

## Lester Pearson and Ken MacKenzie Revisited

Memory is a funny thing.

Sigmund Freud thought that memory was the heart of the human psyche. If that's true, then it's a failing heart, one that quite often misses a few beats. I have a memory from inside the incubator. Everyone tells me this is impossible, but I have it. Did I invent it? Am I mistaking a dream or imagining a memory? The answer, of course, is that I will never know. Memory is a mystery.

When Lester B. Pearson sat down to amass his memories into a three-volume autobiography, he had a lot of memory material to choose from. Forty odd years after he did that, I went rummaging through his memories as part of the research I was doing into the connections between Canadian prime ministers and the game of baseball. I presented my findings at the annual Centre for Canadian Baseball Research conference in London, Ontario. I also published a version of that research as a newspaper feature and as two distinct papers which appeared in the spring edition of the Society for American Baseball Research Journal.

The presentation, the newspaper story and the submission to SABR were all anchored by a fantastic story about John F. Kennedy, Lester B. Pearson and a Canadian major leaguer named Ken MacKenzie. The story, repeated often by both Canadian baseball and political nerds, was about how Pearson, the Nobel Prize winner, impressed his American colleagues with his formidable baseball IQ. The tale is easily the most famous story regarding any Canadian prime minister and the game of baseball. It was referenced in at least two books about Pearson and a short documentary about our fourteenth prime minister. The well-known tale, first detailed in the third volume of Pearson's autobiography, goes like this:

Newly elected Canadian prime minister Lester B. Pearson travelled to Hyannis Port, Massachusetts in the spring of 1963 to meet with United States President John F. Kennedy. JFK and LBP were already well acquainted, and mutually admired each other. Pearson had been tipped off by American Ambassador Walton Butterworth that Kennedy and his special assistant Dave Powers were eager to quiz him on matters of baseball trivia. Pearson wrote in his memoirs that he sensed his American hosts were skeptical of his encyclopedic knowledge of the

game. "Powers was famous for his statistical infallibility on baseball. We discussed batting and earned run averages back and forth with Powers throwing a few curves at me. My answers showed that I knew something about the sport. Then [Powers] mentioned a game played in Detroit the year before in which, he claimed, the pitcher had thrown a no-hitter and nonetheless lost, an almost unheard of event. I was able to fill in some of the details: the pitcher had not allowed any hits but he was pulled in the seventh inning, and the relief pitcher had let in the winning run in the tenth. Powers was incredulous, so at my invitation he sent someone to check. I was proved right and my reputation was established once and for all with that group. The only reason I knew this particularly obscure fact," Pearson wrote, "was that the relief pitcher, Ken MacKenzie, was a Canadian who lived in my constituency. Indeed, I had helped to get him into professional baseball."

The story is wonderful. It portrays Pearson favorably, gives great insight into a private meeting between a PM and POTUS, and highlights the kind of event that a guy doing baseball research about prime ministers could only dream about uncovering. Unfortunately, it never happened. After 40 plus years of being accepted as fact, an anonymous SABR fact checker was the first to point out that Ken MacKenzie never played a game in Detroit. Well, surely the rest of the story must be true? Nope. A close study of [baseballreference.com](http://baseballreference.com) revealed that neither Ken MacKenzie nor anyone else in Major League Baseball experienced circumstances on the mound as described by Lester Pearson. Not in 1962, or '61, or any year that MacKenzie played in the big leagues. Was Pearson lying? Did his memory fail him? Did he mix up key details surrounding a real event? Was there anyone who could shed light on this very obscure piece of Canadiana?

I contacted the author of Ken MacKenzie's SABR biography, Ron Rembert. He put me in touch with Ken Mackenzie. We had a long talk about Lester Pearson, baseball and memory.

The former Met remembers some details of his baseball career very clearly. "I don't remember a lot of stuff, but I remember the big stuff as well as if it happened yesterday," he said. I read Ken MacKenzie the anecdote straight from Lester Pearson's autobiography. "That's a great story!" he reacted, "but I don't think it happened. I think I'd remember a no hitter ending like that." MacKenzie

had no idea that he'd been a point of discussion between Lester Pearson, John Kennedy and Dave Powers.

Did Lester Pearson "get [MacKenzie] into professional baseball?" MacKenzie was polite, but clear, "I don't want to refute anything that Mr. Pearson wrote, but I'll say to the best of my recollection, I don't believe Mr. Pearson had anything to do with that."

Mackenzie does remember Pearson watching him pitch as an amateur. "I saw Pearson in 1959. He happened to be in town when I was pitching in Gore Bay, [Ontario] I spoke to him at the ballpark, but that was the only time I had occasion to meet him."

As for his thoughts on the errors contained in Pearson's memoirs, MacKenzie is somewhat forgiving. "The brain is a wonderful tool, but it really is curious. I have a memory of my first appearance in San Francisco. Bases loaded, no out, I'm pitching to Willie Mays. He bounces one of my pitches, it could have been a triple play ball, but it goes off Eddie Matthews' glove at third base and ends up in deep short. Then, John Logan throws it wide of first... three runs scored. My next pitch was wild. Mays scores. Two pitches, four runs. I told that story for a long time," MacKenzie recalled. "I believed it. Until I looked it up. Willie Mays wasn't even in the game! It was Joey Amalfitano. I relied on memory, but you can't always rely on memory."

Removing memory from the equation, we do have corroborating newspaper sources which verify that Pearson did mention MacKenzie in the press scrum after his meeting with Kennedy and Powers. Bill Galt of the *Vancouver Sun* described the moment in 1963: "Pearson talked baseball and radiated confidence and good humour. Fielding questions after his meeting, Pearson joked with reporters and then someone asked him about the New York Mets, the hapless baseball team that startled America by winning a few games in the past week. 'Their star pitcher comes from my constituency,' Pearson said. 'His name is Ken MacKenzie and he's won three games in a row.'"

The third volume of Pearson's autobiography was written posthumously. Its introduction states that it was "completed after [Pearson's] death under the supervision of his son Geoffrey." My best guess is that the group assembling

Pearson's final memoir were using personal notes, available press clippings and their own memories of tales told by Lester B. It's possible that Pearson did impress the President and Powers with trivia concerning an odd no-hitter. Perhaps that memory was mixed up with the scrum mention of MacKenzie and mistakenly created the false impression that both had occurred at the same time.

I also surmise that Pearson's statement that he had "helped to get [MacKenzie] into professional baseball" may also be based in fact. Ken MacKenzie did recall later in our interview that John McHale, then the General Manager of the Milwaukee Braves, had been at the Gore Bay ballpark with Pearson that day in 1959. The Milwaukee Braves made MacKenzie a big leaguer the following summer. "I guess from [Pearson's] point of view, he may have thought he'd helped," MacKenzie said. Of course, it was all so long ago.

"When I finished playing ball, it was 50 years after Babe Ruth. Soon, it'll be 50 years since I played." 86-year-old Ken MacKenzie summed this whole situation up perfectly when he said, "It's interesting, the things you remember."

Stephen Dame  
July 2020