



The Hidden Star of the 1955 Yankees

Yankees manager Casey Stengel was a big advocate of platooning, and with the resources of the Yankees he had a wealth of players to mix and match as he sought to find the right combination at a position. In 1953 the Yankees had a troublesome platoon at first base of two lefty hitters, Joe Collins and Don Bollweg, and Collins in particular had a lot of trouble hitting lefties. The Yankees won the pennant while getting only 70 RBIs out of the first base position.

That situation would improve in 1954, as one of the best prospects for the Yankees was a right-handed hitter named Bill "Moose" Skowron. But the rich got even richer that winter as the Yankees traded Bollweg and several others in a deal that added lefty swinging first baseman Eddie Robinson. Eddie had been an everyday first baseman for the last six seasons, and had made four All-Star teams, but he would be the #3 first baseman for the Yankees. The Yankees were actually one of the few teams to ever carry four first basemen all year long. The rules of the day required that they carry their "bonus baby," first baseman Frank Leja, on their roster in 1954-55 even though he was fresh out of high school and not ready for the majors.

The Yankees' performance at first base improved considerably in 1954, but again the RBI production was disappointing. Once more their first basemen were in the bottom half of the league with 79 RBIs.

Yankees at 1B	BA	SLG	OBP	OPS
1953	.264	.439	.347	.786
1954	.286	.465	.364	.829

But Casey finally hit the jackpot with his "Frankenstein first baseman" in 1955. Moose Skowron had the most playing time of the trio (41%) and hit .339 and slugged .556 in his at-bats at first base.

But the big surprise was Eddie Robinson, who hit only .223 but drew a lot of walks and showed amazing power by belting 16 homers in his 139 ABs at first base. Despite hitting 116 points less than Skowron, Robinson actually had the higher slugging percentage (.576).



Frank Leja, Moose Skowron, Eddie Robinson, and Joe Collins

In production at first base, Stengel's platoon led the league in HR (37), slugging percentage (.518), and OPS (.878), and with a massive gain of 46 RBIs, led the position in that category as well. In fact, against all positions, the Yankee platoon at 1st base was second in both homers and RBIs!

1955 AL by Position (* player led league)			
HR	PA by main player	RBI	PA by main player
38 (NYY CF)	634 by Mickey Mantle*	135 (DET 3B)	550 by Ray Boone*
37 (NYY 1B)	270 by Moose Skowron	125 (NYY 1B)	270 by Moose Skowron
36 (CLE CF)	557 by Larry Doby	121 (BOS LF)	411 by Ted Williams

The last time the Yankees had gotten that many homers or that many RBIs out of the first base position was in 1937, when a fella named Lou Gehrig manned the position. It would be another 30 years before the Yankees got as many RBIs out of the first base position, and it took Don Mattingly's 1985 MVP performance to top it. The 37 homers remained the most from first base for the Yankees for 42 years, until the first basemen for the 1997 Yankees combined for 46 homers (43 by Tino Martinez). That 1997 group had the advantages of an expanded schedule, a remodeled and smaller ballpark, and an explosion in the league HR rate. (The home run per at-bat rate for position players increased 29% from 1955 to 1997.)

Simply put, that "SkowRobCo" guy was a heck of a player and the hidden star of that pennant-winning team. And it didn't stop there. Although the Yankees lost the 1955 World Series in seven games to the Brooklyn Dodgers, you could not blame their platoon at first base. In the Series the Yankee first basemen hit .500, slugged 1.000, and had a .643 on-base percentage. If they were counted as a single player, they led both teams in homers (3), walks (8), and runs scored (8), and they also led the Yankees in RBIs (6).



Research Notes

🚫 The next year (1956), on June 16th, the first base trio was officially broken up with the trade of 35-year-old Eddie Robinson to Kansas City. The talented 25-year-old Moose Skowron became a regular at the position with 500 plate appearances (75% of the total at first base). The Yankee first base position totaled 30 homers and 114 RBIs that season, the second most in each category among team first basemen.

🚫 The fourth first baseman, the teen-aged bonus baby Frank Leja, rarely played in 1955-56. He usually pinch-ran or pinch-hit, never started a game, and he had just 3 at-bats as a first baseman. When the rules allowed the Yankees to finally send him to the minors in 1957, the lefty slugger showed he could hit the ball a long way, but was inconsistent in his hitting. He averaged 24 homers per 150 games in the minors but hit only .248. He briefly made it back to the big leagues in 1962 and went 0 for 16. He never appeared in the majors again. In his 26 ML plate appearances he hit .043, the lowest mark ever for a first baseman with as many career plate appearances.