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TOP STORY

Former Yankee Bob Cerv dies at 91

Leeanna Ellis Apr 7, 2017



Bob Cerv holds a photo of himself in his Kansas City Athletics uniform. Cerv played in the major leagues with Kansas City and the New York Yankees from 1951 to 1962.

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Catching up with Bob Cerv, a Yankee during the game's greatest era

He played 12 seasons in the major leagues, was friends with President Harry Truman and roomed with New York Yankees sluggers Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris as they battled for the 1961 home run title. But for Bob Cerv, his greatest accomplishment was his family.

Cerv, a former outfielder for the New York Yankees and Kansas City A's, died Thursday in Blair. He was 91.

Cerv, who grew up in Weston, moved to Blair to be close to family. He was living at the Carter Place senior living community at the time of his death. Funeral services were Monday at St. John Nepomucene Catholic Church. Burial was in St. John Cemetery, Weston.

Cerv's grandson, Jacob Lock, read a statement from Cerv's daughter, Dawn (Cerv) Ericson, on Friday morning.

"He held my hand for years and tonight I got to hold his as he left. He taught me things no one else did. He was a competitor, a champion and his love and pride for his family was his greatest accomplishment.

"He counted the days with his desk calendar for years. The last time he was able was April 2. Spring was his favorite time of year because baseball season started.

"Dance with mom, give her a hug for me and there will be a game tonight in heaven. Play ball."



Blair resident recalls baseball career, his year in the midsummer classic

Playing professional baseball was Cerv's lifelong dream.

As a boy, Cerv traveled with his father to New York City to see the Yankees play. They watched a doubleheader against the Philadelphia City Athletics.

"Lou Gehrig had three home runs," Cerv told the Pilot-Tribune in 2012. "Bob Johnson from the A's hit three home runs, but the Yankees won both games. So I came back home and I said, 'I'm going to be a Yankee some day.'"

Following high school, Cerv entered the U.S. Navy. He served as a radarman on the U.S.S. Claxton (DD-571) in the Pacific during World War II. The Claxton patrolled the Pacific, fighting in battles for the Solomon Islands.

On Nov. 1, 1944, the ship was attacked by a Japanese Kamikaze plane, which struck the water only a few feet from the starboard side alongside gun mount No. 5, where Cerv was assigned.

Cerv was reaching down for a missile when the plane hit.

"Everything was punch-boarded above me," Cerv said in an interview in January 2017. "Everyone around me was hit. I'm not sure why I wasn't."

Cerv was discharged from the service in 1946. He returned to Nebraska and attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he played both baseball and basketball, earning eight athletic letters. He was Nebraska baseball's first All-American.

Cerv also met his wife, Phyllis, while he was in school and the two married. The couple raised 10 children.

In 1948, he received his first offer to play professional baseball — \$40,000 from the Chicago White Sox. But Phyllis had other ideas.

"My wife said, 'No way. You're going to get your degree and then I'll follow you forever,'" Cerv said.

Cerv received a degree to teach industrial arts.

In 1950, Cerv signed with the Yankees for \$5,000. He was assigned to New York's AAA affiliate, the Kansas City Blues, for the first few years. In 1954, he made the big league club. He served as a pinch hitter and played in the 1955 World Series. He won the World Series with the Yankees in 1956. He also played in the Fall Classic in 1960.

In 1956, the Yankees traded Cerv to the Kansas City A's — a story Cerv enjoyed telling.

It was a hot day, late in the 1956 season. Cerv was taking a break from throwing batting practice when manager Casey Stengel told him the Yankees had just acquired Enos Slaughter from the Athletics.

The pair chatted before Cerv got up to finish batting practice.

“As I was leaving he said, 'By the way, one of you guys is going to Kansas City.' I'm the only one. That's how he let me know,” Cerv said.

Cerv had one of his best seasons with Kansas in 1958, despite playing two months with his jaw wired shut following a collision at home plate against the Detroit Tigers.

At the All-Star break, Cerv was batting .324 and was chosen to start the All-Star Game over Boston Red Sox slugger Ted Williams. Cerv finished the season hitting .305 with 38 home runs — a single-season record for home runs, which he still holds

That year, Cerv met Yankees star outfielder Roger Maris for the first time when the sluggers were roommates in Kansas City.

Cerv and Maris roomed together again in 1961 when they were both with the Yankees. The teammates were joined by New York's power-hitting outfielder Mickey Mantle.

“He was the fastest man I'd every seen,” Cerv said of Mantle.

Cerv had a front-row seat as Maris and Mantle battled to see who would break Babe Ruth's single-season home run record. Maris broke the record on Oct. 1, 1961.

Cerv played 12 seasons in the major leagues with the Yankees, Athletics, Los Angeles Angels and Houston Colt 45s. He retired following the 1962 season.

In September 2011, the Yankees honored Maris with a special ceremony to mark the 50th anniversary of his record-breaking home run.

Cerv, with help from his son, joined his former teammates Yogi Berra, Whitey Ford, Bill “Moose” Skowron and Bobby Richardson at Yankee Stadium at the request of Maris' family.

It was the first time Cerv had seen the stadium, which had only opened two years before.

“Beautiful,” he said. “I didn't think I'd ever get there.”