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Philadelphia's Top Fifty Baseball Players

Rich Westcott

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Philadelphia's Top Fifty Baseball Players

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Top Fifty Baseball Players

RICH WESTCOTT

Foreword by Dallas Green

University of Nebraska Press • Lincoln and London

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Foreword

Wow!!! Anyone who is interested in the history of baseball in Philadelphia or who has a favorite player or two must read this book by Rich Westcott.

I'm proud that six of my 1980 World Champion players are on this list. I've also had close relationships with the 1950s gang of Richie Ashburn, Robin Roberts, Granny Hamner, and Del Ennis, and I played with Dick Allen and Tony Taylor.

Rich has done a great job of researching the A's players, the older Phils, the Negro League stars, and the native sons. Their history is interesting to any baseball buff. And Chase Utley, Ryan Howard, and Jimmy Rollins—the new kids on the block—easily deserve their places in the top fifty players, even as their legacies in Philadelphia continue.

True, the players selected will stir up memories, both good and bad, and possibly lead to a family argument or two. But the book supports the notion that Philadelphia has been blessed with great baseball players. Their stories as told by Rich enhance their hero status in Philadelphia.

I've been in professional baseball for fifty-six years, and I've enjoyed reading about and remembering these players and their histories. I feel confident that any baseball lover will, too.

Dallas Green

Acknowledgments

Making a list such as one that selects the top fifty baseball players in Philadelphia sports history is an extremely difficult task and one that is admittedly subjective. But it is not something that can be done alone. The input from others has been a valuable part of this effort.

Everyone who took part in reviewing my selections has a considerable amount of expertise when it comes to Philadelphia baseball history. Their contributions have been especially important because in all but a few cases they have verified the choices of the author.

To be sure, there have been debates about certain players. But in the end, we all pretty much agreed with the selections.

And so it is with a considerable amount of appreciation that I salute Frank Bilovsky, Skip Clayton, Jack Scheuer, Larry Shenk, and Bob Warrington, each of whom provided invaluable help in putting together this book. I also thank Rob Taylor for his help and interest in having the book published by the University of Nebraska Press.

I am honored that Dallas Green wrote the foreword. Dallas was the perfect person to perform that duty. He was born and raised in nearby Delaware and followed the Phillies and the Athletics. Later, he pitched with the Phillies, served as the team's Minor League director, and was manager of the club's first World Series winner in 1980. He was also general manager and president of the Chicago Cubs and manager of both the New York Mets and the New York Yankees before returning to the Phillies as senior advisor to the general manager, a post he has held since 1998. Thank you, Dallas.

Finally, I want to thank my dear wife, Lois, for her input, her constant encouragement, and her endlessly listening to and expertly evaluating my ideas and views regarding the substance of this book. As always, I would have been hard-pressed to proceed without her.

Introduction

One of the most compelling characteristics of baseball in Philadelphia has always been the abundance of quality players who have performed there. Even though baseball in the city has had its ups and downs in other areas of the game, it has had a healthy share of good players.

Baseball, of course, has enjoyed a long and sometimes glorious life in Philadelphia. A version of the game was known to have been played in the city in the 1830s. In the years that followed, scores of amateur teams played throughout Philadelphia. One of baseball's first professional players was signed by a local team in 1865. A team represented the city in the first professional league in 1871, and another team was a member of the National League when it began in 1876.

The Philadelphia Phillies made their National League debut in 1883. The Philadelphia Athletics became a charter member of the new American League in 1901. One year later Philadelphia fielded its first professional African American team, which was the beginning of a historic half century of Negro League baseball in the city.

By then baseball had become the primary sport in Philadelphia. And it would retain that status through much of the next century.

A major reason that baseball was such a popular sport in Philadelphia is the fact that exceptional players nearly always wore the uniforms of the home teams. These players not only drew attention to their teams, whether the teams were good or bad, but they were idolized by the fans, and their names were as familiar as those of mayors, businessmen, or other prominent local citizens.

The great players in Philadelphia were also among the great players of their respective leagues. Most of them ranked annually among the league leaders. Many of them eventually became members of the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Philadelphia's glowing baseball history has also been greatly enhanced by the many outstanding players who are natives of the area. Many of them did not play professionally with local teams, but all carried the name of Philadelphia with them throughout their baseball travels.

Altogether twenty-five of the fifty players recognized are members of the Baseball Hall of Fame. Twenty-eight players among the fifty made their greatest impact while wearing the uniform of the Phillies. The group also includes fourteen Athletics, three Negro League players, and five native sons.

To be eligible for inclusion in the book a player from a Philadelphia team must have played for that team for at least five years. A native son must have been born in the greater Philadelphia area.

Naturally, on a list such as this, some players who achieved high levels of success in Philadelphia did not make the cut. In these cases it was no easy task keeping them off the list of the top fifty. For this and other reasons, compiling such a list was an extremely difficult job.

All players who did make the list had a strong impact on baseball in Philadelphia. Some played for World Series teams; others did not. But all had one thing in common: they were true Philadelphia heroes. And it should be added, their selections were not based on popularity; they were based on performance.

The chapters are divided by eras. The order of players profiled in each chapter is based on the earliest date he arrived in the Major Leagues. The collective story of these great baseball players is one that has never been told before. It is a story that in a very significant way supports the rich tradition of Philadelphia's baseball history.



The Pioneers,
Pre-1900



Sam Thompson. Courtesy of National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown NY.

Sam Thompson

Baseball's First Home Run Slugger

In an era long before power hitters were as much a part of baseball as night games, ball girls, and six-inning starting pitchers, Sam Thompson was a breed all to himself. No one in the nineteenth century slugged the long ball with greater regularity than the Phillies' right fielder.

Thompson was one of the first great home run hitters in baseball, a strapping six-foot-two, 207-pounder who could sock four-baggers about as well as anybody else in the Deadball Era. In fact, when he retired from the Phillies after the 1898 season, only one big league player—Roger Connor—had hit more home runs.

Big Sam slugged 127 homers during a fifteen-year career that included ten seasons with the Phillies. In that time Thompson collected two home run titles, one in which he became the first left-handed batter to smack 20 homers in a single season.

Although he wasn't the first batter to reach that figure, Thompson was the first hitter to collect more than two hundred hits in one season. He also registered the second-highest slugging percentage (.504) and the third highest RBI total (1,296) in the nineteenth century. Sam was the only nineteenth-century batter to drive in more than 150 runs in one season. He did it twice; his 166 RBI in 1887 stood for thirty-four years as a Major League record until Babe Ruth broke it with 171 in 1921.

Elected to the Hall of Fame in 1974 by the veterans committee, Thompson recorded more than two hundred hits in three different seasons while leading the league in that category three times, in home runs, slugging percentage, and RBI each twice, and in batting average and triples once apiece. Overall, he hit .331 with 1,986 hits, 1,299 RBI, and 1,263 runs scored. Thompson was said to have averaged .923 RBI per game, a record no one else can claim.

While playing with the Phillies from 1889 through 1898, Thompson hit .333 in 1,031 games. Batting from a crouch, he exceeded .290 seven times as a regular, once hitting .407. Once he drove in sixty-one runs in a single month, a Phils record that still stands. The good-natured outfielder would go on to knock in one hundred or more runs in seven of eight seasons between 1889 and 1896.

Thompson ranks fourth in triples and batting average, fifth in RBI, and sixth in runs on the Phillies' list of career leaders. He was such a successful batsman that Phils manager Harry Wright once called Sam "the hardest hitter who ever lived."

The balls that cracked off Sam's bats were often so vicious that infielders were reluctant to get in front of them. Thompson, though, was more than a good hitter. He could run, field, and throw. Although a big man, he was a fast runner and stole more than twenty bases in a season seven times, including a high of thirty-one.

In the outfield he was a sure-handed fielder with a strong arm that produced more than twenty assists eight times, including a high of thirty-two in 1891. It was often said that Thompson originated the one-hop throw to a base. One season he participated in eighteen double plays. He also once played fifty straight games without making an error, a practically unheard-of feat in the nineteenth century. "He took the fans' breath away," said one report.

Sam's route to the big leagues was not exactly direct. Born in 1860 in Danville, Indiana, one of six brothers and eleven siblings altogether, he

had the unusual distinction of having a great grandfather who served in the Revolutionary War and a father who was a Union soldier in the Civil War. The Thompson boys were standout players in local amateur leagues, but when he was old enough to get a job, Sam became a roofer.

One day a team from Indianapolis came to town to play Danville. In the midst of a roofing job that paid him \$2.50 a day, Thompson refused to play unless his wages could be matched. They were, and that day Sam swatted two balls into a distant cornfield. He was offered a contract before the day was over.

In 1884 the twenty-four-year-old Thompson joined Evansville of the Northwestern League. The team played only five games before disbanding. After switching to Indianapolis of the Western League in 1885, Thompson again was shortchanged when that team also disbanded, causing the end of the league.

Fortunately, some of the better players from Indianapolis were picked up by the National League's Detroit Wolverines. Thompson was one of them. That season he made his big league debut and in his first at-bat split his pants while running out a double.

Sam hit .303 in one-half season with Detroit in 1885. He followed that with a .310 mark, then cut loose with one of the best seasons of his career, topping the league in batting with a .372 average, 166 RBI, 203 hits, and a .565 slugging percentage, once hitting two bases-loaded triples in one game. That fall he hit .362 and led the Wolverines to a "World Series" victory in fifteen games with the American Association's St. Louis Browns, after which he was named Most Valuable Player. Waylaid by injuries, he slumped to .282 in 1888, after which the Wolverines disbanded.

Thompson was picked up by the Phillies, and in his first season used the close right-field fence at Philadelphia Base Ball Park to blast a league-leading 20 homers while hitting .296 and driving in 111 runs. Twenty homers was such an uncommon occurrence that no left-handed batter had previously hit that many in one season.

In 1890 Thompson jumped to the newly formed Brotherhood League but was persuaded by the Phillies to come back before the season started. At the time he was earning an annual salary of \$1,850. Although his home run total tumbled that year to four, he led the league with 172 hits and 41 doubles while posting a .313 average with 102 RBI. The next season he went .294-7-90, but it was a special season nonetheless.

The 1891 campaign was the first one in which the Phillies fielded their

future Hall of Fame outfield. With Thompson joined by Ed Delahanty in left and Billy Hamilton in center, the club had an outfield that unlike any other in baseball history would all be enshrined at Cooperstown.

In addition to that distinction, in 1894 the trio would earn another spot in baseball history when each player batted above .400. Thompson and Delahanty each hit .407 and Hamilton batted .404. Incredibly, although the Phillies had four players in the top five in the National League in batting average (reserve outfielder Tuck Turner hit .416), none won the title as Hugh Duffy of Boston hit .438.

All the while Thompson was smacking the ball with unbridled success. He hit .305 in 1892 with 9 homers, 104 RBI, and 109 runs. Then in 1893 when the pitching mound was moved back to sixty feet six inches from home plate, he racked up the league's second highest batting average (.370) with 11 home runs and league-leading totals in hits (222), doubles (37), and at-bats (600).

Thompson had his most glittering season in 1894, despite being limited to ninety-nine games because of an injury. That year, while blasting 13 homers, he led the league with 147 RBI and a slugging percentage of .696, despite an injured finger. He also became the second Phillies player (Lave Cross did it four months earlier) to hit for the cycle in a game in which he tied an all-time club record with six hits while sparking the Phillies to a club-record 29-4 victory over the Louisville Colonels. He had five or more hits in six different games, and in one game lashed eight hits in a doubleheader.

Sam had another banner season in 1895, when he regained the league lead in home runs with eighteen while also topping the circuit in RBI (165) and slugging percentage (.654) and batting .392. That year Thompson, chosen by fans as the most popular player on the team, became just the third player in National League history to hit 100 home runs in a career. Over two games he also hit six consecutive doubles.

Despite such slugging home runs were still regarded with disdain by some who followed baseball. "Thompson belongs to that ratty class of slugging batsmen who think of nothing else when they go to the bat but gaining the applause of the groundlings by the novice's hit to the outfield for a homer, one of the least difficult hits known to batting in baseball as it needs only muscle and not brains to do it," said an account in *The Spalding Guide*.

Such nonsense notwithstanding, Thompson would go .298-12-100 in

1896. Throughout his career Thompson had been hampered by injuries, particularly those to his back, and that campaign would be his last productive year in the Majors. Sam played only seventeen games over the next two years and retired at the end of the 1898 season.

Thompson returned to his residence in Detroit, where he continued to play baseball with a semipro team. In 1906, at the age of forty-six, he was called back to the Majors by the Detroit Tigers when Sam Crawford got hurt. Thompson played in just eight games before retiring for good.

In the ensuing years Thompson worked various jobs, including selling real estate, serving as a U.S. Marshal, and working as a bailiff in a federal court. Occasionally he appeared with the former big league player turned world-famous evangelist Billy Sunday.

Throughout his life Thompson was always a model citizen. Highly respected by players and fans, he never argued a call, was never thrown out of a game, never had a fistfight, and never participated in the rough-and-tumble style of the era. He was a man of deep religious convictions, and fittingly on the day of his funeral in 1922, all major activities in Detroit were suspended.



Ed Delahanty. Courtesy of the author.

Ed Delahanty

Hitter with Few Equals

One look at his records and the case can easily be made that Ed Delahanty was the best hitter in Phillies history.

Start with his batting average. In sixteen big league seasons, including thirteen with the Phillies, Delahanty hit .346, which ranks as the fifth highest career mark of all time. Only Ty Cobb, Rogers Hornsby, Joe Jackson, and Lefty O'Doul had higher averages.

Big Ed hit .400 or above three times, won two batting titles and two home runs crowns, and led the league in RBI three times and in slugging percentage and doubles each five times. He had 2,596 hits, and in 1,835 games, scored 1,599 runs and drove in 1,464. And in the Deadball Era, when home runs were seldom noted in the box score, the muscular, six-foot-one, 170-pound right-handed slugger drilled 101 round-trippers.

Delahanty was the second big leaguer to hit four home runs in one game.

Once, he collected ten straight hits. He had six hits in one game twice. And to show he was no slowpoke, Ed reached double figures in stolen bases fifteen times, including a high of fifty-eight, and hit a career total of 183 triples, leading the league in that category once.

With the Phillies Delahanty hit .347 in 1,555 games. Three times he slammed more than two hundred hits in a season. He drove in more than 100 runs seven times, and nine times scored more than 100 runs, including 149 in two consecutive years. He is the Phillies' all-time career leader in doubles and triples and ranks second in RBI, singles, stolen bases, and batting average, and ranks third in hits, extra base hits, and total bases.

“When you pitch to Delahanty, you just want to shut your eyes, say a prayer, and chuck the ball,” pitcher Fred “Crazy” Schmit once said. “The Lord only knows what’ll happen after that.”

Delahanty, who once hit a ball so hard that it broke the third baseman’s ankle, was regarded as the greatest hitter of the 1890s. In addition to his brilliance with a bat, he was also an outstanding left fielder, who made diving catches and possessed a rifle arm that few base runners were bold enough to test. He amassed 243 assists during his career.

Clearly, Delahanty, elected to the Hall of Fame in 1945, ranks as one of the best Phillies hitters of all time, if not the best. Only Mike Schmidt comes close.

Few came close to Big Ed in off-field categories either. Delahanty was said to have a two-sided personality. He was a fun-loving, beer-drinking likable fellow who didn’t care much for training and discipline. On the other hand, he could be an immature, moody, surly guy who threw huge temper tantrums and who enjoyed the nightlife at the saloons in the Twelfth and Market Streets area, where he hung out with other sports personalities and assorted prostitutes.

Writing in the *New York Times* in 1903, Robert Smith said that people “had to admit he was a handsome fellow, although there was an air about him that indicated he was a roughneck at heart and no man to tamper with. He had that wide-eyed, half-smiling, ready-for-anything look that is characteristic of a certain type of Irishman. He had a towering impatience, too, and a taste for liquor and excitement.”

Born in 1867 in Cleveland, Ohio, Ed was the oldest of five brothers, all of whom played in the big leagues. Although brothers Frank, Jim, Tom, and Joe all played for three seasons or more—Jim played for thirteen seasons and hit .283—Ed was the best of the bunch.

Drawn to baseball at an early age, he signed his first pro contract for a salary of \$50 per month in 1887 with Mansfield of the Ohio State League. A catcher then, he batted .351. The following year he was hitting .412 after twenty-one games at Wheeling of the Tri-State League when the Phillies bought his contract for \$1,900.

Paid \$300 per month, Ed was installed initially at second base as a replacement for pitcher/second baseman Charlie Ferguson, who had died that spring of typhoid fever. Delahanty was a huge disappointment, hitting just .228 and committing forty-four errors in sixty-seven games. But he did steal thirty-eight bases. "I thought I'd get more hitting out of the big fellow," said manager Harry Wright. "He meets the ball well, but he can't keep it away from the fielders. But he really can run. Some day, he may be a champion base-runner."

Delahanty improved to .293 in 1889, but a broken collarbone limited him to just fifty-six games. The following year Ed jumped to the new Brotherhood (or Players') League, a circuit that big league players had formed during a dispute with National League owners. He hit .293 while playing mostly shortstop with the Cleveland Infants.

The Players' League folded after one season, and in 1891 Delahanty returned to the Phillies and was moved to left field. He hit only .243 but drove in eighty-six runs and scored ninety-two. Unhappy with his performance, Ed decided to do something about it and spent the winter working out every day. In 1892 he arrived at camp in the best shape of his life.

Ed's diligence paid off, and he had his first big season, hitting .306 with 91 RBI and league-leading totals in doubles and slugging percentage. He followed that with a .368 average and the league lead in slugging percentage and with career highs in home runs (19) and RBI (146).

By then Delahanty had become part of a history-making phenomenon. With Ed in left field, Billy Hamilton in center, and Sam Thompson in right, the Phillies had not only three of the league's best hitters but a threesome that would later all be inducted into the Hall of Fame. No team ever had three future Hall of Famers in the same outfield.

The three parlayed their greatness in 1894 into another landmark event when they all hit over .400, as did reserve outfielder Tuck Turner. (Future Phillies manager Hugh Duffy won the batting title with an all-time record average of .438.) That season Delahanty went 6 for 6 in one game, a feat he had also accomplished in 1890.

Delahanty hit .404 in 1895 and .397 in 1896. That year he became the

second big leaguer to hit 4 home runs in one game. All were inside-the-park blows in a 9–8 loss to the Chicago White Stockings. When Ed—who also had a single and six RBI—hit his fourth homer, Chicago pitcher Adonis Terry was among those who shook his hand when he crossed the plate. After the game some one thousand fans followed Delahanty to his awaiting carriage. Later, the team presented him with four cases of chewing gum—one case for each homer.

The sturdy slugger continued his spectacular batting in the ensuing seasons, hitting .377 and .344. In 1899 Delahanty had the best year of his career when he led the league with a .410 batting average. His 238 hits, 55 doubles, 137 RBI, and .582 slugging percentage also topped the circuit. During the season he had ten straight hits, and once he hit four doubles in one game, making him the only player in baseball history to hit four home runs in one game and four doubles in another.

Despite Delahanty's and his teammates' brilliance, the Phillies never finished higher than third place. And after hitting .323 in 1900, Ed was ready for a change. The American League had formed in 1901, and Connie Mack tried to lure Ed and some of his teammates to the Athletics. But Mack's offer was matched by the Phillies, and Delahanty, who had previously made a league maximum of \$2,600, stayed put.

After hitting .354 in 1901, however, he became one of many National Leaguers to jump to the new American League when the Washington Nationals gave him a contract for \$4,000. Now, a two-time jumper, Delahanty led the American League with a .376 batting average in 1902, becoming the only batter in baseball history to lead both leagues in hitting. Around this time New York Giants manager John McGraw offered Ed a reported \$6,000 to return to the National League. Supposedly Delahanty signed a three-year contract, but the deal was voided by an agreement the two leagues had made in which they would honor each other's contracts.

At first Delahanty refused to report back to Washington. Finally, he ended his holdout and joined the team out of shape and in deep financial trouble. He was drinking and gambling heavily by then, his wife was seriously ill, his behavior was erratic, he had talked of committing suicide, and his life was in shambles. Although he was hitting .333, the club suspended him after he failed to show up for a game in Cleveland.

Even today the reasons are unclear, but on July 2, 1903, Delahanty boarded a train in Detroit that was headed east. Some thought he was

going to New York to accept McGraw's offer. Others theorized that he was headed back to Washington.

Whatever the reason, Delahanty was drunk, disoriented, and unruly. He got drunker and more out of control as the journey progressed, and after accosting several other passengers and brandishing a razor, the conductor put him off the train as it was about to cross the International Bridge at Fort Erie, Ontario.

In the darkness Delahanty staggered onto the bridge and was confronted by a night watchman. A struggle ensued, and Delahanty ultimately plunged off the bridge into the Niagara River. Whether he jumped, fell, or was pushed has never been definitively established. But seven days later, his mangled and mostly naked body, one leg torn off by a propeller of a passing boat, was found twenty miles downstream where it had washed over Niagara Falls.

Delahanty's untimely death at age thirty-five brought to an end the life of one of the greatest hitters ever to hold a bat in his hands. The tragedy was a major story at the time, and even to this day is still researched and reviewed by students of baseball.