Roger Maris hits his 61st homerun (October 1, 1961)
Added to the National Registry:  2020
Essay by Bob Costas (guest post)*

Roger Maris’ record breaking 61st homer came in the 162nd and final game of the 1961 regular season. “61 in ’61.” It had a certain ring to it. But the story was not only that single record breaking moment.

All season long, Maris, and his more celebrated Yankee teammate Mickey Mantle, had been neck-and-neck in pursuit of Babe Ruth’s mark of 60 set in 1927. In September, Mantle tailed off and finished with 54. But Maris surged on.

It’s important to remember that Babe Ruth, while already a mythic figure, wasn’t solely remembered through distant black-and-white photos or grainy film clips. Many of those who covered and rooted for the Yankees had actually seen him play. They had specific personal recollections of The Sultan of Swat. Had Ruth been alive in 1961, he would only have been 66 years old. So, for many at that time, a story that now seems very long ago, was much more present. And personal. Many rooted for Maris. Others resented the idea that anyone might eclipse the Babe. And some felt if anyone was going to do it, it should be Mantle, a career-long Yankee and already a legend in his own right. The Yankees were Maris’ third team. And 1961 was just his second season in New York.

Against that backdrop, Maris stepped to the plate on that October day, facing the Red Sox Tracy Stallard. I have long felt that the sports moments which continue to resonate decades later are largely shaped by the way they were captured on radio and television. While Phil Rizzuto, a beloved former Yankee shortstop, was not a classic announcer in the fashion of Red Barber, Mel Allen, or Vin Scully, but his radio call on this day was both descriptive and infused with excitement. For baseball fans and historians, it still echoes down the corridors of time.

Bob Costas is the winner of over 25 Emmy Awards for his television and sports broadcasting. He was with NBC Sports from 1980 through 2019 and he was the host of television’s Olympic Games coverage from 1992 to 2016.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.