



The Last 30-Game Winner

Denny McLain grew up in Chicago and signed out of high school with the local White Sox team in 1962. The 18-year-old exasperated the White Sox with his behavior in the minors, defying team rules, going AWOL several times, and being fined hundreds of dollars. In those days a player with a full year of service became eligible for a "first-year waiver claim" if not added to the 40-man roster. McLain had pitched fairly well in his first season as a pro, but the Sox felt he wasn't worth the personal headaches and let him go on waivers to the Detroit Tigers.

Denny made his ML debut at age 19 for Detroit, and by age 21 (1965), he was their best pitcher, leading the team in wins, winning percentage, and ERA. The next year (1966) McLain was an All-Star and became the youngest 20-game winner since Bob Feller.



Denny McLain

In 1967 it looked like he would win 20 again when he already had 17 wins at the end of August. But McLain did not win another game. He was involved in a shady side-business that began to interfere with his big league life. He had invested in a bookmaking operation that had been unable to pay off a customer who had won big on a horse race and was owed \$46,000. Harassed and threatened, Denny began to pitch poorly in September. It is alleged that the irate customer arranged for a member of the Detroit Mafioso to intimidate McLain. In their meeting the mobster stomped his heel into Denny's left foot, dislocating two toes. The damaged Denny had to sit out for 12 days before pitching and losing the final game of the season.

McLain was winless down the stretch while the Tigers lost the pennant by a single game to the Boston Red Sox. It would be years before the true story of McLain's foot injury came out in an article in *Sports Illustrated* in February of 1970. While the team was disappointed to lose the pennant, there were still high hopes for the young pitcher whose 59 career wins were the second most by a pitcher before his 24th birthday since the end of World War II.

Denny's chances of returning to the 20-win circle did not look good when he began the 1968 season with two no-decisions, but then the wins started piling up. Baseball had not seen a 30-game winner since Dizzy Dean, way back in 1934. Fans began to talk about the possibility of 30 wins when Denny won his 15th game just before the half-way mark. On July 27th, Denny threw a 3-hit shutout for his 20th win and there were still over 60 games to go!

McLain then won five straight to run his win total to 25, putting him on pace for 33 wins. But in his next start Denny got pounded for a loss in his worst performance of the year. He got beat again in his next outing, though he did pitch well — 2 runs and 5 hits in 7 innings. Those back-to-back losses nearly doubled his loss total for the year. That second loss also ended McLain's streak of 16 consecutive victories on the *road* in one season, which set a new major league record.



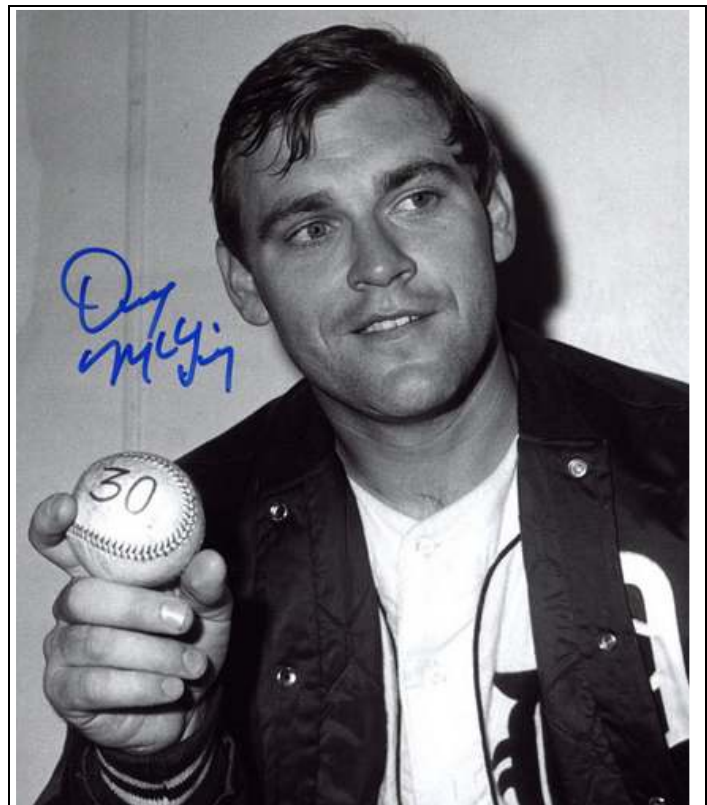
Denny was 20-3 after 101 Games

It was especially satisfying that McLain had done it in the 151st game, so no one could complain about his setting the record in the longer modern schedule, the way they had with Roger Maris and his home run record in 1961.

The Tigers clinched the pennant three days later, and with #30 under his belt, McLain was given an extra day of rest before trying for #31. He threw his sixth straight complete game victory in besting the Yankees 6 to 2 and tied Lefty Grove (1931) and Jim Bagby (1920) for the most wins in a season in the Live Ball Era.

Denny made a solid bid to set a new record in his next start, but lost to Baltimore 2 to 1 on an unearned run. The Tigers had to make up a couple of games that ended up in a tie, and McLain got one more start in their 163rd game. Denny pitched brilliantly against the Senators for 7 innings, retiring 21 of the 23 batters he faced. But manager Mayo Smith did not want to stretch out McLain's arm when he would be pitching the World Series opener in four days. McLain left the game leading 1-0, and it seemed to be in capable hands with veteran reliever Don McMahon, who came into the game with a season ERA of 1.80. But in the 9th inning McMahon blew McLain's lead and lost the game 2 to 1.

Denny won #26 in his final start of August and then he tackled September as if he felt he had to make up for his ignominious September of 1967. He started off with three straight complete game victories and in the last two he had the only back-to-back games of his career fanning a dozen batters. He went up against the Oakland A's for his 30th win, and while he pitched well, whiffing ten and allowing only 6 hits, it was a big day for Reggie Jackson, who homered twice. Denny was losing 4 to 3 when the Tigers came to bat in the bottom of the 9th. Al Kaline pinch-hit for McLain to start the inning and drew a walk. A single and a ground-ball RBI tied up the score, and then Willie Horton hit a walk-off single to make McLain the game's first 30-game winner in 34 years.



The way pitchers are used today, we'll never see another pitcher/picture like this one.

While Denny McLain did not get to set a new record for wins in the Live Ball Era, he can say he is the only pitcher in the over 100 years of the era who won 30 games in a season as a *starting* pitcher.

Most Wins as a STARTER 1920-2023	
31-	Denny McLain 1968
28-	Robin Roberts 1952
27-	Dazzy Vance 1924
27-	Lefty Grove 1931
27-	Bucky Walters 1939
27-	Sandy Koufax 1966
27-	Steve Carlton 1972
27-	Bob Welch 1990
27-	Dizzy Trout 1944

Research Notes

🚫 Two other pitchers are known to have won 16 consecutive games on the road, Cal McLish and Greg Maddux — who holds the major league record of 18 straight road wins — but McLish and Maddux did it spread over two seasons. Denny McLain’s feat of doing it in one season still stands alone.

🚫 McLain won the Cy Young Award with a sweep of the first-place votes. That was the first time this had happened in the history of the award. It would not be done again until Roger Clemens’ 1986 season. McLain also won the MVP award in 1968, but whether you use WAR or Win Shares, Carl Yastrzemski deserved to be a back-to-back MVP in 1967 and 1968.

🚫 Like Lefty Grove, McLain was the league’s best pitcher in the season *after* he won 31 games. Although Denny shared the 1969 Cy Young Award with Mike Cuellar, Mike got some votes simply because he was the best pitcher on the team that won the pennant. Denny’s performance was actually much better than Cuellar’s.

🚫 McLain’s career crashed hard after 1969 due to shoulder trouble that most likely was the result of his arm being so abused in his formative years. Denny won his last big league game at age 28

🚫 McLain was suspended for half a season for his 1967 transgressions. His punishment would probably have been more severe if Commissioner Bowie Kuhn had had more evidence to support all that *Sports Illustrated* claimed in their article. The SI story was quite detailed and named the Mafia mobster sent after McLain as Tony Giacalone. That name meant nothing to the public at the time of the SI article, but there really was an Anthony “Tony Jack” Giacalone, who was a known member of the Detroit mob, and became better known in the coming years as a prime suspect in the disappearance and likely murder of Jimmy Hoffa.



“Tony Jack” Giacalone

🚫 McLain denied ever meeting Giacalone, and Bowie Kuhn, relying on the limited evidence he was able to confirm, went easy on the pitcher. He concluded that McLain had not actually been a true partner in the bookmaking operation but had been a victim of a confidence scheme and made a patsy for the unpaid debt. McLain’s suspension was for involving himself with an illegal bookmaker but not in a manner that compromised the game. (The SI article did not suggest McLain threw any games, but did report that Giacalone made bets that the Tigers would not win the pennant, and also that the Angels would beat McLain in the final game of the season.) There will always be a cloud over what Denny did in 1967. When asked about Denny’s suspension, his teammate Dick McAuliffe said, “If Denny’s innocent, it should be nothing. If he’s guilty, then this is not enough.”

Research Notes Continued

☹ It was a shame to see McLain waste his natural gifts. Besides being a great athlete, he was a bright fellow who learned to fly his own plane and was also a talented musician. But after washing out of baseball he continued to be involved in shady get-rich-quick schemes that more often than not were illegal. He was accused of loan sharking, bookmaking, and smuggling a fugitive in his airplane for a 6-figure fee. In 1984 he was convicted of racketeering, extortion, and cocaine trafficking. Sentenced to 23 years, he actually served only 30 months because he caught a break and his sentence was overturned on a procedural error. McLain then blew his second chance with a new round of white-collar crimes and was convicted and sentenced to 8 years in prison in 1995, and served six. He was convicted of embezzling millions from a pension fund, which also involved money laundering, conspiracy, and mail fraud. His "crime doesn't pay" story includes his going bankrupt at least twice, the destruction of his marriage, and two stretches in prison.

☹ All the same, McLain's 1968 performance was a true marvel that deserves to be celebrated. He was justly prized as a competitor on the diamond and it is certainly hard to imagine the 1968 Tigers winning the World Championship without both his excellence and his ironman performance in starting over a quarter of their games and also leading the league with 28 complete games. Manager Mayo Smith once said, "You can say what you want about Denny McLain, but don't say anything bad about him to me. He got me this," and then Mayo pointed to the World Championship ring on his finger.