

Bill Reynolds: 50 years ago, 'Impossible Dream' forever changed baseball in New England

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By Bill Reynolds

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Even now, an incredible 50 years later, it's the summer that changed baseball in New England forever.

The big crowds.

The demand for tickets.

The Red Sox as obsession.

In many ways, that all started in that long-ago summer.

It's easy to forget that, as the seasons come and the seasons go, easy to think it's always been this way, the Red Sox as one big season that goes round and round forever, one big story as timeless as summer. Easy to forget that before that amazing summer of 1967, rooting for the Red Sox was like rooting for a broken heart.

That was the reality — too many endless summers where the baseball glamour always seemed to be somewhere else.

1967 changed that.

It was also the summer that changed Carl Yastrzemski's life, the summer he became an iconic New England figure, known by everyone, not just Red Sox fans.

But it was much more than just baseball, too.

Before that summer, when one of the big songs had lyrics like "if you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair," there was no real counter-culture, not one the average person knew about anyway. After that summer the culture would never be the same.

Nor would baseball in Boston.

Fenway as a love fest?

The idolization of Yaz?

An entire generation topsy-turvy in love with a baseball team?

That all started in that summer of 1967, back when there were student protests every Wednesday at noon on the Brown campus, and the mood was volatile, all but humming with change. The country's involvement in Vietnam was in its sixth year, with no end in sight. Muhammad Ali, the heavyweight champ, was at odds with the Selective Service, the country's draft board. Casualties already had passed the 100,000 mark, and every night the war came into America's living rooms. And everywhere you looked resistance to the war was growing.

Then there was the growing counter-culture.

The Red Sox were a certain antidote to that, at least in New England, as Fenway was a place for all ages.

Or as someone once said about that magical summer, "Fenway became a place where people forgot about the human race, and worried about the pennant race."

Indeed.

It's easy to forget that long ago summer, of course. It's been 50 years, after all, and that's a lot of hits, runs and errors. And in all the important ways, baseball is not even the most popular sport in the country anymore, replaced by our obsession with the National Football League. Nothing ever stays the same, not even sports.

That's one of the ironies, of course.

Baseball was the great American game for the longest time, a game of immigrants, one that helped bring people together. Until it gradually got taken over by the NFL. Until it began to get criticized for its too-long games, and its too-slow pace.

But not back there in 1967.

Not back there in baseball's golden era, back when arguably there was nothing bigger in sports than the World Series.

It's largely been forgotten now, but the Red Sox began that '67 season with a 100-1 shot to win the American League pennant. In short, they were considered to have no shot.

We all know what happened: it's deeply ingrained in both New England sports history, and in baseball history, too. After a next-to-last place finish in the American League in 1966, Boston won 92 games, the AL pennant and took the St. Louis Cardinals to the seventh game of the World Series, before ultimately falling.

Even now, 50 years later, there are few things in sports around here that have had the same kind of emotion that the Sox winning the pennant had back there in 1967. But isn't that what makes sports great, teams that come out of nowhere?

So it was with the '67 Red Sox.

You can make the argument they were the best story in the long history of Boston sports. They weren't the Celtics, who were the undisputed best team in their glory days back there in the late '50s and '60s. They weren't like the Patriots in this wondrous Bill Belichick era, when it might seem like bigger news when they don't make the Super Bowl than when they do.

No, they were a team that came out of nowhere.

Still one of the best stories in the long rich history of Boston sports.

Even now, 50 years later.