

Bernie Williams: The Yankee Star Even a Red Sox Fan Could Love!

When I began following baseball around the turn of the 21st century, the Red Sox and New York Yankees rivalry was as hot as ever. One of my favorite players to watch right from the beginning was Bernie Williams...of the Yankees. That's right. The longtime Yankees center fielder spent all 16 major league seasons in the Bronx. I saw him right towards the end of his prime. Today, I feel like he's become vastly underrated.

For eight seasons, 1995 to 2002, Bernie Williams was consistently one of the best players in baseball. His counting stats were never that impressive, but someone who consistently hits 20 HR, 100 RBI, steals 10 to 15 bases, and hits over .300 is going to be damn valuable. Whether coincidence or not, it so happens that Bernie's peak almost perfectly coincided with the Yankees eight year Dynasty. What held him back, interestingly enough, was his "Gold Glove" defense.

That's right. The 4 time Gold Glove winner was actually a below average center fielder. Sure, he made the plays. The problem was that he didn't really have great range as a center fielder. I certainly never thought of Bernie as bad a fielder as the defensive metrics have him. In retrospect, he was probably better suited to a corner, but staying in center field is what gave him such impressive WAR (Wins Above Replacement) numbers. He finished with 49.6 WAR according to Baseball Reference. That is nothing to sneeze at, but well short of the Hall of Fame standard.

However, Bernie was a postseason hero on several occasions and probably a better fielder than Total Zone would lead you to believe. He also won FOUR World Series with the Yankees and hit very well even in losing efforts. I always thought of Bernie Williams as a future Hall of Famer? Will he ever get a plaque in Cooperstown? It's highly unlikely, but he is on the Today's Game Committee ballot for 2022.

Then again, [Chris Bodig makes an excellent case for Bernie Williams to be in the Hall of Fame](#) on his excellent website Cooperstown Cred. I happen to agree with his arguments. But while I am usually a stats oriented guy like him, I'm going to look back at his peak performance merely as a fan...

Of course there will be some stats and a particular focus on his breakout career year. But, mostly, observations extrapolated from my experience and memories as a teenage fan. Of course, even then I was obsessed with stats...

Bernie Williams and His Early Career

Like many baseball stars I grew up watching, Bernie Williams' career began in the Junk Wax era of card collecting. In fact, Bernie's first cards debuted in 1987, the widely considered beginning over the Junk Wax overproduction. It's also the year of my birth.

Anyway, 1987 ProCards was the official cardboard debut for Bernie Williams. Several other minor league issues would follow in 1988 and 1989. Bernie's first official rookie card was 1990 Bowman, which thankfully has a glossy Tiffany version if you're looking for his key rookie card to collect. It's a great card. Bernie also appeared in 1990 Donruss, Topps, and Score.

Bernie's major league debut wouldn't come until 1991, but by 1992 he would become an above average player in MLB. Bernie would post a 2.0 WAR Mark in just 62 games in 1992 and a 2.5 WAR Mark in 139 games in 1993. Building my "Junk Wax" Dynasty, I would be very happy to fill out my roster with a young Bernie Williams.

Bernie's Breakout Season of 1995

After a strong showing in the strike shortened 1994 season, Bernie would have his best season in the Majors by WAR. It would be the beginning of his 8-year peak. He would amass 6.4 WAR, with the best defensive season of his career by defensive WAR (1.7)... Ok, enough stats...

I wasn't watching baseball at that time, but 1995 was the year that Bernie was becoming the player I'd later admire. His 18 HR and 82 RBI were nothing to sneeze at. He did steal 8 bases, but was caught 6 times. However, he also hit .307. Keep in mind this is back when batting average was still far, far more important than on base percentage. These were stats that fans were excited about.

The Yankees were getting really good, too. While the hobby was going into decline around this time, what kid didn't want to have some Bernie Williams baseball cards? He was a young star, and he was legit.

Bernie Williams: The Best Hitter of the Late '90s Yankees Dynasty, Who Was Almost a Red Sox...

Chris Bodig goes into it in great detail in his piece on [Bernie Williams on Cooperstown Cred](#), but even as a more casual fan in the late 90's, I knew just by watching him that Bernie Williams was the best hitter on the Yankees. I often wished he played for the Red Sox. Well, ironically, it almost happened just as I was getting into following the sport seriously...

After the 1998 season, the Boston Red Sox actually made Bernie Williams a six year offer for \$90 million - with a seventh year option on the table. Keep in mind, Mike Piazza signed a seven year \$91 million deal with the Mets not long before that, at the time, the largest contract in baseball history. Arguably, that one worked out pretty well...

The great news for the Yankees is that they decided to offer a seven-year deal worth \$87.5 million, which he accepted. The even better news is that the Yankees would've instead signed Albert Belle... and we all know where his career went after that. Unfortunately for the Red Sox, they not only lost Mo Vaughn to the Angels, but they essentially replaced Vaughn with Jose Offerman (who at least was quite good in 1999).

There's a non-zero chance that had Bernie gone to Boston, the Sox may have won both the 1999 and 2000 World Series. In retrospect, the Yankees should consider themselves very fortunate that Bernie returned to the only organization he'd ever known. They likely would have won in 2003 and 2004, as well. (No one was beating Schilling and Randy Johnson in 2001.)

Oh, what could've been...

Should Bernie Williams be in the Baseball Hall of Fame?

From my observations, Bernie Williams absolutely deserves a shot for the Hall of Fame. He had as many, if not a couple more, big hits in the postseason as Derek Jeter, a first-ballot Hall of Fame selection. The Yankees not only may not have won all four of those rings – they may not have even gotten to the postseason some years without the consistent bat of Bernie Williams. As the Yankees primary cleanup hitter, he was the centerpiece of their offense. Period.

It also helps that Bernie Williams is also one of the most likable people to ever play the game of baseball. His second career as a jazz musician has also been a phenomenal success. Since he made so much money in his career, Bernie uses his musical talents mostly for charitable causes. If he's not a Hall of Fame ballplayer, Bernie's a Hall of Fame human being.

Bernie Williams is one of those guys who I'll just throw WAR out the window and put him in the Hall of Fame anyway. As it is, modern center fielders are vastly underrepresented in the Hall. If he's not elected into the Hall by a future Era Committee, I will be greatly disappointed.

Bernie, I wish you continued success in all you do!

~ Amelia Desertsong