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 on the Boards . And as David Letterman would say, "For entertainment purposes only; please, no wagering."

At number 18, we have another digit that's been retired by the Cleveland Indians. Starting pitcher Mel Harder wore #18 for (coincidentally) 18 of his 20 seasons with the Indians, having worn #49 for his first season+ with the Tribe. Harder pitched for the Indians from 1928 through 1947, and in his 20 years with the Tribe he never participated in a postseason contest. He broke in with the club after the 1920 World Series victory, and left just one season before the Indians were next world champs in 1948. Along the way, Harder would win 223 games and post a 3.80 ERA in 3426 1/3 career innings pitched, appear in four consecutive all-star games from 1934-1937 and become a Cleveland sports legend. The 20 seasons with the club make Harder the longest-tenured Cleveland Indian in history, and even after he retired as a player Harder remained with the organization as pitching coach. After a one-season stint as their 1B coach, Harder served as the Indians pitching coach from 1949-1963, so if you're doing the math along with me you'll see that Harder was a part of the Indians organization for a quarter of a century.

Melvin Leroy "Chief" Harder was born on October 15, 1909 in Beemer, Nebraska. He signed with the Indians straight of his Omaha high school, and made his big league debut as an 18

year old on April 24, 1928. Harder threw 3 2/3 innings of hitless relief, walking one and striking out a pair in a 6-2 road loss to the St. Louis Browns. A few weeks later, Harder was appearing in his third game as a professional against the Philadelphia Athletics and threw the pitch that ended up being Ty Cobb's last career home run. Harder's rookie season was somewhat rocky, as he was tagged with a 6.61 ERA in 49 IP, mostly out of the bullpen. He made just one start in his 23 appearances that season, and spent most of the 1929 season in the minor leagues. But Harder would be called up to the Indians in 1930, and he'd remain in the big leagues for the rest of his long and distinguished career. One of Harder's more memorable feats was serving as the bookend for Cleveland Municipal Stadium. Harder started the first game in the stadium, dropping a close 1-0 decision to Lefty Grove and the Philadelphia Athletics on July 31, 1932. Harder was the hard-luck loser, throwing 8 innings and allowing just one run on 5 hits while walking 2 and striking out 7. There were 80,142 fans in attendance that day on the shores of Lake Erie, setting a new record for attendance at a professional baseball game. Harder would then throw the last pitch in Municipal Stadium history after the final game in 1993, a game I was lucky enough to attend along with my dad.

The one blight on an otherwise superlative career for Harder came during the 1940 season, when Harder was a veteran team leader under manager Ossie Vitt. Vitt was a tough manager, hard on and demanding of his players. He would frequently lambast them to the assembled members of the media, and was even hard on superstar Bob Feller. Feller pitched the only opening day no-hitter in baseball history that season, and was in the midst of a season in which he would lead the league in strikeouts, ERA, complete games, shutouts, innings pitched, WHIP and make the all-star team. Oh, and he was 21 years old at the time. Still, this wasn't enough for Vitt, who was heard remarking on how he couldn't be expected to win a pennant with Feller as his ace. After he yanked Harder off the mound and publicly told him to start pitching better to earn his salary, the veterans on the team had enough. Led by their spokesman Harder, eleven players went into to Indians owner Alva Bradley's office in mid-June to tell Bradley that the Indians had the talent to win the AL pennant that year, but not with Vitt as their manager. They were sick of his attitude, sick of his arrogance, and sick of being run down to members of the press. Bradley said he would consider their concerns and asked that they not be made public, but word of the meeting leaked to the press.

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