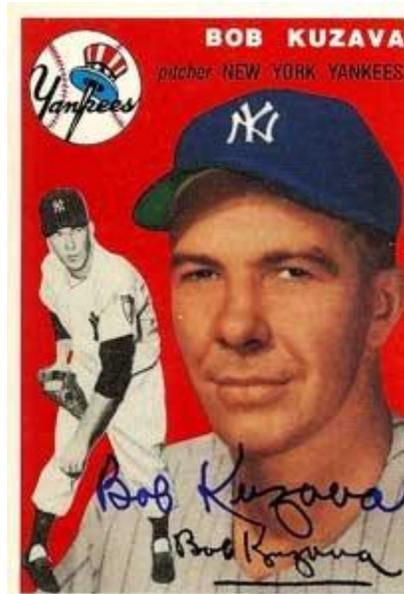


# Something Special Sixty-One Years Ago:

## A chat with Bob Kuzava

By David A. Jones



On September 21, 1946, rookie pitcher Bob Kuzava made his big league debut for the Cleveland Indians at League Park in Cleveland, Ohio starting against a very talented Detroit Tigers club led by Tiger pitcher Dizzy Trout. For the Indians the season was all but over. The Red Sox had clinched the peanut on September 13<sup>th</sup> at League Park. The Indians were playing for pride sitting some 34 games out of first and looking to the future. There were only 2,472 paid at the old ball yard on that Saturday afternoon.



Bob “Sarge” Kuzava represented a new beginning on that late September day. An Army veteran who was discharged in January 1946 he had returned from the dangers of waging war against the Japanese. He was only twenty-three and was ready to restart a promising baseball career interrupted by World War II.

Little did Bob or others know but this would be the last game the Indians would ever play at venerable old League Park. According to the Cleveland Indians Encyclopedia, “The next day’s papers reported simply that (Cleveland’s owner) Veeck announced - without fanfare - that from that day on all home games would be played at the Stadium”. On September 21, 1946 we witness a new beginning and the end of a historic era for Cleveland that began with Cy Young in 1891.

When I caught up with Bob Kuzava sixty one years latter I could not believe that I had been so fortunate to track him down. Bob resides in his home state of Michigan and sounds like a very alert and active eighty five year old former major league star.

Speaking with Sarge was a very big deal for me. Kuzava is special in today’s steroid sports era. First, Bob is a member of the *Greatest Generation*. He along with millions of other Americans sacrificed everything to win World War II. This generation is fading fast. Along with being a service veteran Bob was a pretty darn good baseball player.

That is an elite group by any measure composed of the likes of Ted Williams, Bob Feller and Hank Greenberg just to name a few. Since I only dreamed of wearing a big league uniform I was amazed to be chatting with this former star and war veteran.

As we chatted about his service in World War II in the India/Burma theatre I was struck by his sacrifice and sense of duty. Asked if he joined or got drafted he said “of course I was drafted. In 1942 everyone was going and I was no exception”. Case closed folks, the war effort came first in 1942 for every American and most every American sacrificed. Speaking of sacrifices, Bob remembers Hank Greenberg of the Detroit Tigers who was in the Army Air Force. They served in the same theatre in South-East Asia fighting the Japanese.

Well what about September 21, 1946 and that start at E.66th Street and Lexington Avenue? Bob does not remember a lot. Sixty-one years has passed by so memories do fade a bit. He was a late September call up, age 23 and ready to prove he had what it took to make the club. Bob remembers more about Cleveland Memorial Stadium where he also played in 1947. “It was made for football, the players looked so small to the fans in the upper decks, and it was big”. Oh yes, “it got cold there”.

As a fan I wanted to know what sort of arsenal he had when he took the mound at League Park. Bob said he had a fastball that got into the 90’s. Along with that he said he had a curve ball and change up. His strike out pitch was his heater. Asked what batters of his era he feared the most he said George Kell and Al Rosen. We joked about how certain batters such as Kell and Rosen seemed to know how to hit you.

I asked Bob about his absence from the big leagues in 1948, the championship year for Cleveland. Bob said in disgust that he was sent down that year. He went on to say he requested to be traded. Bob believed he had proven himself and did not want to be sent down. For Bob lady luck was with him. He did get traded and lucky for him ultimately ended up on the 1951, 52 and 53 New York Yankees. Bob collected three World Series rings! Although we were talking over the phone I could almost see the gleam in his eye as he told me about getting back to back saves in the 1951 World Series (Game 6) and the 1952 World Series (Game 7). During his three World Series appearances he would post a cool 2.08 ERA

Bob said that he stayed in baseball after his final year in 1957. He managed at the minor league level at Charleston, South Carolina. Bob remembers traveling throughout the South and visiting my hometown, Knoxville, Tennessee. Bob's last assignment in baseball involved "scouting for Charlie Finley and John McHale" of the Athletics and Braves.

After I wished old Sarge a fond farewell I paused and pondered about the life that Bob Kuzava had experienced. What a ride, what a gentleman, truly this man is a class act! In the year 2007 as Bob pointed out baseball is not quite the same as it was sixty-one years earlier. "Most people did not make a lot of money back in my day, maybe Yogi, why I remember people working in a factory for a dollar and hour now they work for thirty!"

Sixty one years ago this month a new career began. Three World Series rings later and after a successful and productive career both in and out of baseball Sarge can look back to that late September day at League Park with pride. League Park may be gone but Bob Kuzava along with many other talented, dedicated and gifted players made it a field where dreams came true.

\* Photo by [Baseball-Almanac.com](http://Baseball-Almanac.com)

\* - Special thanks the Bob Kuzava and his family for making my interview with possible; I truly appreciate his time and great insight.