

Jason Varitek: A Red Sox Player Profile

Red Sox Team Captain and Legend

The last team captain of the Boston Red Sox, Jason Varitek spent parts of 15 seasons with just one team in Major League Baseball. The Georgia Tech product was drafted by the Minnesota Twins in 1993, but decided to return to school for his senior year. In 1994, he was drafted by the Seattle Mariners, held out again due to advice from his agent Scott Boras, but ultimately settled for less money to sign.

Varitek was acquired from the Mariners by the Red Sox along with pitcher Derek Lowe in an infamous trade for relief pitcher Heathcliff Slocumb. It's not even close who won that deal, even if Lowe had never done anything. Varitek was the starting catcher in 10 different seasons for the Red Sox and only wasn't the regular catcher in 2001 due to injury. He made his major league debut with a base hit in his first and only major league at-bat in 1997. But he would be the primary catcher starting in 1998.

Varitek was also one of the most popular players in recent Red Sox history. He was loved by the pitching staff and anecdotally was an above-average defensive catcher. It also helped that [Varitek caught four no-hitters](#), a major league record tied with Carlos Ruiz.

While Tek was somewhat below average in throwing out opposing base stealers, over the years he did work with some pitchers that were notoriously slow delivering the pitch to the plate. The advanced defensive metrics see him as an overall defensive negative, but most of those negatives came from his brutal final season in 2011. From all the years I watched him play, I'd say he was at worst perfectly average behind the dish, but above average as a pitch receiver.

Jason Varitek Was Mr. Average Overall

While being average isn't exciting, in baseball, being average is extremely valuable. Looking at Jason Varitek's 162 game average, he hit 20 HR and drove in 79 runs per prorated season. Those are solid baseball card stats, especially for a catcher. Because of his solid work behind the dish, those league-average offensive stats allowed him to be an above-average regular by Wins Above Replacement (WAR) in 6 out of his 15 seasons.

2001: 1.4 WAR (in only 51 games)
2002: 2.1 WAR (132 games)
2003: 3.0 WAR (142 games)

2004: 4.0 WAR (137 games)
2005: 3.9 WAR (133 games)
2007: 2.3 WAR (131 games)

He wasn't bad in his first full season in 1999, either, with 1.9 WAR in 144 games. But, Varitek did have some poor seasons with the bat. His rookie year of 1998 wasn't too hot, and neither were 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, or 2009. But with a career OPS+ of 99, on the balance, he was perfectly average offensively. The good news is that Varitek's dWAR (WAR from Defense) is a positive 8.8 for his career. So, in fact, Varitek was slightly better than average, before factoring in his "intangibles" such as team leadership.

Why Jason Varitek's 2004 Season Was His Career Best

Most fans may believe 2005 was Varitek's best year in Major League Baseball. He won the Silver Slugger, Gold Glove, and made his second American League All-Star Game roster! Varitek did deserve the Silver Slugger with a 122 OPS+. However, 2005 was also one of Varitek's worst defensive seasons overall; that is, if you believe the defensive metrics from Total Zone and Fielding Bible's Defensive Runs Saved (DRS). Still, his overall contributions were worthy of an All-Star appearance and were worth 3.9 WAR to the Red Sox.

So, why was Varitek's 2004 season better? Of course, in 2004, the Red Sox won the World Series for the first time in 86 years! That's the best season ever!

Anyway, while far from being the star of the show, Varitek was a big part of the Red Sox's success that season. Despite receiving no accolades, he was worth a career-high 4.0 WAR for the regular season 2004 Sox. He also batted a career high .296 while compiling a career high on-base percentage of .390. His offensive contributions amounted to a 121 OPS+. Defensively, Varitek was 3 runs above average by Total Zone's metrics and perfectly average by DRS.

In the postseason, Varitek was OK in the Division Series. But, he was a major contributor in the classic comeback ALCS victory against the Yankees. While Varitek was a non-factor in the World Series, it didn't matter as the rest of the Sox offense showed up for a four-game sweep.

Speaking of the postseason, in 2007, Varitek's bat didn't show up in the Division Series. But, his bat came alive in the League Championship against the Cleveland Indians and in the World Series versus the Colorado Rockies. So, Varitek really did help the Sox win their 2nd ring in four years. This was after signing a four-year, \$40 million extension before the 2005 season, after which he delivered that fantastic 2005 season along with a very strong 2007 year.

Jason Varitek's Legacy

Various injuries and troubles in his personal life did affect Varitek's on-field performance at times. But, Varitek was loved by his teammates and is anecdotally one of the more underrated catchers of his era. In fact, I can't think of another catcher that was as consistently league-average as Varitek.

The only catchers from his era that were better on offense are Jorge Posada, Ivan Rodriguez, and Mike Piazza. "Pudge" and Piazza are Hall of Famers and Posada has an outside case for a plaque. "Pudge" was easily the best defensively of his era. Joe Mauer was obviously great early in his career, too, which started towards the end of Tek's own career.

Sure, Tek isn't a Hall of Famer. But, he did have a very nice peak and hit better than you'd expect from your typical catcher. The defensive metrics also mostly show that Varitek was a very good catcher on defense. We don't have pitch framing metrics for that time period, but he could've well been among the league leaders. In fact, had Varitek not played in the same era as Pudge Rodriguez, it's likely he'd be remembered as one of the best of his era without question, behind only Jorge Posada.

Varitek doesn't have anything resembling a Hall of Fame career. Then again, [baseball writer Jay Dunn did give Varitek his one and only Hall of Fame vote](#). In any case, he's definitely one of the most important Red Sox players of all time. The brawl between Varitek and Alex Rodriguez may be his most infamous moment, but while on the balance Tek was a pretty average player, when he excelled, his team often followed suit.

It's an old baseball saying that great teams are great up the middle. So, it's no surprise that the Red Sox and Yankees had two of the best catchers in the game during their respective eras. Varitek was at least the third or fourth best overall catcher in the American League in his peak years. Catchers like Tek don't come along everyday, and you'd be hard-pressed to ever expect another one to come along like him any time soon.

Varitek is still with the Red Sox in 2023, signing a three-year deal to remain their game planning coordinator — a uniformed coaching position — in the 2022 offseason. Also, you never know, [you may even run into him](#) and his family at Canobie Lake Park in Salem, New Hampshire!

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