

Mammoth blast from the past

Before Sammy Sosa hit his mammoth home run Tuesday night, Dave Kingman's blast for the Mets on April 14, 1976, was considered one of the longest home runs ever hit out of Wrigley Field.

Richard Keiber has a fantasy. He wants to play shortstop for the Chicago Cubs. There are some days in which he imagines he is playing shortstop. He glides quickly to his right, deep into the hole, straightens up and makes an enormously powerful throw to first base. The crowd cheers. Keiber kicks at the dirt and returns to his position, concentrating on the next enemy hitter.

"My father almost played shortstop with the Cubs back in 1946," says Keiber, 25-year-old father of three who is employed as an assistant bar manager in Waukegan. "He tried out with them, but was assigned to the minors, and he didn't last long. The money wasn't very good and he had a family to support."

This Keiber will never play shortstop for the Cubs, either, except when he lets his creative mind take him inside the confines of Wrigley Field.

Instead, he sits on the curb outside Wrigley Field and catches home runs.

That's what Richard Keiber does. He catches home runs. He's been doing it for 16 years and estimates he's caught "about 410 of them" during the span.

"It's my hobby," he says. "I just love to catch home runs. Over the years, I think I've caught 30 of them on the fly, bare-handed . . . and I guess I'll keep doin' it until someday I die catching one."

On Wednesday, he caught what may have been the longest home run ever hit out of Wrigley Field.

Dave Kingman of the New York Mets hit it off pitcher Tom Dettore in the sixth inning. It was an awesome blow which exploded off Kingman's bat and soared high into the 16-mile-per-hour jetstream which was blowing toward left-center field.

Keiber, the man who has a duffel bag full of baseballs at his home .. the man who caught Ron Santo's 200th .. the man who dreams of someday playing shortstop for the Cubs, was stunned.

He estimated it traveled 600 feet.

"I was sitting on the curb, across Waveland Avenue [behind the left-field bleachers], listening to Vince and Lou on the radio and when I heard the crowd I knew it was coming my way," recounts Keiber.

"But when I finally saw it ... high above that 40-foot screen and as high as the top of the flagpole, I just couldn't believe it."

Keiber wasn't the only disbeliever. At least a half-dozen other home run chasers had congregated around the popular intersection of Waveland and Kenmore--and three youngsters with gloves, when they saw Kingman's home run coming, turned and started running north on Kenmore

The ball sailed over their heads, struck the porch of the third house⁷ from the Waveland Ave. corner on the fly, and caromed back.

That's when Keiber drew on his 16 years of experience.

"I caught it on the carom," he said, proudly, displaying the ball which showed only the slightest blemish. "Gawd, it was hit. Nobody ever hit a ball out of Wrigley Field like that."

Maybe Keiber is right. Vince Lloyd says he remembers Hank Sauer hitting one which departed the park just left of the scoreboard. Marv Grissom says he remembers throwing one to Dick Stuart which traveled a greater distance out of old Forbes Field in Pittsburgh. Keiber himself recalls one which Willie Stargell smashed over the center-field wall at Wrigley Field ["I missed it by 40 feet."]

But Kingman's home run was truly incredible, primarily because it soared so high before beginning its descent.

Keiber, incidentally, insists his estimate of 600 feet is accurate. He should know. He's measured the distance from the back of the left-field wall [it's about 400 feet from home plate"] and knows it's another 75 to 80 feet across Waveland Avenue.

"Kingman's ball landed at least another 100 feet past that," says Keiber. "When it went over my head I couldn't believe it. I've seen some big home runs hit out by Jim Hickman, Roberto Clemente, Willie Mays, Stargell and even Hank Aaron, but nobody ever hit one like this. Not out of Wrigley Field."

Lou Ness, ex-Brooklyn Eagle sports writer who now serves as traveling secretary for the Mets, left the press box immediately after Kingman's blow and found Keiber with the ball [he also had another one which Kingman had hit out in batting practice].

He took Keiber into the Mets' locker room after the 6-5 loss to the Cubs and introduced him to Kingman, the 6-6, 210-pounder from Mount Prospect, Ill. Kingman didn't appear too excited about the introduction. After all, the Mets had lost and he was 1-for-4, striking out twice. Then Keiber told him it traveled 600 feet.

"Really? How do you know that?" asked Kingman.

"I just know," said Keiber. "It's the longest one I've ever seen and I wanted to give you the ball."