[Editorial]

The Spirit of “The Bird”

It was a sad day on Monday, April 13, 2009, for lifelong Detroit Tigers fans, when the news came that Mark “The Bird” Fidrych had died at age 54 in an accident on his farm in Massachusetts. Just the mention of his name brings back fond memories for me of the summer of 1976. That summer, as the nation celebrated its bicentennial, the number of murders skyrocketed in Detroit. The bitterness of the race riots less than a decade ago, Watergate, and our withdrawal from the Vietnam War were still fresh in our minds, and Detroit—and the country as a whole—desperately needed a diversion. We got one in the form of Mark Fidrych—a zany, wacky fireball pitcher. Out of nowhere, he appeared in Detroit to take the American League—and all of baseball—by storm. Born in Worchester, Massachusetts, he managed to progress through the minor leagues with little or no fanfare.

I still remember his first start for a mediocre Detroit Tigers team, in May 1976. He talked to the baseball on the mound all afternoon as he baffled the Cleveland batters on his way to a 2–1 victory and a complete-game performance. Over the next 2 months, he turned the traditional baseball world inside out as he became the most popular player on the planet. Despite being a rookie, he started the All-Star game in Philadelphia that year, on his way to a 19–9 record. The Bird was sensational! I’m still not sure if his fastball was really that overpowering or if his goofy antics on the mound just kept batters distracted. Whatever it was, he was phenomenal: His ERA was 2.34 for the year, while completing 24 of the 28 games in which he got a decision—truly unheard-of statistics by today’s pitching measures. The Bird became a sports hero overnight as he provided a great escape from reality for a troubled city and country. The most popular song on Detroit radio and television that year was “Surfer Bird,” an offbeat classic that was repeatedly played on the days that Mark pitched.

He ended that amazing rookie year by finishing second in the Cy Young Award balloting, losing out to the great Jim Palmer.

He did make it to the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, alongside Big Bird from Sesame Street, for whom he was nicknamed. He also made the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, something that no other athlete had accomplished, and it solidified his rock star status.

Sadly for Detroit fans, his star performance didn’t last. He tore a meniscus in his knee during the spring of 1977, which kept him on the disabled list until May. When he returned, his mechanics were off, which led to shoulder problems for the rest of the year. We’d like to think that those problems could have been effectively solved with today’s standard of medical care.

During the next 3 seasons in Detroit, his fortunes turned south and he never regained his form. The Bird retired from baseball but did attempt a comeback in the early 1980s. He never regained the form that powered him to the pinnacle of baseball in 1976.

After his passing, the tributes from his former teammates were impressive, emphasizing his love for the game. They spoke of how The Bird cherished signing autographs and talking with fans; how he refused to hire an agent to negotiate his contract, saying it wasn’t about money for him; and how gracefully and lighthearted he left baseball when it was over for him, happy to be able to purchase a farm and gas station, 2 of his dreams. In the end, Mark “The Bird” Fidrych was one of the few athletes that reached the peak of his sport but didn’t worry how long he stayed there. It was more than enough for him just to have made it.

The Bird provided a healthy dose of medicine for a troubled populace in the summer of 1976. I’m not sure we’ll see the likes of another Bird, but we should keep trying to find one. I’m sure happy I was around to see The Bird perform. Oh, what a show it was!

—Edward M. Wojtys, MD
Editor-in-Chief