Johnny Pesky (1919-2012)

The iconic Boston Red Sox baseball player Johnny Pesky began his career a continent away from Boston in Portland, Oregon, where he established a teenage reputation as an outstanding ballplayer. Called up to the Red Sox in the spring of 1942, Pesky (née Pavescovich) batted second and played shortstop in a powerful batting order between graceful center fielder Dom DiMaggio and one of baseball's greatest all-time hitters, left fielder Ted Williams. Except for their service during World War II, the Red Sox lineup remained the same for nearly a decade, until Pesky was traded to the Detroit Tigers in 1952.

Although he played briefly for two other teams, Pesky spent most of his career with the Red Sox as player, coach, or manager or as a broadcaster. He was a contact hitter with a lifetime batting average of .307.

Pesky was born in September 1919 to Croatian parents Jacob and Maria Pavescovich, who lived on Northwest 20th Street, four blocks from Portland's Vaughan Street Park. His father worked in nearby saw mills in an industrial area known as Slabtown to support a family of six children (John was fifth in birth order). At age twelve, John's first job was cleaning the Vaughan Street Park bullpens. In time, he graduated to clubhouse boy and became acquainted with players in the Pacific Coast League.

The Pesky name came to John early in his playing days, when Portland-area sportswriters abbreviated his family name to Johnny Pesky to fit into box scores. He changed his name legally in 1947. Pesky married Ruth Hickey of Lynn, Massachusetts, shortly after the war.

Pesky played city-league ball in Portland and then spent the summer of 1937 playing in Bend. By age eighteen, scouts began to take notice of his fielding skills and his talents with the bat. In 1939, the Red Sox signed him and sent him to Rocky Mount, North Carolina, to play in the Piedmont League, where he batted .325. From there it was on to Louisville, where he was voted most valuable player in the American Association. Pesky was ready for the big time.

Joining the Red Sox in 1942 at the age of twenty-two, Pesky enjoyed a stunning rookie season, with 205 hits and a batting average of .331. He was an important part of Boston's starting lineup, hitting in front of Ted Williams, who batted .406 in 1941—the last major leaguer to pass the .400 mark. Pesky valued a few teammates who became lifelong friends—Williams, DiMaggio, and another Oregonian, hall-of-fame second baseman Bobby Doerr.

In *The Teammates: A Portrait of a Friendship*, David Halberstam captures Pesky's place among those luminaries: "There was no artifice to him, no arrogance; unlike so many older ballplayers, he never became hard and grizzled, but instead remained kind, caring, almost innocent." When Dom DiMaggio offered Pesky a job in his successful business after his playing years, Pesky replied: "Dom, I'm a baseball man, and it's all I'll ever be. It's all I know. I'll wear the uniform until I die, and then they'll probably have to cut it off me."

The Red Sox honored Pesky in later years on special occasions, and when he died in August 2012, newspapers across the nation, including the *New York Times*, paid affectionate tribute to Boston's Mr. Red Sox.

Written by William G. Robbins

Further Reading:

Halberstam, David. *The Teammates: A Portrait of a Friendship.* New York: Hyperion, 2003.

Johnny Pesky obituary. *New York Times*, August 8 and 15, 2012.

Johnny Pesky obituary. *Oregonian*, August 14, 2012.

Copyright © 2008-2014 Portland State University