My Father and Stan the Man

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

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A few hours after the Cardinals won the 2011 World Series, I got an email from my father saying "Tonight, this old Cardinals fan is very happy." My father is far from a big sports fan and grew up in New Jersey, making it unclear why he was a Cardinals fan. It was possible that he was simply rooting against the Rangers because of the presence of George W. Bush in the owner's box periodically during the World Series, but it was unlikely that my father was even paying attention that closely. Over the years, I have met other men my father's age who were also lifelong Cardinals fans despite growing up in the east, where they were a lot closer to Boston, New York, Philadelphia or Washington.

The real reason these men, including my father, became Cardinals fans is simply because of Stan Musial. Musial, who died over the weekend at the age of 92, had not uncoiled his famous swing in a meaningful baseball game in just short of half a century. During that time a legend grew around Stan Musial. Of all the great World War II era stars, Musial was the decent one who rarely sought attention but lived his life honorably, was polite, pleasant and respectful and never had any contact with even the whiff of scandal. Musial's personal story reinforced this. He was a Polish-American who grew up in a coal mining town, was a natural athlete who worked hard to make it in baseball, spent his entire career with one team and was married to the same woman for more than 70 years. Gradually, other stories leaked out. Turns out that in 1947 Musial had without fanfare made it clear that he, as the leader of the reigning World Champion St. Louis Cardinals, had no problem with African American players and expected his teammates to act the same way. Baseball history might have been very different if Musial had given in to the racist pressure coming from some corners of that team. The legend of Stan Musial helps explain why of the thousands of men who have played professional baseball, only one was known as "The Man."

For most of his long retirement, Musial was the forgotten man of the great World War II era players such as Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio. In recent years some attention was generated precisely because of how he had been overlooked. Additionally, Musial outlived Williams, DiMaggio, Hank Greenberg, Bob Feller and the other great players from those years, thus becoming baseball's last link with that period.

While the legend of Stan Musial is impressive, it also overshadows something else. Musial was not simply a good ballplayer who led an exemplary life; he was one of the greatest players ever. His extraordinary career numbers have been recited elsewhere in recent days, but there are other on-the-field accomplishments that have often been overlooked. During his first five seasons 1941-6, excluding 1945 when Musial did not play because he was in the military, Musial's Cardinals won four pennants and three World Series. This is a record of winning that we tend to associate with Yankee greats like Mickey Mantle, DiMaggio and Derek Jeter, not with players on the Cardinals or any other team.
Musial, however, was the unquestioned star on those 1940s Cardinals teams that still are among the best teams in NL history. When Jackie Robinson came to the Brooklyn Dodgers spring training in 1947, it was the Cardinals, not the Yankees or Dodgers, that in recent years had been baseball's best and most successful franchise.

Robinson's rookie season was the beginning of a new era in baseball and a period of dominance by New York teams. From the beginning of 1947 until the end of 1957, a period recognized as the golden age of New York baseball, when the Dodgers and the Giants combined for eight pennants and the Yankees won nine, Musial accumulated more WAR than any player in the game, while no New York player had a higher batting average, more home runs or more RBIs than Musial. Among New York players only Mickey Mantle posted a higher OPS+. In all of baseball only Ralph Kiner hit more home runs and only Ted Williams hit for a higher batting average or posted a higher OPS+ than Musial during those years.

I never saw Musial play, nor am I a Cardinals fan. I even rooted against them pretty hard this October in the NLCS because they were playing my team, the Giants. Nonetheless, through my father, I always felt a connection to Musial. My father, who is well into his seventies and might be able to name three active baseball players, will still smile when he hears, or says, the words Stan the Man, can still recite the names of Musial's teammates like Marty Marion and Enos Slaughter, and very occasionally will even imitate Musial's batting stance. When I called him to share the sad news, my father took solace in the long healthy life Musial had led, but kept repeating it was the end of an era, which, at least for him, it was. Now that Stan the Man is gone, maybe my father will give in to the pressure from one of his brothers, two of his grandsons and both his sons to become a Giants fan. I sure hope he can learn to imitate Timmy's pitching motion.