

# Danny Darwin – A Red Sox Player Profile

## **The Best Red Sox Player in 1993!**

Hey, baseball fans; here's some Boston Red Sox trivia: who was the best Sox player in 1993 by Wins Above Replacement? If you guessed Roger Clemens, you'd be wrong. Heck, even if you'd guessed young shortstop John Valentin you still won't be correct. It was a 37-year old starting pitcher by the name of Danny Darwin, leading with 5.7 WAR.

No one knew this at the time, as the WAR statistic wouldn't be invented for over a decade, but Darwin really was the best player on the team. By traditional stats, Darwin would compile 15 wins with a 3.26 ERA, very good numbers, but certainly not ace level, and not what you'd expect from a "best" player.

Still, along with veteran Frank Viola and a young Aaron Sele, Danny Darwin helped pick up the Boston pitching staff from an unusually poor season from Roger Clemens. Yes, Clemens was about merely average in 1993. Unfortunately, despite a pretty good starting staff, Paul Quantrill kept losing games, despite actually being a pretty decent reliever for most of his career.

Also, despite Mo Vaughn having a good year, Mike Greenwell putting up one of his typically good years, and John Valentin being a very nice young player, the lineup wasn't great. That's with future Hall of Famer Andre Dawson at DH, being sadly mediocre. So, in 1993, Boston finished 80-82 under manager Butch Hobson.

None of that was Danny Darwin's fault.

## Danny Darwin's Career Before the Red Sox

Darwin had a very interesting career. He actually only made 371 starts in his career out of his 716 career appearances, spending a good deal of his career in the bullpen. For most of his career, he bounced between the starting rotation and bullpen. However, after a nice run with the Texas Rangers, he went to the Milwaukee Brewers, where he had one and a half above-average seasons before being traded to the Houston Astros. He pitched very well and returned to Houston as a free agent.

In Houston from 1986 to 1990, Darwin would be worth 13.4 WAR, 5.3 of that coming in his 1990 season when he won the NL ERA title with a 2.21 mark. He started 17 games that year with 3 complete games while also finishing 14 games and saving 2 games. Still, the Astros saw fit to see him leave as a free agent. The Red Sox were only too happy to add the solid Danny Darwin to their pitching staff.

## Danny Darwin with the Red Sox

By the time he got to the Red Sox in 1991, the “Bonham Bullet” had already put together a pretty nice career as a “swingman” - a guy who worked both as a starter and a reliever. Unfortunately, Darwin’s first season with the team didn’t go so well. In 12 starts, he delivered a 5.16 ERA while dealing with shoulder problems and battling pneumonia. Fortunately for both him and the Red Sox, this would not be a free agent bust.

In 1992, Darwin rebounded with one of his typical swingman seasons. He made 15 starts and finished 21 more, with 51 total appearances over the season. Overall, his efforts were worth 2.6 WAR. But, where he truly excelled in 1992 was in the starting rotation in the season’s second half, in which he pitched only one game out of the bullpen. In his 15 starts, he had a 3.50 ERA and 2 complete games. It was a precursor to his best season in the major leagues, 1993.

In 1993, Darwin made 34 starts, pitching 2 complete games, 1 of them a shutout. Despite a solid 3.26 ERA and 1.068 WHIP, his 4.29 FIP (one of the advanced stats that didn’t exist for many more years) was a harbinger of things to come. FIP stands for Fielding Independent Pitching, which considers strikeouts, walks, and home runs to approximate what a pitcher would do with average luck on batted balls in play. As a pitcher who never struck out that many guys as a starter, he relied on his defense to win. Yes, Darwin had a really nice season, but things would go south after that.

In the strike shortened 1994 season, the wheels fell off for Darwin. He made 13 starts, and while he went 7-5, had a miserable 6.30 ERA. He was up and down and had a couple of clunkers mixed in between brilliant performances. But, arm trouble led to him blowing up in June, after which he was shut down. It looked like the beginning of the end for Darwin, and it was certainly the end of his Red Sox career.

## Danny Darwin’s Last Hurrah

After an awful 1995 season split between the Toronto Blue Jays and the Texas Rangers, Darwin caught on with the Pittsburgh Pirates at age 40. He actually pitched pretty well with a 3.02 ERA in 19 starts! Darwin was good enough to net relief pitcher Rich Loiselle from the Houston Astros at the trade deadline.

That trade actually was a win for Pittsburgh, who got a very good rest of 1996 from the reliever, a solid rookie campaign as closer in 1997, and decent returns in 1998. Unfortunately, after 1999, Loiselle apparently forgot where the strike zone was and was never good again. Meanwhile, the

Astros, who'd been happy to reacquire Darwin, watched him struggle and get released at season's end.

Yet, that wasn't the end for Darwin. He'd catch on with the White Sox in 1997, pitching 21 games, 17 of them starts. His 4.13 ERA was a bit of a mirage, but it was good enough for the Giants to acquire him along with Wilson Alvarez and Roberto Hernandez in a trade that famously didn't work out well for the Giants. The White Sox ended up with a solid closer in Keith Foulke (yes, the same Foulke that finished off the 2004 World Series for the Sox) and a decent set-up man in Bob Howry.

For the Giants, Darwin and Alvarez would both be mediocre, although Hernandez would be fine. Then again, Alvarez and Hernandez would end up with the expansion team Tampa Bay Devil Rays next season after being exposed in the expansion draft, getting nothing in return, so the Giants really lost that trade.

Darwin would hang around with the Giants for 1998, getting into 33 games, 25 of them starts, and wasn't particularly good at all. In fact, Darwin was "worth" -1.1 WAR that season, and that spelled the end for his playing days. However, he's hung around the game and as recently as 2019 is still a minor league pitching coach.

## Danny Darwin's Career

Overall, Darwin was worth 39.8 WAR over 21 seasons. That includes some really awful seasons where his WAR totals were negative. He was actually significantly better as a reliever, although he was a slightly above league-average starting pitcher when he got the call.

As a Starter: 371 starts, 2396  $\frac{1}{3}$  innings, 4.04 ERA, 53 complete games, 9 shutouts, 2.2 K/BB ratio

As a Reliever: 345 appearances, 620  $\frac{1}{3}$  innings, 3.06 ERA, 171 games finished, 32 saves, 2.29 K/BB ratio

The obvious knock against Darwin were his platoon splits.

Vs Right-Handed Batters: 6216 PAs, .234/.281/.361 - .641 OPS

Vs Left-Handed Batters: 6500 PAs, .277/.338/.437 - .775 OPS

In today's analytically-driven game, Darwin probably would've been limited against left-handed batters and probably relieved much more than he started. It's also possible he would've faced fewer batters per season, which may have saved him some of the arm trouble. Darwin was indeed "Dr. Death" on right-handed batters and more analytically, data-driven deployment may have made him one of the greatest swingmen of all time.

Of course, Darwin's career was just fine as it was. He gave Boston baseball fans a great 1993 effort that, along with his above-average work in 1992, made that four-year free agent contract mostly worth it. He's still in the game today passing on his extensive knowledge of pitching to younger pitchers. Here's to a great baseball career that hasn't even yet ended. Thanks for all your efforts, Danny!

~ Amelia Desertsong