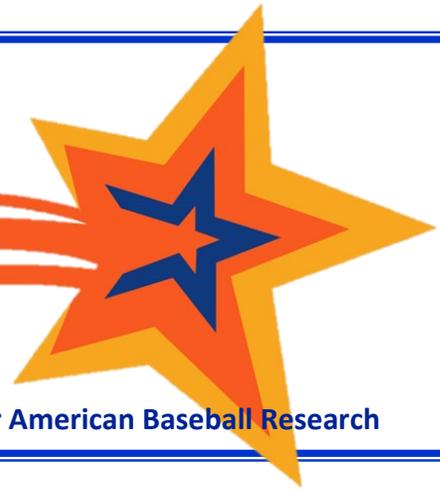


# Houston Baseball

## Shooting Star Express

Official Newsletter of the Larry Dierker Chapter of the Society for American Baseball Research



Volume 2 Number 1



Summer 2021

### President's Welcome

By Bob Dorrell

It has been a chaotic first half of the 2021 baseball season. Yes, the fans have started to return to most ballparks, but are they there to cheer for their team or take out their displeasure with teams like the Astros?

On the positive side, we have had multiple triple plays, numerous no-hitters (too many really), outstanding defensive plays, and terrific competition between archrivals.

Unfortunately, the element of cheating and adding foreign substances to baseballs has predominated. Pitchers cannot escape scrutiny as they must present their gloves and hats to umpires after most innings. What kind of lessons are we passing along to the next generation?

Once again, the powers-that-be are creating new rules that are changing the beauty and tradition of the sport.

This issue of the *Shooting Star Express* offers SABR members the opportunity to sound off about all forms of "cheating," both recent and historical, and the impact "cheating" has had on the game, particularly this year. Books, columns, and TV analysts have expressed opinions, but we want to hear from our members: those dedicated individuals who care about the game and the direction it is taking.

Please send us your opinions and concerns for the Fall issue.

### Astros Scandal Outrage

By Joe Thompson

Mike Fiers decided on November 12, 2019, to break MLB's unwritten rule about the confidentiality of the clubhouse when he said that the Astros used advanced technology to steal the signs of opposing pitchers during home games throughout the 2017 season and beyond. Ken Rosenthal and Evan Drellich wrote in *The Athletic* that electronic sign-stealing was "not a single-team issue" and "numerous clubs expressed general concerns that other clubs were stealing their signs." *Sports Illustrated* published a story on November 2, 2018, that many teams were using high magnification cameras "specifically for stealing opposing teams' signs." Despite this evidence that other teams used advanced technology to steal signs, the Astros would soon become the face of an electronic sign-stealing scandal that seemed to be prevalent throughout the league.



Joe Thompson

Electronic sign-stealing had been a growing trend in MLB since 2014 when the league allowed all teams to be given access to video-replay technology. On September 15, 2017, Commissioner Manfred levied fines against the Red Sox and Yankees for

stealing signs. He used the incident to issue a memorandum to all clubs reiterating the rules prohibiting the use of electronic equipment to steal signs and declared that future violations of the rule would include harsher penalties.

The league looked into the allegations against the Astros by Mike Fiers and, on January 20, 2020, Manfred announced the results of the league's investigation. He determined that the Astros had violated the rules and, as a result, the team would lose its 2020 and 2021 first- and second-round draft picks, it would be fined \$5 million dollars, and team GM Jeff Luhnow and manager A.J. Hinch would be suspended for a year. Team owner Jim Crane quickly fired Luhnow and Hinch after the Commissioner's announcement.

Perhaps the biggest punishment for the club was the outrage from the national media and fans that continues to the present. The national media wrote stories and took to social media

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## Articles Solicitation

Want to get into the game? Tired of sitting on the bench? Play ball with us by sending in articles for future newsletters! Give your fellow chapter members, and other SABR'ites, solid hits of wisdom, wonderment, and wit in an article of your choice that relates to baseball, especially Houston baseball. Rookies are welcome; our cracker-jack editors will tone up your prose into major league quality. Just send your articles, from 200 to 1000 words, to umpire/editor Tony Cavender at [anthony.cavender@pillsburylaw.com](mailto:anthony.cavender@pillsburylaw.com) by October 10 for our Fall issue. Start writing your opening pitch and join the lineup!

The editorial board would like to honor the Hall of Fame players who passed away within the past two years by having our chapter members write personal remembrances of them. If you have unique experiences or memories with any of the recently departed players or managers, please send your stories to our umpire/editor and we will publish them in future newsletters. For each article, please provide your photo and any artwork that goes with your story. We cannot promise that we will use all the stories, but we'll try.

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The Chapter Officers and Editorial Board thank Matthew Stevens and Meghan McCroskey for designing the logos for the masthead and this box, respectively.

## Al Worthington was Honorable. Mike Fiers was not!

By Greg Lucas

In keeping with our newsletter topic this issue, I wish to bring up the story of former major league pitcher Al Worthington. He had a long major league career as both a starter and reliever for the Giants, Red Sox, White Sox, Reds, and Twins.

But unlike Mike Fiers, who publicly exposed the Astros using methods to steal signs after he moved on to the A's, Worthington, a deeply religious man, only took his concerns to his managers in both San Francisco and Chicago. He did not go to the media and did not break baseball's long-time clubhouse posting that, "What you see here, What you hear here, Let it stay here when you leave here!"

Mike Fiers broke that "rule" and the Astros have been the subject of ridicule and resentment ever since. Never mind that Houston was far from the first to "steal signs" — even using electronic means. Wires running up telephone poles or all the way from centerfield to the third base coaches' box were used as far back as 1876 and 1898

respectively. The Astros were just to first to be fully investigated.

As for Worthington, he discovered the Giants were placing a player in the outfield stands with binoculars who then relayed information when he was asked to fill the position. Citing his religious belief that such action was immoral, he was not ordered to take part. His manager, Bill Rigney, who had been close to Worthington even said the practice would cease. That was in 1959.



Greg Lucas

Stealing signs from the stands or scoreboards was very common those days. In fact, Hall of Famer Rogers Hornby said as much in his autobiography published in 1963. "Every team with a scoreboard in centerfield has had a spy one time or more."

And some were "electronic" in the way they relayed the signs. What the Astros did in 2017 was far from new. Using a centerfield television camera to help eliminated the use of binoculars. The cameras had been used since WGN-TV in Chicago introduced the shot from centerfield which is now the television standard.

Worthington's problem with off-the-field sign stealing came up again in 1969 when he was with the Twins. The Minnesota club managed by Billy Martin used a similar binocular-using sign thief. Worthington protested again. Martin apparently did not change tactics and Worthington "retired" with a month left in the season.

However, unlike Mike Fiers, who opened a can of worms, Worthington in 1959 did not go public. He knew sign stealing, both legal and questionable, had been in baseball for a long time and wasn't going away. He made his protests to his managers and that was it.

*Worthington continues on page 6*

## Spin of *Deadspin* Article About Astros All-Stars Spirals out of Control

By Mark Wernick

Jon Hoefling wrote an article for *Deadspin* detailing why he thought the four All-Star selections from the Houston Astros opted out of attending the game. Each had a plausible and valid health reason that they offered, but we all understand that the opportunity to be on the All-Star team this year would have been more of a burden than an honor in the aftermath of the sign-stealing mayhem to which the Astros have been subjected. Nevertheless, Hoefling couldn't resist sprinkling some smarm on the quiet and dignified way the Astros players opted out.



Mark Wernick

Hoefling noted that four All-Star Astros skipped *not* the All-Star game, but the unpleasanties they would have been subjected to at the All-Star game. His analysis of why the situation exists was consistent with the obvious, common-sense nature of the situation. It's just that Hoefling overlooked one salient detail – his own role, and media's role in general, in agitating fans into behaving abusively. And I believe that detail is as important - perhaps more important - than any other detail regarding the motivation of the Astros ballplayers to skip this All-Star game. Hoefling wrote:

“To make a long story short, the Houston Astros cheated to win the 2017 World Series using a camera system to steal opposing pitchers' signs.”

That statement, right there, is unsupported by any known evidence; it is also incendiary. It is not made in the commissioner's report and, to my knowledge, was never identified as a finding of the investigation. Carlos Correa said in an interview that the trash-can-banging sign-stealing efforts were abandoned in the 2017 postseason because it was rendered ineffective by the in-

tense crowd noise. There is no proof that the Astros “cheated to win the 2017 World Series,” so Hoefling's statement is without foundation.

Statements like Hoefling's exemplify why fans all over the country are whipped into a jeering frenzy whenever Jose Altuve and Carlos Correa come to bat. Most of the other players on the team are largely spared the fan histrionics, probably because they were not on the team in 2017. But at the All-Star game, the chances were increased that even Michael Brantley and Ryan Pressly would have to absorb fan abuse, given the current climate surrounding the Astros outside of Houston. What a shame that those two ballplayers, who were not on the Houston Astros roster in 2017, should have to forego one of baseball's great honors in order to spare themselves abuse from the fans.

Also, in his new book, “*Cheated*,” Andy Martino reports that Jose Altuve opted out of the sign-stealing scheme altogether. I always assumed that was true even before I heard about the corroborating data,

because Altuve is a free-swinging, instinct-driven, bad-ball hitter. He reacts to pitches. He doesn't guess at pitches. And he was a great hitter when the Astros were losing 110 games a season. He's probably the one player on the 2017 Astros who least deserves the jeers.

Ross Bernstein wrote in his 2008 book, *The Code*, “There is an old saying in baseball that still rings true today: ‘If you're not stealing, you're not trying.’” He quotes Buck Showalter as saying, “I don't understand how somebody gets upset about it. It's not shame on them for stealing; it's shame on you for allowing it to happen.” He also quotes former pitching great, the late Mike Marshall: “My philosophy on this was simple. I always figured that if a guy could pick up your signs, then that was just good baseball. If you were dumb enough to have signs that they could pick up, then then you deserved to have them stolen.” Pitcher Joe Nathan said, “... if we are switching signs or something, we have to make sure that the opposition can't interpret them, either from the dugout or by one of their scouts watching the game on T.V.”

*Deadspin continues on page 5*

### Baseball



### Trivia

1. Who played in 152 games for the 1959 Phillies, his only major league season as a player, and is in the Hall of Fame?
2. Who is the only player to appear in the College World Series, Major League World Series, Rose Bowl, and Major League All-Star Game?
3. Who played for the Washington Nats, Buffalo Bisons, and Pittsburgh Pirates?
4. Who was the Reading Rifle?

*Answers on page 6*

## Baseball's History of Playing on the Rules' Edge

By Bill Brown

Long before the sophistication of today's game, players devised methods of breaking the rules of the game. If men play a sport for money and fame, there will be cheating. Early methods of rule-breaking including using binoculars to steal catchers' signs from centerfield and relay them to hitters. Modern players discovered that cutting-edge cameras gave them a much better system.

### Lineup of Upcoming Events:

- Aug 13: Monthly Meeting: Live at Skeeters game, Sugar Land**  
**Sept 20: Monthly Meeting: Live and Virtual at Spaghetti Western**  
**Oct 18: Monthly Meeting: Live and Virtual at Spaghetti Western**

In sophisticated times, players used steroids to gain an advantage in providing more bat speed. Faster bat speed led to more power. The Mark McGwire-Sammy Sosa home run race of 1998 highlighted the tremendous gains some players made in strength via steroids. The sport became so popular that investigating steroid use would have been bad for business. Congress intervened, and MLB was forced to conduct an official investigation in 2005. Rob Manfred led that investigation under the edict of Commissioner Bud Selig. The Mitchell Report detailed some of the abuses in the sport.

In the book *Baseball Cop*, former 30-year Boston policeman Eddie Dominguez wrote about being hired by MLB to serve as one of the investigators. He told of angry conver-

sations with Manfred, instructing him to focus on the flow of steroids into the United States rather than exposing individual players who were using the illegal substances. The investigators also were directed to avoid investigating how Cuban players were being transported to the Dominican Republic and other countries by "buscones" and unsavory criminals who then extorted payments after the Cubans signed lucrative contracts. The inference is that the pipeline of these talented players could be ignored because the players were good for business.

When the replay review system started, MLB did not implement

*Edge continues on page 6*



Bill Brown

## Tommy Lasorda Memories from Splendor

By Joe Thompson

Not that long ago, a Youtube video of my 1989 Splendor, Texas high school graduation surfaced. I immediately stopped what I was doing and watched myself walk across the stage, shake the hand of my principal and take my diploma. I shook my head in embarrassment as that same kid, after grabbing his diploma, seemingly strutted off the stage awaiting the adventures of his next stage in life. This video caused me to stop and think about how much my life has changed and stayed the same since that moment.

Thoughts about that graduation weekend came to me when Dodgers legendary manager Tommy Lasorda passed away. When Astros fans talk about the Dodgers on social media, a majority of them seem to dislike the club and its fans. Astros fans in the 1980s were not that much different. We simply did not like the club. When the Dodgers came to town, the Astros faithful roared chants of "Beat LA! Beat LA!" The rivalry was real.

One of the exceptions to this intense rivalry was my fondness for Tommy Lasorda. I always liked Lasorda because he seemed like a likable guy on television. When he was not coaching, he was on some of my favorite television shows, like *Fantasy Island*, *Hart to Hart*, *ChiPs*, and even *Silver Spoons*. The year I graduated, the guy "who loved to eat" even became a spokesman for Ultra Slim Fast. Tommy seemed to be everywhere.

What made me think about him again when he passed away and what caused me to shake my head in wonder, even to this day, was a move he made during a game against my beloved Astros on June 3, 1989, one day after I graduated from high school.

That night, the Astros and Dodgers played a 22-inning, seven-hour game in the Houston Astrodome. It was one of the longest games in Astros history. Tommy Lasorda made an interesting infield substitution in the bottom of the 21st inning, out of

necessity, by placing pitcher Fernando Valenzuela at first base.

While most of the country slept, Astros shortstop Rafael Ramirez hit a ball that glanced off of Valenzuela's glove and into right field. Billy Doran scored the winning run for the Astros and put an end to, up to that point, the longest game in National League history. Legendary Dodgers announcer Vin Scully, despite the long game, expressed the exhausting emotion of both clubs. "Once again we can look at the reaction of the managers, and this time it's the scene you can take to bed...What a finish. What a game."

Lasorda's decision to insert Valenzuela, a long-time thorn in the side of Astros (and the rest of the National League) hitters, was curious. To this day, I try to imagine what Lasorda was thinking. Like I said before, I always liked Tommy and what he did that night made me happy because my Astros won. I still do not understand why he put Valenzuela at first.

Thanks for the memories Tommy. We'll miss you.

*Deadspin continued from page 3*

Bernstein cites numerous examples of the use of wires, buzzers, vibrators, binoculars, telescopes, reflecting flashes of light with mirrors from the centerfield stands, and other examples of this practice going all the way back to the turn of the 19th century.

While I don't condone the electronic sign-stealing scheme, I don't believe the Astros perceived themselves as cheating. More likely, they perceived what they did as part of a pervasive trend throughout baseball, with the young, talented, stat-savvy Astros trying to be the best at all facets of the game, including the tacitly condoned, time-honored practice of deception that includes sign-stealing.

The fact that there still is no prohibition against sign-stealing — even with the use of electronics — in baseball's official rule book, is befuddling. The prohibition comes from two memoranda issued by the commissioner's office in 2001 and 2017, and is identified in the commissioner's report as MLB Regulation 1-1. If baseball wants to make such activity a punishable offense, then why not prohibit that activity in its official rules? And why not be even-handed in meting out punishment? Is it fair to single out one team for draconian consequences while using a gentle touch on other offenders? Why not have a fair and

even-handed policy that discourages future inappropriate deception tactics, but allows teams to continue fielding a competitive team, so long as a team takes appropriate self-corrective steps when necessary?

The Red Sox and Yankees kept their managers and GMs while the Astros sent theirs packing. Doesn't that mean the Astros took their actions more seriously, and behaved more responsibly in the aftermath, than those other teams did? Why not give them some credit for that?

In fact, the Boston Red Sox were caught TWICE doing the same thing, once in 2017 and again in 2018. Not only did the Red Sox get a wrist slap from the commissioner both times, they also continue to get a pass from the fans. Why? I think a big part of the reason is because Hoefling and some of his colleagues don't write, "The Boston Red Sox cheated to win the 2018 World Series," or, "The New York Yankees cheated to get into the 2017 ALCS."

The Astros fired their manager and their GM. The Red Sox rehired Alex Cora, one of the ringleaders of the Astros' scheme. And yet Red Sox fans don't jeer Alex Cora. Writers like Hoefling help fans determine who gets jeered based on the design

## Welcome New Members

Ryan Ferguson ..... Houston, TX  
 William F. Johnson III ..... Port Neches, TX  
 Carl Owens..... Richmond, TX  
 Charles Muizers..... The Woodlands, TX  
 Art Spanjer..... San Antonio, TX  
 James Brazil ..... Houston, TX  
 Richard Stewart ..... Houston, TX

of the jersey they're wearing and the logo on their cap.

Even if they had continued relaying signs via camera in the post-season, there is no sure-fire way to demonstrate that the Astros derived any benefit from the knowledge. The Dodgers are on record as saying they continuously switched up their signs to thwart stealing attempts, which all teams should do.

There was a huge disparity between the Astros home versus road offensive performance in 2017 — but in the wrong direction. When on the road, the Astros vastly outperformed their offense at home. They won the 2017 ALDS and World Series on the road. This defies any reasonable expectation that they obtained a serious benefit from their scheme.

I appeal to the better nature of Mr. Hoefling and his like-minded scribes to please stop writing and saying the Houston Astros cheated to win the 2017 World Series. You do not know that that happened. The players say it did not happen in the 2017 World Series. They were willing to be truthful to the investigators about what they did in return for immunity. If they lied, they would lose their immunity, so what did they stand to gain by lying?

Casting them as illegitimate champions does nothing for the game and does significant harm to the team and the fans of Houston. The Red Sox are not cast as illegitimate champions of 2018. Please stop singling out the Houston Astros as baseball's only bad guys, while ignoring all other likely sign-stealing culprits and stoking fan abuse. I think our media representatives and MLB executives all can do better.

**Thanks to the efforts of SABR member Mike Vance, the Harris County Historical Commission, of which Mike is a long-time member, this historical marker was placed at the corner of Andrews and Heimer in downtown Houston. Much of the site of the former ballpark location of the Texas League's Houston Buffaloes lies beneath I-45. The ballpark opened in April of 1905 and hosted such players as Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Tris Speaker, Satchel Paige, and Rube Foster in exhibition games. It was also home to the Houston Black Buffs.**



**Scandal Outrage continued from page 1**

to express their vitriol towards the Astros. Social media users immediately claimed the 2017 World Series title was forever tainted and that the Astros' success in recent years was the result of electronic sign-stealing.

The story quickly grew beyond the sports headlines as media figures like Howard Stern, Ben Mankiewicz, and others talked about the scandal. The message sent out worldwide about the Astros from the national media, users on social media, and journalists like Andy Martino in his book *Cheated* was that the Astros success, especially from 2017 onward, was only possible because the team stole signs using advanced technology.

Martino's book is a good read and does a great job teaching a general audience about baseball's long history with electronic sign-stealing. The strategy dates back to the 19th century and I commend Martino for showing this. Another good point the book makes is explaining that the Biogenesis performance enhancing drugs ("PED") scandal influenced Manfred's decisions when it came to punishing clubs involved in electronic sign-stealing.

However, Martino's book, in my

opinion, has some major problems. Martino wrote in chapter 18 that MLB's union members all turned against the Astros because union members are a tightknit community. On this point, Martino seems to have forgotten about the steroid era. A group of players like Roy Oswalt and Justin Verlander spoke out strongly against other players who used performance enhancing substances.

Another problem involves his belief that the Astros used the trash-banging scheme throughout the 2017 playoffs. The research into trash-banging by Tony Adams does not cite evidence that the club used the strategy during the postseason. Martino acknowledged Adams' research, but wrote that one source said the Astros used trash-banging. He also wrote the team became more advanced in their cheating. How? Martino does not say on either count.

Commissioner Manfred said the league's investigation received conflicting reports that the Astros used the system throughout the playoffs, but he sided more with the evidence suggesting they did. Manfred is entitled to his opinion, of course, but the public has not seen hard evidence that they did. Martino is also convinced the Astros kept cheating in 2018 and into the 2019 postseason. It



seems to me that Martino believes that the Astros are a cheating franchise, period.

The Astros won the 2017 World Series because they were a great team full of talented players, not because the team participated in a trash-banging, antiquated, rudimentary, sometimes advanced, high-tech buzzer sign-stealing scandal. As Tony Adams and others have pointed out, and as players from the team have said, the strategy they used was abandoned because it was ineffective.

The Astros were built to win long-term and their continued success into 2021 proves that the strategy to build the club into a perennial powerhouse worked. Andy Martino and national writers should abandon their ideas that the club is a cheating franchise and just admit that "Astroball," as described by Ben Reiter in his 2018 book, does indeed work.

**Edge continued from page 4**

rules and controls on using the various high-speed cameras it installed in each system.

That left teams to their own devices in using the video, and they were able to steal signs and relay them to hitters. I Pads were used on the bench to show real time video to players. Those methods of cheating

had not been banned. Teams typically allowed many young and bright front office employees to enter clubhouses and focus on video during games in efforts to steal and relay signs. This practice also was not banned by MLB until the official investigation of the Astros' tactics in 2017 brought them to light.

With rapidly-moving technology, MLB was, in a sense, complicit in

the teams' cheating by not staying in front of the video techniques and putting rules in place. As with the Spider Tac method of pitchers using sticky substances to provide a better grip on baseballs, MLB reacted only after the abuse of the rules was bad for business by taking runs, hits, and action from the game. The issue of cheating is a complex web. At the heart of it is the need for confidence by the public that rules are not being abused and violations are not allowed to go unchecked.

**Worthington continued from page 2**

Worthington left the game at age 40 after 14 major league seasons. He had been effective as both a starter and reliever with a career 3.39 ERA to go with 111 saves and 75 wins.

He coached with the Twins until he heard Christian Liberty University needed a head coach. He led the

school till 1986 when Bobby Richardson took over and Worthington retired.

Who knows what the future of Mike Fiers will be? His highlights, two no hitters—including one in a Houston uniform—are in the record books. But a fan favorite with Astro fans — he will never be.

**Trivia Answers**

1. Sparky Anderson
2. Jackie Jensen
3. Connie Mack
4. Carl Furillo