

The Record That Will Never Be Broken

Recently, my good friend won a state wrestling championship. This sparked my interest in learning about notable athletes from our area. During my research, I learned about basketball star Sean Miller, Wampum's Dick Allen, and baseball infielder George Zeber, who won a World Championship with the New York Yankees in 1977. Of all the athletes I read about, one stood above the rest: Hack Wilson.

Lewis Robert "Hack" Wilson, was born in Ellwood City on April 26, 1900.¹ His mother died when he was a child, and his father left him in the care of a local boarding house. It was the owner's son who introduced Wilson to the game of baseball. At age 16, Wilson and his father moved to eastern Pennsylvania. There, he dropped out of school and worked in a print shop, carrying lead up to twelve hours a day for minimal pay. Standing five foot-six inches tall, weighing upwards of 210 pounds, with remarkably small hands and feet, it is thought that Wilson was a victim of fetal alcohol syndrome. Wilson and his father moved to West Virginia in 1921 where he played semi-professional baseball.²

Wilson performed well enough in the minor leagues to earn a contract with the New York Giants. His first few seasons were relatively unimpressive, but after being traded to the Chicago Cubs, he played remarkably well. In 1930, Wilson broke the National League record with 56 home runs, a mark that stood until 1991 when Mark McGwire hit 70. Incidentally, McGwire's feat has been tainted by his use of performance enhancing drugs (PED). Wilson also hit for an outstanding batting average of .356 in 585 at-bats. To put that into perspective, the highest MLB average in 2019 was .329 in 498 at-bats.³ While .027

¹ "Wilson, Hack | Baseball Hall of Fame." <https://baseballhall.org/hall-of-famers/wilson-hack>. Accessed 27 Mar. 2020.

² "Hack Wilson | Society for American Baseball ... - SABR.org." <https://sabr.org/bioproj/person/e2c5ebeb>. Accessed 31 Mar. 2020.

³ "Tim Anderson Stats, Fantasy & News | MLB.com." <https://www.mlb.com/player/tim-anderson-641313>. Accessed 31 Mar. 2020.

might seem insignificant, it represents 44 more times that Wilson came to bat *and* got a hit. Yet, these statistics are not even his most notable of the 1930 season. In that single season, Hack Wilson had 191 Runs Batted In (RBI) in 154 games, the most in MLB history.⁴

Significant sports records are broken every year, but Hack Wilson's record of 191 RBI is one that will never be broken. Not only has the record stood for 90 years, it has only been approached a handful of times by legendary players like Lou Gehrig, Jimmie Foxx, and Joe DiMaggio. In the past 80 years, only two players have finished within 30 RBI of the record, and both were convicted of PED usage.⁵ As time goes on, baseball becomes more of a "pitcher's game" with specialty pitchers in each team's reserves. In 1930, teams averaged 5.55 runs and 10.37 hits per game. Last year, teams averaged only 4.83 runs and 8.65 hits per game, even after the league introduced a new ball designed to give hitters an advantage. Still, no player came remotely close to Hack's record, with the league leader having only 126 RBI.

Wilson's career, and life, came to a disappointing end due to alcoholism. He passed away in 1948 at the age of 48. In his final interview, days before passing, he stated: "There are kids, in and out of baseball, who think because they have talent, they have the world by the tail. It isn't so. In life you need things like good advice and common sense. Kids, don't be too big to take advice. Be considerate of others. That's the only way to live."⁶ Ellwood City should celebrate the accomplishments of its native son, Hack Wilson, and also share his story as a cautionary tale to all.

⁴ "Runs Batted In Single Season Leaders on Baseball Almanac." <https://www.baseball-almanac.com/hitting/hirbi2.shtml>. Accessed 31 Mar. 2020.

⁵ "Sammy Sosa's positive steroids test means we've ... - ESPN.com." 16 Jun. 2009, https://www.espn.com/mlb/columns/story?columnist=bryant_howard&id=4264973. Accessed 31 Mar. 2020.

⁶ "Hack Wilson | Society for American Baseball ... - SABR.org." <https://sabr.org/bioproj/person/e2c5ebeb>. Accessed 27 Mar. 2020.