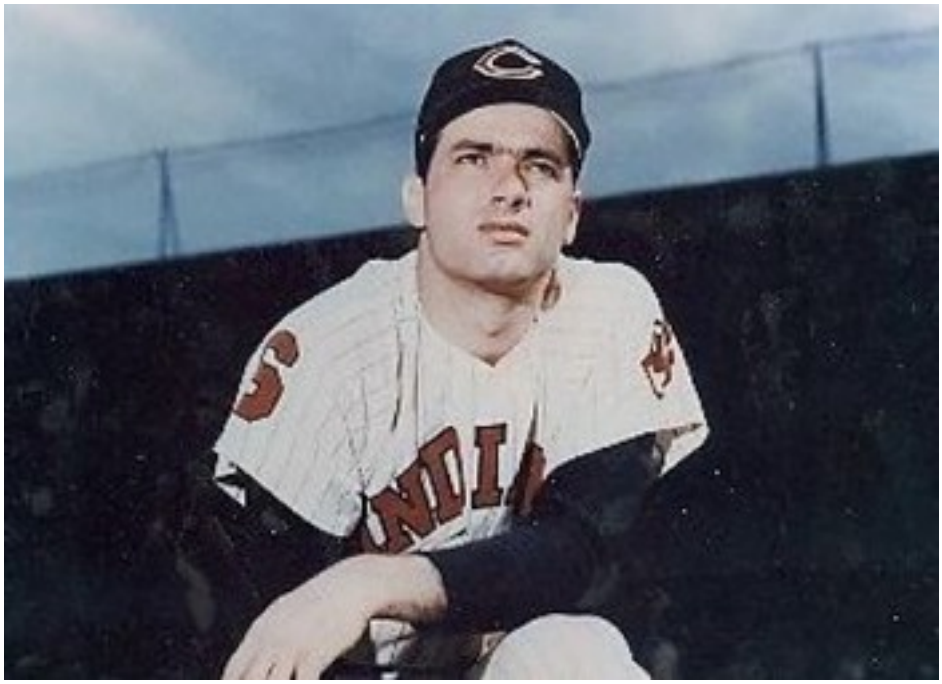


This is one installment in a team effort by The Cleveland Fan, highlighting the top local sports figures by jersey number. Please weigh in with your thoughts, in the Forum. As David Letterman would say, "For entertainment purposes only; please, no wagering."

In 1950, the Indians signed an 18-year old outfielder from the Bronx to a free agent contract. He had dropped out of school as a 16-year old to pursue his professional baseball career, a decision that Rocco Domenico Colavito Jr. would never regret. Colavito grew up a Yankee fan, but his honetown team showed very little interest in the hitting prodigy, so the Indians were able to sign him before his high school class even graduated. Colavito debuted with the Indians for a brief nine-AB audition in 1955 before coming up for good in 1956. In the same summer that Mickey Mantle won the Triple Crown, Colavito tied for 2nd in AL Rookie of the Year voting after a season in which he hit .276/.372/.531 with 22 HR, 65 RBI and more walks (49) than strikeouts (46). With whom did Colavito tie in the vote that year? None other than Baltimore's Tito Francona, of course. How Colavito and his .903 OPS (and 2.3 WAR) lost out to Chicago's Luis Aparacio's .653 OPS (and 1.3 WAR) is beyond me, but that's neither here nor there. Rookie of the Year or not, a Cleveland legend was born.

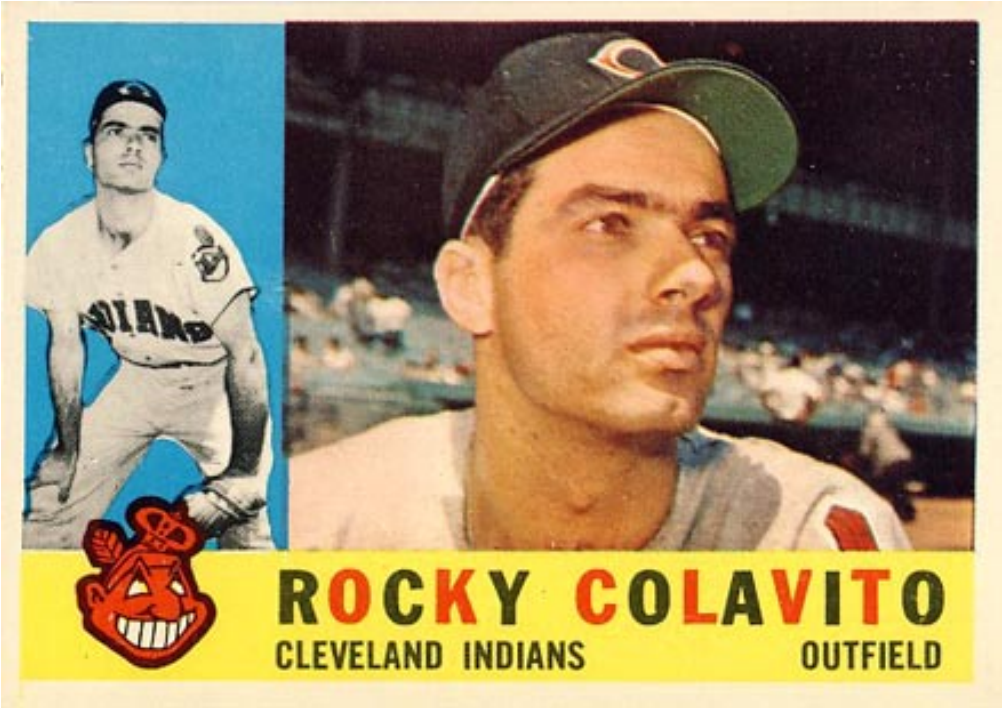
Colavito wore #38 in both his rookie and sophomore campaigns, and put together two solid seasons on the North Shore. He slugged 46 HR, drove in 149 runs and posted a .845 OPS back before anyone knew what OPS was. Not bad numbers, but not exactly MVP-worthy either. Prior to the 1958 season, Colavito transitioned to jersey #6. Wearing the new digit, Colavito dominated American League pitching to the tune of a .303/.405/.620 line as a 24-year old in 1958, adding 41 HR, 26 2B and 113 RBI. The 41 HR were just one behind AL leader Mickey

Mantle, and helped earn Colavito a 3rd place finish in AL MVP voting that year. When he followed that up by leading the league with 42 HR in 1959, it looked like the Indians would have one of the game's superstars on their payroll for years to come. Colavito was young, good looking, power hitting and had a cannon for an arm. He was a fan favorite, and by all accounts loved playing in Cleveland. His fantastic 1959 season included a 4-HR game in Baltimore against the Orioles, helping push him to the national spotlight and turning him into a household name among baseball fans around the country. He was the first player in club history to have two 40+ HR seasons, and his .620 SLG in 1958 stood as a team record until 1994.

All that came crashing down when, prior to the 1960 season in a move that still reverberates in Cleveland history, Indians GM Frank "Trader" Lane dealt the popular slugger to the Detroit Tigers. The move occurred on April 17, just days before Opening Day, and if Twitter were around in 1960 you could bet that the Internet would have melted down in Cleveland that day. In fact, if the Internet existed during at all during Frank Lane's career, he may have crashed it more than once. Lane made more than 400 trades during his various stints as a GM, including the 1960 trade that sent manager Joe Gordon to Detroit in exchange for Tigers manager Jimmy Dykes. Lane even attempted to trade Stan Musial during the 1956 season until the Cardinals owner stepped in and put a stop to those negotiations. Stan Musial! But I digress…Colavito was dealt straight up for OF Harvey Kuenn, a trade that saw the reigning HR champ swapped for the reigning batting champ. Kuenn was actually coming off of a fairly solid season in Detroit, having hit .353/.402/.501 with 42 doubles and 9 HR. The batting average and doubles both led the AL in 1959, but that season represented the high water mark for Kuenn's career. Prior to the '59 season, Kuenn had just a .768 career OPS in 6+ seasons in the major leagues. After the 1959 season, he was even worse, putting up a paltry .729 OPS from 1960 until his retirement after the 1966 season. Say what you will about Chris Antonetti, Mark Shapiro and their use of "advanced statistics" like OPS and WAR, but they'd have never made the Colavito trade. Kuenn lasted just one season in Cleveland before Lane shipped him to San Francisco in exchange for Johnny Antonelli and Willie Kirkland.

In his four seasons in Detroit, Colavito continued to be productive but wasn't nearly as happy or beloved as he was during his time in Cleveland. The Rock averaged 35 HR and 108 RBI with the Tigers, including his best season as a pro in 1961 when he hit .290/.402/.580 with 45 HR and 140 RBI. However, showing that people in Michigan were idiots even back in the 50's and 60's, Tigers fans groused about the trade and publicly preferred Kuenn to Colavito. Tigers beat writer Joe Falls was particularly hard on Colavito, as he famously created the Run Not Batted In (RNBI) stat for use specifically in case Colavito dared to strand a runner on base. Can you imagine Jordan Bastain or Paul Hoynes doing that to Nick Swisher in 2013? Wait, let me rephrase that; can you imagine Jordan Bastain doing that to Nick Swisher in 2013? Colavito's relationship with the fans wasn't much better; in May of 1961 the slugger went into the stands to confront a drunken Tigers fan (better known by the abbreviation of 'a Tigers fan') who had been accosting Colavito's wife and father. You stay classy, Detroit. Meanwhile, in Colavito's first game back in Cleveland after the deal, Indians fans hung Frank Lane in effigy to protest the

trade.



Following the 1963 season, Colavito was dealt to Kansas City where he had another solid year, hitting .274/.366/.507 with 34 HR and 102 RBI for the Athletics. By then, “Trader” Lane was out of baseball and was serving as the GM for the Chicago Zephyrs of the fledgling NBA (he would return to baseball later on, but that’s another story). Gabe Paul was the GM of the Indians now, and was determined to right the wrong that was the terrible Rocky Colavito trade. Paul re-acquired Colavito from the Athletics in a complicated 3-team deal that included the Chicago White Sox in January of 1965. When the dust settled, the Indians sent John Romano, Tommie Agee and Tommy John to the Sox for Colavito and Cam Carreon. Agee promptly won the Rookie of the Year Award, a Gold Glove and was named to the AL All-Star team in 1966, and Tommy John of course went on to win 286 games in a uniform other than Cleveland’s, as well as have some fancy surgery named after him. But Colavito was home, and that was all that mattered to Indians fans at the time.

Rocky was 31 years old by the time he again donned the Indians uniform, and this time his jersey featured the #21 on the back. He had a solid season in 1965, hitting .287/.383/.468 with 26 HR and a league-leading 108 RBI. But after hitting just .238/.336/.432 in 1966, it was clear that Cleveland’s favorite player was on the downside of his career. He appeared in just 63 games in Cleveland in the 1967 season, hitting a career-worst .231/.317/.333 with only 8 HR. Only July 29 of that year, just prior to the trading deadline, Colavito was again traded away. This time he went to the White Sox in return for Jim King and a PTBNL. The PTBNL turned into Marv Staehle, and ironically the only team that gave up anything of real value when they traded for the great Rocky Colavito was the Indians themselves. Colavito closed out his career in 1968,

appearing in 40 games with the Dodgers and 39 games with the Yankees. He hit 8 HR between the two leagues, and even won a game for the Yankees on the mound, throwing 2 2/3 scoreless innings in his 2nd and final career pitching appearance.

All in all, Colavito appeared in 913 games as a Cleveland Indian. In those games, Colavito hit .267/.361/.495 with 190 HR and 574 RBI. He made the all-star team three times (1959, 1965, 1966) and finished in the top-5 of MVP voting in three times (1958, 1959, 1965). His 190 HR still rank 10th in team history. He helped spawn a book and sequel from noted Cleveland sports author Terry Pluto, who penned "The Curse of Rocky Colavito" in 1994 and followed it quickly with "Burying the Curse" in 1995. Colavito ended up wearing three different numbers as an Indian, starting off his career with #38 before switching to #6 and then finishing up with #21, but his best seasons came while donning the #6 jersey. Colavito was elected into the Cleveland Indians Hall of Fame in 2006, and when Terry Pluto interviewed Colavito near the 50-year anniversary of the trade that sent him to Detroit, Colavito said, "I loved Cleveland and the Indians. I never wanted to leave." He was one of the best players in baseball for much of a decade, one of the most popular players in club history, and a guy who was proud to call Cleveland "home."

It's a good thing Colavito wore #6, because there just aren't many other options out there. Larry Nance wore #6 for his first season in Cleveland, but did most of his damage wearing his much more familiar #22. The best Browns #6 in team history? Amazingly, it's the QB who couldn't keep a deep ball in bounds, Seneca Wallace. For as rich in sports tradition as Cleveland is, it's amazing to see a number as common as 6 with so little history attached to it, other than Colavito of course.

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