

Home runs

"Red Seat" is as much a part of your \$25 Fenway Park tour as the Green Monster and Pesky's Pole. Retired Worcester Telegram sports writer Bill Ballou put it best in his 2003 history of the Red Sox: "While it has become legend, it is not a myth and never has been one. It may not be in exactly the right place in the bleachers, but it can never lose its place in Red Sox history."

And yet all ballparks, from the beer leagues to the big leagues, have a red seat. Oh, it might not be red, and might not be an actual seat at all, or even a plank of wood, but it is that special place where somebody's mighty blast sailed over the fence and directly into local lore.

Sabathia hits a eucalyptus tree (2003)

C.C. Sabathia broke into the big leagues in 2001 at age 20 with the Cleveland Indians. He closed out his brilliant career in 2019 as a grizzled 39-year-old New York Yankee. Along the way, Sabathia, a 6-foot-6 left-hander, won 251 games and registered 3,093 strikeouts. He will make his debut on a Hall of Fame ballot next winter.

Sabathia did not get many plate appearances over the years, but he did hit three major league home runs, all of them no-doubters.

At home in Vallejo, California, about 23 miles north of Oakland, people who watched Sabathia grow up knew he could hit the long ball. Seeing was believing when Sabathia appeared in his high school's alumni game at Bob Patterson Park in February 2003.

It was the alumni versus the current players, and the old-timers fielded a pretty good team. In addition to Sabathia, it included Damon Hollins and Joe Thurston, who also played in the majors. Dave Bernstein, Sabathia's catcher at Vallejo High School, played three seasons of minor league ball. Infielder Chris Smith played four seasons in the Angels' farm system.

Imagine what it must have been like to watch Sabathia hit a home run that, even now, more than two decades later, is hard to put into words by those who were there.

"When I think of that home run, what comes to mind is 'Oooooooooo,'" said Josh Ramos, 38, the current baseball coach and athletic director at Vallejo High. Ramos was a senior and playing shortstop when Sabathia, armed with an aluminum bat, jumped on a pitch from Aaron Boggs and hit it high and deep to right field. (Boggs died in 2020 at age 35.)

"I had seen C.C. taking batting practice before the game," Ramos said. "And then I looked over to my third baseman, Pat Brooks, and I said, 'He's going to hit a bomb right here.' He kind of nodded up and down, and when he hit the ball it was 'Oooooooooo.' That's what I heard. Oh, my gosh, it was hit so far."

How far? As far as that old eucalyptus tree way out there beyond the shop building, that's how far.

The eucalyptus tree is Justin Saroyan's show-and-tell in this discussion. He's Vallejo High class of 1996 — an outfielder on the varsity team during Sabathia's sophomore year — and he was in the third-base dugout when the ball headed for that tree.

"It was mind-blowing how quickly it got out," said Saroyan, 46, who was later a recreation supervisor at the Vallejo Recreation District for 25 years. "I think it hit about 10 or 20 feet up the tree. The sound was as if you took a baseball bat and hit the tree."

Saroyan was inspired to measure the distance of Sabathia's home run. His finding: 511 feet to the base of the tree.

A grainy video of the home run shows Sabathia's swing, after which the camera moves to the right, showing the shop building and, beyond that, the tree. The flight of the ball cannot be seen. As Sabathia crosses home and is mobbed by teammates, Hollins can be heard saying, "C, you ain't right, man."

The eucalyptus tree, old and tired, was taken down several years ago.

"At one point, it was just a trunk, and then it started to fall down," Saroyan said. "I like to say it was because C.C. hit it so hard with that baseball."

Ruth Bids Adien to Sanford, Maine (1919) Offseason barnstorming was easy money for ballplayers in the early 20th century, and nobody cashed in the way Babe Ruth did. Ever the showman, the Babe suited up for exhibition games throughout the Northeast, and even out West, his mere presence guaranteed to shut down entire towns so folks could see baseball's greatest slugger swing for the fences.

On Oct. 1, 1919, Ruth, of the Red Sox, took a busload of teammates to Goodall Park in Sanford, Maine, to play a stitched-together collection of local all-stars. According to the Portland Evening Express, "all factories and stores closed, and the attendance was the record one for the season."

Ruth was fresh off a season in which he had socked a major-league record 29 home runs for the Red Sox, and now he would be playing at Goodall Park. That the Cincinnati Reds and Chicago White Sox would be playing Game 1 of the World Series that very day did not mean a thing; it would be another two years before live broadcasts of the World Series cracked over the airwaves.

Ruth was all business when he stepped to the plate in the eighth inning and hit a three-run homer over the right-field fence and right into Sanford lore. All it is known about the pitcher is what is in the box score: "Barclay."

True, it was only 288 feet down the line in those days. But, according to The Sanford Tribune, "Ruth caught the old pill and sailed



Boston Red Sox great Ted Williams bats at Yankee Stadium in New York on May 23, 1941.

it over the right-field fence, 30 or more feet inside the foul line and with a clearance of a full 40 feet." It did not go unnoticed by the Tribune that the Babe was "thereafter taking his time in jogging around the bases in the wake of the two men who preceded him across the plate."

More than a century later, the home run remains a point of civic pride. Locals proudly point to the right field fence (not the same fence, of course) as they tell you it was one of the last home runs Ruth hit in a Red Sox uniform before his contract was sold to the New York Yankees two months later, an event that changed history for both clubs.

It also helps that Goodall is such a spectacularly beautiful, old-timers park that it looks like a place where Ruth would have hit a home run. The original wood grandstand was destroyed by an arsonist in 1997, but a spirited fundraising effort brought in \$1 million for a rebuild.

Although there are no living witnesses to the Sultan of Sanford's mighty swat, to step into Goodall Park is to get an instant history lesson, according to Carl Johnson, a Stonington, Connecticut, native who came to Sanford in 1956 to play baseball at the old Nassau College.

"It was the first thing I learned about Goodall Park," said Johnson, 86. "Almost any time you were there, you'd hear people talking about Babe Ruth and the home run."

McDowell's firehouse shot in the Cape Cod League (1984)

Former major league outfielder Oddie McDowell, now in his 10th season as baseball coach at McArthur High School in Hollywood, Florida, was asked about the home run he hit for the U.S. national team in 1984 in an exhibition game against the Cape Cod League all-stars in Chatham, Massachusetts.

"Oh, the firehouse," he said over the phone, laughing softly.

"I don't know if the firehouse is still there, but that's where the ball went. I'll never forget that one."

The original firehouse, across from Chatham's Veterans Field, no longer exists. But a newer, larger firehouse sits on roughly the same footprint. It's still the place where McDowell launched a two-run, ninth-inning home run off University of Delaware pitcher Mark Johnston that carried the United States to a 5-4 victory against Cape Cod.

Judy Scamille, who later served as president of the Cape Cod Baseball League and was there that night, said: "When he hit it, we all just stopped and looked and couldn't believe how far it went. Everyone was saying, 'Look at it! What a shot!'"

Just how far of a shot was it? To assist with this article, a dream team of Cape Cod League stalwarts took part in a mission to measure the home run. They began at home plate, continued beyond the 357 sign in right-center, and stopped at the spot where it is believed the ball one-hopped the old firehouse. Their finding: 502 feet.

Jackson's swat at Boardwalk and Baseball (1989)

In 1988, the Kansas City Royals moved their spring training base from Fort Myers, Florida, to a new facility called Boardwalk and Baseball, in Davenport, Florida. It was supposed to be an entertainment complex with amusement park and a baseball mecca, but it never really caught on. As Joe

Ponanski of The Kansas City Star wrote in 2002, "You wonder whether anybody — anybody — considered that maybe it wasn't the best idea to build a little baseball amusement park three exits west of Disney World."

The Royals have been doing their spring training in Surprise, Arizona, since 2003. Boardwalk and Baseball has since been torn down.

But Baseball City Stadium will always be important to me, because it's the site of my version of the red-seat home run. It happened

on March 5, 1989, in the second inning of a Grapefruit League game between the Red Sox and Royals. That is when Bo Jackson jumped on a pitch from Red Sox starter Oil Can Boyd and sent it over the left field fence and then over the 71-foot scoreboard beyond that fence. Estimated distance, according to the Royals: 515 feet.

I was covering the Red Sox for The Hartford Courant, and something happened that day that I would have remembered even if Jackson had not hit a 515-foot home run: When I stepped into the elevator that morning I found myself standing next to actress Barbara Bilesley, who played June Cleaver in "Leave It to Beaver" and was the jive lady in "Airplane."

Meeting Bilesley is not exactly what the baseball poets have in mind when they say that each time you go to a game, you might see something you have never seen before, but too bad. I had never seen her at a baseball game, and I've never forgotten it.

Here's what I remember most about Jackson's home run: It seemed, at first, like a pop fly. My eyes, having never seen a ball hit that far, were sending a message to my brain that this was no biggie, just a sky-scraping pop-up. But the ball kept climbing, and then it just kept going, and going, until it sailed over the scoreboard.

Jackson, speaking with reporters after the game, said: "I hit one longer than that high school." According to my game story in the Courant, Jackson said Boyd threw him a fastball. But the Royals' first-base coach, Bob Schaefer, said: "Somebody asked me what he hit, and I said, 'Probably a Top-Flite.'"

Jackson, whose football and baseball pursuits would be cruelly derailed by a devastating hip injury, had his finest baseball season in 1989, hitting 32 homers and driving in 105 runs. Later that year, in his only All-Star appearance, he led off the bottom of the first inning with a home run off the San Francisco Giants' Rick Reuschel.

But nothing Jackson hit that year approached what he did at Baseball City Stadium. Don't take my word for it. Johnny Pesky, still working for the Red Sox as a coach during spring training in 1989 after just turning 80, also saw Jackson's home run.

I caught him out after the game. "That thing might have gone 500 feet," Pesky said.

On the day Williams dented Boucher's hat, Pesky was watching from the first-base dugout. Batting second in the lineup for the Red Sox, he had grounded out to second just before Williams stepped in to face Hutchinson.

In just two snapshots of baseball history — from Fenway Park in 1946 and from Baseball City Stadium in 1989 — Pesky witnessed two home runs that may have traveled a combined 1,017 feet, each of them worthy of a red seat.

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