of course. He started nine World Series games in his career -- eight of which were complete games -- and had a 1.89 career ERA in those outings. He was as intimidating a figure on a pitcher’s mound as the game has known. It was a remarkable and inspiring journey for him after he left Omaha, both on and off the field, but hardly an easy one.

I asked Wednesday if he thinks that the country will come out of everything that has happened on the streets since the death of George Floyd.

There was a long pause.

“It’s always possible,” Gibson said. “But is it likely? I’m not so sure about that. After '68, and what happened that year [the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King], I wanted us as a country to be better then, too. I thought things would be different. They’re not.

“But now that doesn’t mean there aren’t things that give me hope, especially in our game. I don’t just see Black players speaking up, the way they always have. I see something deeper. I see white players listening more than they used to.”

Gibson does think sports can help lead a new dialogue about race in America. I mentioned to him that Bill Bradley, the former Knick, U.S. Senator and presidential candidate, once told me that locker rooms in sports were one of the best sociology classes ever invented.

“He’s right about that,” Gibson said. “Black people and white people and people from other countries, we all get thrown into this life, thrown together on buses and planes and in clubhouses, and then we spend more time with each other than we do with our own families. We’re forced to find out who we all are and what we’re all about. And it can be the best education in the world.”

There was another silence now at his end of the phone, as he tried to find the right words for what he wanted to say next.

“I’m usually not political,” he said. “But I am now. And it makes me angry, because I don’t want to be. And at my age, and seeing what I’ve already seen, I shouldn’t have to be.”

“Tim McCarver has been my friend for 60 years. I came out of housing projects. He came out of Memphis. But we learned from each other. One of my best friends when I was a boy was white: Dick Mackey. I ate at his house. He ate at mine. So I always wondered why Black people and white people couldn’t get along. I still don’t understand. You’ve already made up your mind about me because I’m Black. You don’t like me because I’m Black? Why? I’m a good guy.”

No. Gibson is more than that. He is one of the best men his sport has ever produced. I asked him over the phone if he knew Jackie Robinson, and he said they had only spent time together once, during the 1969 All-Star Game in Washington, D.C. Gibson was on the National League team, and Robinson had been invited to attend, as Major League Baseball celebrated its 100th anniversary in ‘69. There was a reception for the players at the White House hosted by Richard Nixon. Robinson had actually supported Nixon in 1960 when he ran against John F. Kennedy, because he thought Nixon had a better record on civil rights. By ‘69, though, Robinson had seen enough.

“I was in this long line, getting ready to go into this room and meet the president,” Gibson said. “And at the last moment, I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t let them use me like that. I turned around and walked out and was just going to wait on one of the buses that brought us over there. And there was one other person on that bus: Mr. Jackie Robinson. We spoke for an hour

that night, just the two of us. I enjoyed it. So did he. I found out that night his thinking was my thinking. His voice was mine.”

And Gibson's voice is still a voice worth hearing, now more than ever.

“One of these days,” he said, “people in this country are going to stop being afraid of what they don’t know. That day just hasn’t come yet. And that doesn’t just make me angry. It makes me sad.”

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<https://www.mlb.com/news/bob-gibson-on-race-baseball>

Talk about legends in ferocity: Bob Gibson!

It bothered me that Jackie Robinson, the great breaker of the colour barrier in “The Nation’s Pastime,” was a Republican politically. This article helped me understand why. I also realize that in those days, a primary Democratic party base was White Southern segregationists, the perpetrators of Jim Crow. Jackie, so bright, so gifted, so driven, had an elitist streak to him that I imagine found more purchase in the Republican Party. Black or White was not the deciding factor; the Democrats were as guilty of racism, at least until Lyndon Johnson, of all people, launched the Great Society. And lost the South to the Republicans.

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