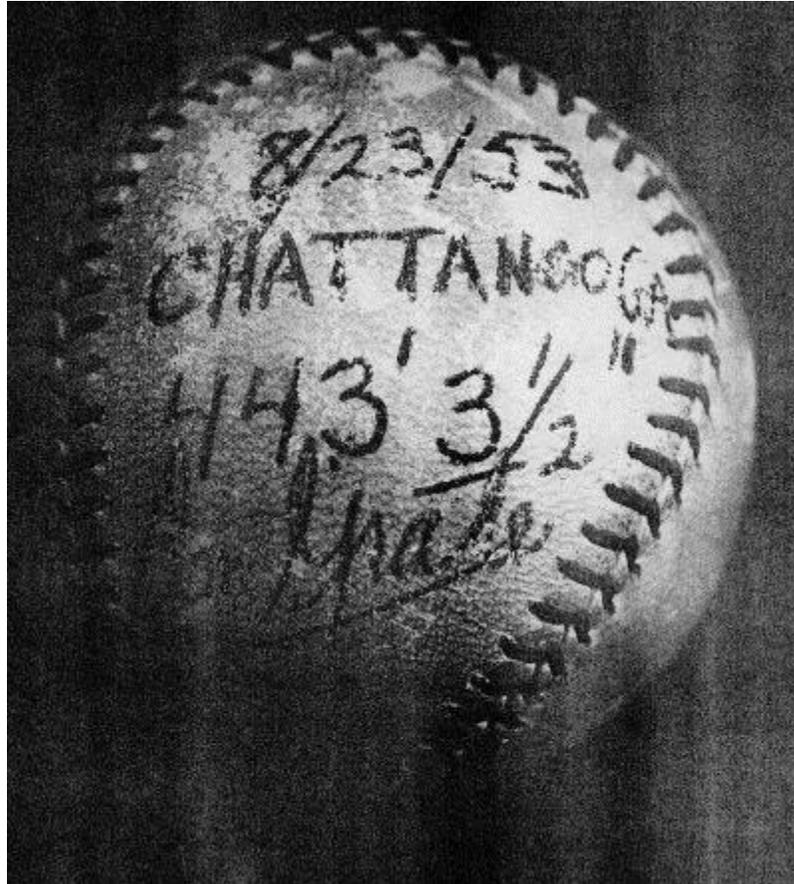


The Longest Throw

by Steven P. Gietschier



Don Grate proved in Greenfield, Ohio, that he could kick a football. He proved in Columbus that he could shoot a basketball. And he proved in Chattanooga, Tennessee, that he could throw a baseball - farther than anyone else. And then he proved it again and again. In the 1950s, when ballplayers were more scornful of the threat of injury than they are today and when minor-league games were often enlivened by such field events as cow-milking contests and egg-tossing relays, Grate,

a major-league pitcher turned minor-league outfielder; three times set the record for throwing a baseball for distance. He didn't own the record for long, it is true, but, to hear Grate tell it, the mark should still be his. His best throw, he says, went farther than could be measured, certainly farther than the throw since recognized as the world's longest.

Don Grate may not have set out to establish the record he did, but even at Greenfield's Edward Lee McClain High School, he was an outstanding athlete. He earned four varsity letters in both basketball and football and another three in baseball. He won All-Ohio honors in basketball and could have attended the University of Kentucky to play for Adolph Rupp. But Grate decided to attend Ohio State. He wanted an OSU degree to get a teaching and coaching job in Ohio, and he wanted to play for the Buckeyes freshman basketball coach, former All-American Jimmy Hull, himself a Greenfield native.

Grate dropped football once he reached Columbus in the autumn of 1942, but he joined Hull's basketball team and co-captained it to an undefeated season. In the spring, he played center field and shortstop for the varsity baseball team and pitched as well. "I pitched a no-hitter for four or five innings my first time out against Michigan State," he told a reporter in 1989, "then the coach took me out; wouldn't let me finish." Later that season he completed a no-hitter against Purdue.

As a sophomore and junior, Grate captained the Buckeye basketball team and was named All-Big Ten and All-American. He was selected for the United States team for the 1944 Olympics, games that were never held because of the war. Slowly, he began to consider a future in baseball. He won the Potter's Runmaker Cup, awarded to Ohio State's best offensive baseball player, as a freshman and as a sophomore and tied in the voting as a junior. After the 1945 collegiate season, he gave up his remaining eligibility to sign a contract with the Philadelphia Phillies.



At Edward Lee McClain High School in Greenfield, Grate lettered in three sports. At Ohio State, in addition to baseball, he captained the basketball team and earned All-American honors.
Don Grate Collection

Phillies general manager Herb Pennock had his scouts scouring college campuses for talent - the scout who signed Grate also landed Robin Roberts out of Michigan State - and Pennock clocked Grate's fastball at ninety-eight miles per hour and decided to make him a pitcher, sending him to Utica in the Eastern League. Grate went 7-5 with a 2.23 earned run average and got a short trial with the Phillies at the tail end of the season. Returning to Utica in 1946, he won fourteen games and again got called up to the big club. Entering a late-season game without properly warming up, he delivered a sidearm pitch and heard something pop.

Over the following seasons, Grate battled a sore arm and continued to pitch for several teams, but his strikeout totals dwindled. He was used mostly in relief and as a pinch hitter. In 1951, playing for the Chattanooga Lookouts in the Southern Association, he came off the bench for an injured outfielder and started a game. "Then I

got lucky," he told the *Sporting News* a year later. "The first two times up I hit in the hole and legged them out for inside-the-park home runs, and they never took me out of the outfield."

In 1952 the Lookouts, on the road at New Orleans, were invited to participate in a typical minor-league attendance booster, an array of pregame field events at the ballpark. Grate at first rejected manager Cal Ermer's suggestion that he enter the long-distance throwing contest, but then he changed his mind. "So, I threw...from centerfield in the old Pelican ballpark, and the darn ball went over the press box; they couldn't measure it."

Back in Chattanooga, Lookouts owner Joe Engel, one of the minor leagues greatest showmen, offered Grate "a famous prize" if he could break what was then the world record for the longest thrown ball by a professional ballplayer, 426 feet, 9 1/2 inches, set in 1910 by Sheldon Lejeune of Evansville in the Central League. On September 7, 1952, the last day of the season, Grate threw a dozen balls from centerfield toward the plate. The best throw landed high in the stands and was measured at 434 feet, 1 inch. National Association President George Trautman, head of the governing body for all the minor leagues and a former Buckeye basketball coach himself, certified this throw on October 4. Grate earned his fabulous prize: \$200. Not all that bad, considering his monthly salary was \$500.

A year later, under similar circumstances - a field day preceding a doubleheader between Chattanooga and Little Rock - Grate tried again. He made five throws, the last of which soared 443 feet, 3 1/2 inches, for a new record. That ball now resides at the National Baseball Hall of Fame. But with this fame came a certain responsibility, specifically, the task of getting the Lookouts out of jail. One day Ermer took his team to the Atlanta federal prison for an exhibition game. Grate pitched and won, but then

prison authorities told the Lookouts they were not free to go. Inmates who had heard of Grate had been wagering whether he could throw a ball from the playing field and break a window high on the prison wall. The Lookouts, it was made clear, could not leave until Grate gave it a fling. "So I threw one." Grate recalled, "and it hit one of the dividing bars that separates the window panes. The guard said, 'You're going to have

to throw another one.' I threw that on top of the prison, and they let us all go home."



Switched from pitcher to outfielder, Grate's years with the Chattanooga Lookouts were his best; he consistently hit around .300 and had an incredible throwing arm. The latter earned him a place in the record book. *Sporting News*

Grate did worry about injuring himself. "I had already hurt my arm once," he said, "and didn't want to do it again. I limited my throwing for records to the end of the season when I was sure my arm was in shape." So, three years after his second record throw, while playing for Minneapolis in the American Association, Grate tried again on Fan Appreciation Night, August 27. One of his five attempts landed inside the golf bag of trick-shot artist Chuck Lewis, also on the evening's program, and was measured at 445 feet, 1 inch.

Grate retired from baseball after the 1957 season, but, unlike too many players, he had prepared well for life beyond baseball. After signing with the Phillies, he had returned to Ohio State every winter until he earned his education degree in 1949. He played a little pro basketball and coached high school basketball in Kilbourne and in Westerville, Ohio, and was quite prepared by 1950 to become a full-time teacher and

coach. But Fred Taylor, later to be a Buckeye legend and then a member of the Lookouts and Grate's friend from recreational and industrial basketball, persuaded the Chattanooga management to give Grate a shot. Still, by 1957 Grate sensed that he would not make it back to the major leagues. Minneapolis was a farm team of the New York Giants, and they had Willie Mays in centerfield. When the Giants promoted the likes of Felipe Alou and Orlando Cepeda to the parent club in 1958 and offered Grate a contract with Phoenix, he knew it was time to move on.

Grate had kept coaching and teaching, first in Ohio and then in Chattanooga, and in 1963 he moved to Miami, Florida. He earned a master's degree and taught high school until 1988. Active in community affairs, he and his wife still live in Miami and raise greyhounds. And last September 21, at the Ohio State-Pitt football game, he was inducted into the Ohio State University Athletic Hall of Fame.

One more thing. Grate's record for the longest baseball throw was officially broken on August 1, 1957, by Glen Gorbous, a Canadian then playing for Omaha of the American Association. His fling was measured at 445 feet, 10 inches - nine inches beyond Grate's mark. But Grate insists that his best Minneapolis effort went farther. "That thing hit eight or ten feet up on the backstop," he said. "They only measured it to the bottom of the backstop and that was 445 feet plus. You should probably add another 10 or 15 feet to it"