The Baseball Crank

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**BASEBALL: Gibson and Alexander**

*This is a column I started three years ago, and just recently wrapped up.*

Gibson and Alexander, Alexander and Gibson. Let's hit the books and take a look back . . .

Who was a better pitcher – who did more to help his teams win – [Pack Robert "Bob" Gibson](http://www.baseballreference.com/g/gibsobo01.shtml), or [Grover Cleveland "Pete" Alexander](http://www.baseballreference.com/a/alexape01.shtml)? In the popular imagination, the answer is easy. Gibson was voted to the All-Century team. Lefty Grove, Christy Mathewson and Alexander were the only three 20th Century pitchers to win 300 games and win more than 64% of their decisions (Roger Clemens has since joined them); in the balloting, Gibson (with 251 career wins and a .591 career winning percentage) [drew more votes than all three combined](http://baseball-almanac.com/legendary/limc100.shtml). It’s not just the public at large; [when the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) named its top 100 players of the century, Gibson was 17th, Alexander 25th](http://baseball-almanac.com/legendary/lisab100.shtml). What got me thinking particularly about the comparison between the two was Sports Illustrated; SI’s state-by-state list of the top athletes of the 20th Century placed Gibson directly above Alexander among athletes from Nebraska.

Besides both being from Nebraska, both men were late bloomers; Gibson arrived in the majors at age 23, but struggled with his control and didn't have his first good year until age 26, and didn’t really blossom until they expanded the strike zone the following year. Alexander didn't even enter professional baseball until age 22 (in 1909) and had his career set back when he was nearly killed after being struck in the head by a thrown ball while running the bases in July of 1909. When he did arrive in the majors two years later he immediately led the league in wins and set a rookie strikeout record that lasted 73 years.

Stylistically, they were complete opposites. Gibson was a classic power pitcher, with a high leg kick and over-the-top delivery; his favorite pitches were High and Inside, Higher and Further Inside, and Right Down Your Throat. Alexander was a sidearmer who threw so many tailing sinkers that he was known as "Old Low and Away."

Incidentally, it was probably the sidearm delivery that allowed both Alexander and Walter Johnson to throw so many more innings than their contemporaries. Many pitchers, like Christy Mathewson, threw straight overhand by the early 1900s; Alexander and Johnson were among the exceptions. (Johnson once complained that his shoulder hurt just *watching* Smokey Joe Wood’s overhand delivery).

There are more than a few reasons to narrow the statistical gap between the two; but as I discuss below, I can't shake the feeling that Gibson's higher standing is mostly a matter of good press notices. **But Alexander was the better pitcher.**

Let's look at the record:

**1. THE RAW NUMBERS**

Did Gibson leave behind a clearly superior record? Let’s look at the numbers as they appear in the books:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pitcher** | **W** | **L** | **W%** | **ERA** | **IP** | **BB** | **K** |
| **Alexander** | **373** | **208** | **.642** | **2.56** | **5190** | **951** | **2198** |
| **Gibson** | **251** | **174** | **.591** | **2.91** | **3884.1** | **1336** | **3117** |

Well, Gibson did strike more people out; in fact, he retired as the second man to strike out 3000. But *to match Alexander’s record, Gibson would have had to pitch five more seasons and go 24-7 with a 1.52 ERA each of those five years*.

What about their prime years? Surely Gibson, remembered today as an overpowering force, was the greater pitcher in his prime? Let’s look at Gibson’s best five-year run, from age 30 (1966) to 34 (1970):

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Age** | **W** | **L** | **W%** | **ERA** | **IP** | **BB** | **K** |
| **30** | **21** | **12** | **.636** | **2.44** | **280.1** | **78** | **225** |
| **31** | **13** | **7** | **.650** | **2.98** | **175.1** | **40** | **147** |
| **32** | **22** | **9** | **.710** | **1.12** | **304.2** | **62** | **268** |
| **33** | **20** | **13** | **.606** | **2.18** | **314** | **95** | **269** |
| **34** | **23** | **7** | **.767** | **3.12** | **294** | **88** | **274** |
| **Total** | **99** | **48** | **.673** | **2.30** | **1368.1** | **363** | **1183** |

Brilliant, by any standard. But compare to Alexander from age 28 (1915) to age 33 (1920); I’m combining his 1918 and 1919 totals because Alexander, right at the zenith of his powers, was drafted and went off to fight World War I in 1918, after appearing in only 3 games:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Age** | **W** | **L** | **W%** | **ERA** | **IP** | **BB** | **K** |
| **28** | **31** | **10** | **.756** | **1.22** | **376.1** | **64** | **241** |
| **29** | **33** | **12** | **.733** | **1.55** | **389** | **50** | **167** |
| **30** | **30** | **13** | **.698** | **1.83** | **388** | **56** | **200** |
| **31/32** | **18** | **12** | **.600** | **1.72** | **261** | **41** | **136** |
| **33** | **27** | **14** | **.659** | **1.91** | **363.1** | **69** | **173** |
| **Total** | **139** | **61** | **.695** | **1.64** | **1777.2** | **280** | **917** |

Wow. Alexander’s numbers read like Sandy Koufax on andro. And in between, unlike some baseball players who went to war, Alexander saw real combat on the front lines as an artillery soldier.

**2. THE LEADERBOARDS**

Who was more dominant? Gibson won two Cy Young awards; Alexander pitched against Cy Young, but had there been an award then he would have easily won at least four (1915-17 and 1920), and possibly a fifth at age 40 in 1927 (or maybe not; [Alexander finished behind six other starting pitchers in the MVP voting](http://www.baseballreference.com/awards/awards_1927.shtml#NLmvp)). Look at the top five pitching categories, Wins, Winning Percentage, ERA, Innings, and Strikeouts. In his 5-year peak, Gibson racked up just 3 league leads in those categories, the sum total for his career; Alexander, between 1915 and 1920, notched ***18***. In his career? 25, second only to Walter Johnson. And those weren’t close races; Alexander led the league in Wins by margins of 8, 8 and 6 in consecutive years, and in innings by margins of 35, 61, and 46. Five pitchers on the 1915 Phillies threw over 170 innings; the second-lowest ERA was 2.36, but Alexander alone lowered the team ERA to 2.17. Gibson’s calling card, his 1.12 ERA in 1968, doesn’t exactly dwarf Alexander’s 1.22 mark in 72 more innings in his best year, and while Alexander had four other full years in the ones, Gibson only once had an ERA less than double the 1968 mark.

Alexander, of course, was the dominant force in major league baseball in 1915-17, topping even Walter Johnson, and easily the best pitcher in the game in 1920. Had it not been for the war, he would likely have matched teammate Hippo Vaughn as the NL’s best hurler the two years in between. In the National League between 1962 and 1966, there was Koufax and there was everyone else; from 1971 on, it was Seaver and everyone else. And Seaver was probably better than Gibson in 1969-70. And Gibson was hurt in 1967. That really leaves only the one year when Gibson was the undisputed best pitcher in the National League.

**3. THE TRANSLATED RECORDS**

There being really no way to twist the numbers themselves to make Gibson look better, it becomes necessary to evaluate those numbers in the context each man pitched in. I’ve run translated records before, and I’ll run them here. ([I explain the details here](http://baseballcrank.com/archives/001077.php)). It’s not the most sophisticated measurement, but in short, the method tells us one thing: when external factors are removed, what was a pitcher’s performance relative to others in his league?

Here’s the career numbers I got, after running the translations one season at a time:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pitcher** | **W** | **L** | **W%** | **ERA** | **IP** | **BB** | **K** |
| **Alexander** | **308** | **173** | **.640** | **2.70** | **4465.1** | **963** | **3395** |
| **Gibson** | **221** | **149** | **.597** | **2.90** | **3455** | **1259** | **3037** |

As you can see, adjusting for the surroundings hurts both pitchers, Alexander more than Gibson; both men pitched in pitcher’s eras, and both alternated between good and bad run support. Both were probably hurt by their parks overall, although Gibson was helped a great deal in his best years. Here, let’s run the same peak-seasons comparison as before:

**Gibson**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Age** | **W** | **L** | **W%** | **ERA** | **IP** | **BB** | **K** |
| **30** | **21** | **8** | **.724** | **2.58** | **248** | **89** | **202** |
| **31** | **11** | **8** | **.579** | **3.30** | **155.1** | **42** | **134** |
| **32** | **17** | **11** | **.586** | **1.52** | **266** | **77** | **224** |
| **33** | **18** | **9** | **.667** | **2.30** | **254** | **81** | **212** |
| **34** | **22** | **5** | **.815** | **2.66** | **256.2** | **68** | **260** |
| **Total** | **89** | **41** | **.685** | **2.39** | **1180** | **357** | **1032** |

**Alexander**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Age** | **W** | **L** | **W%** | **ERA** | **IP** | **BB** | **K** |
| **28** | **25** | **9** | **.735** | **1.57** | **320.2** | **68** | **339** |
| **29** | **24** | **14** | **.632** | **2.38** | **322** | **63** | **199** |
| **30** | **24** | **10** | **.706** | **2.36** | **317** | **61** | **291** |
| **31/32** | **18** | **10** | **.643** | **2.29** | **239.2** | **57** | **250** |
| **33** | **21** | **11** | **.656** | **2.27** | **305.2** | **83** | **300** |
| **Total** | **112** | **54** | **.675** | **2.16** | **1505** | **332** | **1379** |

What you see here is that Alexander was a better pitcher, but not by a huge margin in quality; the real difference, even adjusted for the difference in eras, was in their workloads. And he was more consistent. As I discuss in more detail in the link on the method, I used the 1986 NL as the baseline, so these are good approximations of what their performance was equivalent to on an average team in a neutral park in the mid-80s. The fact that Alexander still registers as a 300-320 inning a year guy by mid-80s standards tells you how dominant he was in that category in his era.

The odd thing is Gibson’s 1968 W-L record; although 22-9 is a fine record, common sense tells you that you need some bad luck to lose 9 games with a 1.12 ERA. Gibson threw 13 shutouts that season (second on the all-time list; Alexander threw 16 in 1916), which means that he was 9-9 with an ERA still in the ones when not throwing a shutout. But his team was a pennant winning team in a pitcher’s park; the Translated Record system reduces his winning percentage to reflect an above average offense. Hard to say this is anything but arbitrary bad luck – which tends to mostly even out over a career but can vary a lot from year to year – but it’s awfully hard to reconcile a disappointing record in Gibson’s very best season with the popular image of Gibson as the ultimate "gamer," a guy with an almost mystical ability to win close games.

Baseball Prospectus.com just came out with their own translated pitcher records, [using a similar methodology to mine](http://premium.baseballprospectus.com/article.php?articleid=2467) (so far as I can tell) but translating into present-day rather than mid-80s numbers. More on that later; the BP analysis gives the following career totals:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pitcher** | **W** | **L** | **W%** | **ERA** | **IP** | **BB** | **K** |
| [**Alexander**](http://www.baseballprospectus.com/cards/alexape01.shtml) | **278** | **195** | **.588** | **3.57** | **4252** | **772** | **2953** |
| [**Gibson**](http://www.baseballprospectus.com/cards/gibsobo01.shtml) | **209** | **160** | **.566** | **3.66** | **3323** | **1052** | **3004** |

and totals for the five-season peaks:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pitcher** | **W** | **L** | **W%** | **ERA** | **IP** | **BB** | **K** |
| [**Alexander**](http://www.baseballprospectus.com/cards/alexape01.shtml) | **102** | **55** | **.650** | **2.99** | **1405.2** | **246** | **1163** |
| [**Gibson**](http://www.baseballprospectus.com/cards/gibsobo01.shtml) | **82** | **44** | **.651** | **3.08** | **1136.1** | **287** | **1017** |

Same general conclusion. Win Shares, you say? Bill James gives Alexander his due in the new Historical Abstract, ranking him 3d to Gibson's 8th (in the original historical book he had Alexander 9th in peak value to Gibson's 11th, and 5th in career value to Gibson's 9th among righthanded starters). The Win Shares method puts Alexander 4th among pitchers at 476 (behind only Cy Young, Walter Johnson and Kid Nichols), and Gibson 28th at 317 (the book has him tied with Greg Maddux, but that was two years ago).

**4. WHAT ABOUT THE POSTSEASON?**

The heart of Gibson’s case, and it is an impressive one, is his record in the World Series: 7-2 with a 1.89 ERA and eight complete games in nine starts. Gibson started three games in [the 1964 World Series](http://www.baseballreference.com/postseason/1964_WS.shtml), losing Game Two 8-3 (Gibson allowed 4 runs in 8 innings before his bullpen imploded), but rebounding to win Game Five 5-2 in 10 innings (the two runs were unearned, and Gibson struck out 13), and clinging on to win Game Seven 7-5 despite allowing two runs in the ninth. [In 1967](http://www.baseballreference.com/postseason/1967_WS.shtml), returning to action after a broken leg, he was more impressive: 10 K in a 2-1 complete game victory in Game One, a 6-0 shutout in Game 4, and a complete game 7-2 victory with 10 K as Jim Lonborg got pounded on two days’ rest in Game Seven. Yaz, fresh off the Triple Crown and an incredible stretch run, was held to just 3 for 11 against Gibson; the rest of the “Impossible Dream” Sox were 11 for 80. [In 1968](http://www.baseballreference.com/postseason/1968_WS.shtml), Gibson was utterly dominant in his first two starts -- a 5-hit 4-0 complete game shutout in Game 1, and a 10-1 blowout in Game 4 (Gibson had a 6-run lead when he took the mound in the fourth inning). The series, and the season, came down to one game -- and Gibson looked like the same old Gibson for six innings, but allowed 3 key runs in the seventh and lost 4-1. It wasn't all Gibson's fault -- Jim Northrup's 2-run triple broke the game open, and some sources lay most of the blame for that on poor outfield play by Curt Flood. But the game underlined the fact that Gibson, a great pitcher who was usually good in the clutch, was not invincible.

Alexander’s first two Series visits were nearly as impressive. In 1915, Alexander's Phillies faced off against [an incredibly deep 101-win Red Sox team](http://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/BOS/1915.shtml) at the height of the Sox dynasty: besides the outfield of Tris Speaker, Harry Hooper and Duffy Lewis, the pitching staff included Babe Ruth, Smokey Joe Wood, Carl Mays and Dutch Leonard, the latter a year removed from setting the ERA record. And those weren't even the aces of the staff; the Sox didn't use Ruth, Wood or Mays (except a pinch hit appearance for Ruth, in which Alexander got the Babe to ground out) the whole series. Alexander went the distance in Game One, allowing just a single run on the way to a 3-1 victory when the Phillies scored two in the bottom of the 8th. In Game Three he went the distance again on two days' rest, allowing just 6 hits but [losing a 2-1 heartbreaker to Leonard when Lewis singled home Hooper in the bottom of the 9th; Leonard had retired the last 20 in a row](http://www.baseballlibrary.com/baseballlibrary/chronology/1915OCTOBER.stm).

The Phillies lost the series in five games, and there was some controversy over whether Alexander was unavailable (i.e., hung over) to start Game Five, when Erskine Mayer and Eppa Rixey combined to blow a 4-run first inning lead. Bill James reviewed the controversy in The Baseball Book 1990 and left the answer unclear (he thought it odd that Alexander told the manager that his arm was stiff). Alexander would have been coming back on one day's rest after a complete game, and even if they'd held the lead, he would have most likely been expected to start either Game Six or Game Seven; even by 1915 standards, that's asking a lot. On the whole, he acquitted himself quite well.

[In 1926](http://www.baseball-reference.com/postseason/1926_WS.shtml), well past his prime at age 39, Alexander was the hero of the Series with a performance that entered the annals of baseball legend. Facing the Ruth/Gehrig Yankees, Alex threw a complete game 4-hitter in Game Two, allowing just two early runs in a game the Cards blew open in the 7th for a 6-2 win; he got stronger as the afternoon went on, retiring the last 21 batters he faced. Five days later he did it again, staving off elimination on the road with a 10-2 complete game victory in Game Six (again, the game was close until a 5-run seventh). The next day - hung over or not, although his teammates swore he was sober and just tired - Alexander came out of the bullpen in the bottom of the seventh, with a 1-run lead, the bases loaded and two out, and struck out Tony Lazzeri (on a low and away pitch, of course) to squash the Yankee threat. Alexander then retired the side in the 8th and the first two batters in the ninth before walking Ruth, only to have the Babe foolishly try to steal second with Bob Muesel coming up and Gehrig on deck, leading to the most damaging caught stealing in Series history.

Unfortunately for Alexander, like his contemporary Walter Johnson, he didn’t get as many shots as Gibson at postseason glory in his prime, and Alexander came back for one more turn in 1928 at the age of 41. If you can imagine Bob Gibson, who was bombed to the tune of a 5.04 ERA at age 39, coming out of retirement at age 40 to face the 1976 Reds in the World Series, you get an idea of how well Alexander pitched against the 1928 Yankees: Ruth and Gehrig ate him alive to the tune of 11 earned runs in 5 innings. Those two by themselves went 16 for 26 with 4 doubles, 7 homers, 7 walks, 14 runs and 13 RBI in 4 games in that Series, and Alexander took his share of the abuse (it was Alexander's misfortune to face Babe Ruth's teams in all three of his postseason excursions; Alex had held the Babe to 0-for-8 with 2 walks in 1915 and 1926). This ruined Alexander’s lifetime Series record, but in this particular comparison, I don't see how that can be unduly held against him.

If you count his first two appearances in the Series, Alexander's postseason record is nearly as impressive as Gibson's: 3-1, a 1.42 ERA, complete games in all four starts, a 27-8 strikeout/walk ratio, and just over 6 hits allowed per 9 innings.

So, Alexander was a real good money pitcher, and Gibson a great one. What does that all mean? There have been an awful lot of statistical studies done in attempts to determine whether there is such a thing as clutch hitting. The usual answer is either (1) ain’t no such thing or (2) if there is, there’s no evidence to prove it. The latter is the more sensible answer, since there’s always the chance that we have looked in the wrong place. Bill James did a study in the Baseball Book 1992 (at page 201) in which he determined that veteran players, generally, had just a slight advantage over otherwise similar young players in certain types of clutch situations.

For all the work done in this area, there has been (as far as I've seen) precious little really systematic attention paid to clutch pitching – whether the evidence, broadly speaking, supports the idea that some pitchers are better than others at pitching in big games or tough game situations. Intuitively, it seems possible for pitchers to have a greater ability to "turn it up," since pitchers can vary their arsenal and often have to pace themselves if they are in midseason or midgame, although I understand that some studies have suggested that "pitching to the score" (i.e., changing a pitcher's approach based on the game situation) may be a myth.

Where this relates to Bob Gibson is this: how much credit do we give him for raising his level of performance in big games? Because that's the only way to really toss out the numerical advantages for Alexander. Given that Alexander's postseason performances were outstanding, however, I can't give Gibson enough credit to swing the analysis his way.

**5. WHAT ABOUT THE COMPETITION? COULD THESE GUYS SURVIVE TODAY?**

Some people would write off the exploits of pre-1947 stars like Alexander, reasoning that competition before the color line was broken must have been watered down; if that's your attitude, then this argument isn't even worth having. I don’t think you can really prove very well how strong the competition in any given era was, or at least it’s nearly impossible to quantify it. The game, in Alexander’s day, drew from a smaller group of potential players due to discrimination, yes – but except for 1914-15 there were fewer big league teams, 16 compared to 20 or 24 for most of Gibson’s career. And in those days, baseball was *it*; even guys like [Jim Thorpe](http://www.baseball-reference.com/t/thorpji01.shtml), [Greasy Neale](http://www.baseball-reference.com/n/nealegr01.shtml), and [George Halas](http://www.baseball-reference.com/h/halasge01.shtml) tried to make a living in the game because you couldn’t make decent money playing every other sport. If the conditions were like that in Gibson’s day, he would have been pitching against Jim Brown and Wilt Chamberlain.

In any event, Alexander’s teams were trying to do the same thing that Gibson’s were - win the pennant and the World Series – and the big question is how much each guy did to help his team to that goal.

Inter-league levels of competition is another story. Because the available evidence does suggest that Gibson played in the NL at a time when it was the dominant league, featuring many more of the game’s biggest stars, winning the All-Star Game on a regular basis, and winning the World Series 6 times in 9 tries between 1963 and 1971. By contrast, Alexander pitched in the NL at a time when it was decidedly the weak sister of the AL. AL teams won every World Series between 1910 and 1920 but two: the "Miracle" of 1914 and the fix of 1919. (The 1919 Reds, you may remember, had a better regular season record than the White Sox, but the Sox were overwhelming favorites anyway due in large part to the lopsided World Serieses of the previous several years.)

Taking them out of their contexts . . . each pitcher, of course, would face a very different game today. Gibson had the advantage of mammoth ballparks, centerfield bleachers full of white shirts, a high mound, and did his best work in a part of the strike zone that was only just recently resettled after a 30-year occupation by the hitters. As for Alexander, he had his best years before the advent of the lively ball, the breaking of the color line, night baseball, etc. But I have to think that Alexander would be at least as suited to the modern game as Gibson, given that his sinker and pinpoint control would leave him far less vulnerable to today's patience-and-power offenses (think Kevin Brown).

There is, however, the issue of the spitter, which was outlawed after 1920. Alexander was 34 at that point, and maybe he threw it and maybe he didn't; he wasn't one of the veteran pitchers who was allowed to keep throwing it. (Then again, I remember reading that his manager and first baseman Fred Luderus was famous for licking the baseball, such that an opposing team once retaliated by putting a substance on the ball that caused his tongue to swell up). But check out Alexander's strikeout rate, which was first or second in the league six times between 1911 and 1920, and which dropped almost in half immediately thereafter, generally staying below the league average the rest of his career. It's a fair inference that Alexander's devastating sinker was at least partially a phenomenon of the dirty, wet, dinged-up baseballs he used.

**6. SO WHY DOES EVERYBODY LIKE GIBSON BETTER?**

Well, the postseason is a huge part of it; the whole nation was watching those games on television, and they became a critical part of the game’s lore. The idea that Gibson was unbeatable is big games led people naturally to assume that he was just unbeatable, at least when he needed to be. The fact that he had his best serieses against teams from New York and Boston just underlined that. Then there’s the 1.12 ERA; having a single, impressive "record" or a signature skill does a lot for a player after he retires, and can make the difference between being Hank Aaron or Roger Maris and being Stan Musial or Frank Robinson, who are far less well-remembered than they should be even though Robinson's still managing. That one ERA gives some statistical ammo to the people who use Gibson’s postseason performance as the platform for arguing that he was an absolutely unbeatable pitcher, capable of raising his game as far as the situation demanded.

There's also the fact that Gibson pitched more recently – there are scores of fans out there, as well as writers and broadcasters, who saw him pitch; Alexander’s been dead for 50 years, so his image is vague at best even in the minds of people who think about baseball all day. Then there’s Tim McCarver, Gibson’s catcher in his best years, who has a huge megaphone as a New York and national broadcaster. McCarver may have once been identified with Steve Carlton, but he obviously thought of Carlton as his student; Gibson he treats with reverence. If I hear him tell that story about how Johnny Keane wouldn’t take Gibson out of the seventh game of the 1964 World Series because he "had a commitment to his heart" one more time, I’m gonna gag.

Gibson also scared people; as my older brother likes to point out, Alexander was like Greg Maddux in that he could shut you out, shut you out again and still leave you feeling like you didn't hit him just because you were having an off day, not because Alex was pitching. Gibson retired as the #2 man all time in strikeouts. Alexander's reputation has also been sullied by his alcoholism, epilepsy and "shell shock" (what's known today as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), the combination of which rendered him a pathetic figure by the end of his life.

Finally . . . well, it’s partially Ronald Reagan’s fault. You may remember that shortly after Alexander died, Hollywood rushed out [a movie of his life called "The Winning Team,"](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045332/) starring Reagan as Alexander and Doris Day as his wife. It was just awful. The movie had a few dramatic high points, but they made little enough attempt to capture the real Alexander. And Reagan – put aside your politics for a minute and just think acting – gave what had to be the worst performance of his acting career: adept at playing the genial Everyman and the B-movie hero, Reagan was completely out of his league trying to portray a morose, moody alcoholic. Only Reagan’s political career kept the movie from disappearing into complete obscurity, but the butchering of Alexander’s life story left him less well known today than Crash Davis and Moonlight Graham.

**CONCLUSION: WHO WAS BETTER?**

Well, if you’ve read this far, you can tell that I’m partial to Alexander in this debate; I think he’s really gotten shafted in the discussion of the all-time great pitchers, not least because his service to his country cost him his shot at 400 wins. Gibson was really a great one, and my in-depth look at his numbers definitely left me more impressed than before. Things like the color line and other factors relating to the strength of competition also speak in Gibsion's favor. But at the end of the day, Alexander was more dominant in his prime, and more durable over the course of his career. Based on the evidence I've laid out above, yes, reasonable people could disagree. But I'd put my money on Old Pete.