

# HISTORIAN'S CHOICE Carlton Fisk

*Oil on cotton duck by Susan Miller-Havens (born 1944), 1993, gift of Peter C. Aldrich, in memory of Duane C. Aldrich of Atlanta, Georgia*

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A prominent baseball expert has ranked Hall-of-Fame catcher Carlton Fisk (born 1947) as the sixth-greatest major-league catcher of all time, behind only Yogi Berra, Johnny Bench, Roy Campanella, Mickey Cochrane, and Mike Piazza.

Fisk's offensive statistics and his longevity are remarkable. He holds the record for the number of games played as a catcher (2,226), and is second only to Piazza in home runs hit as a catcher (351). A major leaguer for twenty-four seasons—first with the Boston Red Sox, then with the Chicago White Sox—Fisk made the All-Star team eleven times. In 1972, he was the first player to be unanimously chosen Rookie of the Year, a year in which he won a Gold Glove and was tied for the lead in triples (9), the last time a catcher led the league in that category. Fisk hit seventy-two home runs after the age of forty, a major-league record, and in 1991, at the age of forty-three, he was the oldest player to get a hit in the All-Star game. Fisk hit twenty or more home runs in eight seasons, with a career high of thirty-seven in 1985.

Although statistics are important in baseball, Fisk is much more than the sum of his numbers. The catcher's position in baseball is physically the most demanding, but Fisk's longevity and his ability to come back from serious injury mark him as a tough guy even among catchers. He played the game hard, demanded a lot from his teammates, and even expected the opposition to play the game the right way. In one memorable episode, Yankee player Deion Sanders, a talented football player who thought he could play baseball, hit a pop fly and, with Fisk yelling at him to run it out, refused to run to first base. When Sanders next came to bat, Fisk angrily told him, loud enough to be heard on the Yankee bench, "If you don't play it [the game] right, I'm going to kick your ass right here in Yankee

Stadium." The shocked Sanders later apologized.

There is one game, however, which many fans consider the defining moment in Fisk's career: game six of the 1975 World Series between the Cincinnati Reds and the Boston Red Sox. The Sox were a very strong team that year, and the "Red Sox Nation" was hopeful that the "curse"—allegedly dooming Boston in World Series competition after it sold Babe Ruth to the Yankees in 1919—would be broken. But Cincinnati had its "Big Red Machine," boasting one of the most powerful batting lineups in baseball history. In the eighth inning of game six, the Reds, with a 3–2 game advantage in the series, had a 6–3 lead, but the Sox tied the game up with a three-run pinch-hit homer in the bottom of the inning. In the ninth, the Sox had the bases loaded and no outs. They failed to score, however, and the game went into extra innings. Only a spectacular catch by Boston outfielder Dwight Evans prevented Cincinnati from scoring in the top of the eleventh. At 12:33 a.m., Fisk led off in the bottom of the twelfth and blasted a ball high and deep down the left-field line. It was unquestionably a home



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run, if it stayed fair. All those in Fenway Park and watching on TV will never forget Fisk at home plate, jumping wildly up and down, frantically waving the ball to the right side of the foul pole, using all his body language and willpower to direct the ball fair. Mind may have triumphed over matter, because the ball hit the foul pole for a game-winning home run. The "curse" would hold, as the Reds went on to take game seven and the series, but Fisk expressed it best: "The Red Sox won that series, 3 games to 4."

Susan Miller-Havens, who works out of Cambridge, Massachusetts, specializes in sports figures, and painted this portrait and three others of Fisk from video sources. \*

For further reading: Bill James, *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract* (New York: Free Press, 2003).