

Houston Baseball

Shooting Star Express

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



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Spring 2021

President's Welcome

By Bob Dorrill

Spring Training has always been magical for me since growing up in New Jersey. Not only does it symbolize a new year but it means baseball is back.

My wife and I started going to spring training about 20 years ago, focusing on the Astros and Kissimmee, Fla but we also traveled to the home base of other clubs. We were able to visit Baseball City (Royals), Plant City (Reds), Lakewood (Tigers), Tampa (Yankees), St. Petersburg (Cardinals and Orioles), Winter Haven (Red Sox), Sarasota (White Sox), Bradenton (Pirates), Orlando (Twins), and Disney World (Braves).

And the memories:

- Getting an autographed bat, ball or helmet signed by every player, coach and manager of the Astros each year and in just two days.

- Being taught a pregame dance by Jose Lima.

- Standing behind a batting cage when it started to rain and being invited to sit in the dugout by Craig Biggio.

- Getting signed baseballs from Hall of Fame broadcasters Milo Hamilton, Jack Buck, Ernie Harwell, Bob Murphy and Vin Scully.

- Having former umpire John McSherry come over and sign a bat during a 7th inning break.

Lasorda from Pitcher's and Manager's Perspectives

By Larry Dierker

I didn't know Tommy Lasorda was watching the worst game I pitched in high school. He was a Dodgers scout at the time (1964).

Had I known, I still wouldn't have known that he was an outstanding pitcher in his day, who only missed his chance because the Dodgers signed a kid named Sandy Koufax and had to protect him on the major league roster.

- Going to dinner with Texas Baseball and Houston Astros Hall of Famer Bill Brown.

- Watching batting practice on the back fields and having a young man in shorts stand next to me. As he left a gentleman standing on the other side said "Do you know who that is? It's Jose Altuve." I hustled after Jose just to say hello.

- Joe West delaying the start of a game so he could sign a ball for me.

- Lance Berkman, just out of Rice, asking me why anyone would want his autograph.

- Just watching the Boys of Summer getting prepared for the season with lots of other fans.

And so many more.

Sure we attended other attractions during our stays over a 12 year period but it was mostly baseball. And as my wife kept saying "Hurrah I don't have to cook tonight."

Years later, when Tommy came up to manage the Dodgers, he gave me a good-natured shot-across-the-bow. We were near the batting cage at Dodgers Stadium, "You shoulda pitched a good game against Birmingham. I was there and you stunk it up." he said. "You coulda been pitching for us."



Larry Dierker

It was the only time the Dodgers sent a scout to see me that year. The Colt 45's saw me pitch the rest of the games and they signed me to a generous bonus. The Dodgers signed Willie Crawford, another Los Angeles player. So it goes.

Lasorda continues on page 6

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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 by July 10th for our Summer 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 year 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.

Editorial Board

Astros' Worst Trade - How about John Mayberry?

By Mark Wernick

A friend who lives in San Diego recently wrote the following to me:

"This morning, I read about the Padres' top position player in the minors, CJ Abrams, who's a shortstop. I thought of 'the guy' who's occupying that position on the local nine, and wondered, 'Did the Chisox have someone good at shortstop in 2016?'"

[The Chisox traded away Fernando Tatis, Jr, shortly after signing him, to San Diego, for James Shields. Tim Anderson and Jimmy Rollins handled shortstop for the White Sox in 2016.]

"What former Astros player do you (or Houston fans) lament trading away, or losing?"

As I offered up my reply, I did so with the smug confidence of a person who has examined this very question many times over the years, so the words came pouring out without a lot of filtering.

"Hands down, way atop the list, it's Joe Morgan, followed closely by Mike Cuellar and Rusty Staub, fol-

lowed by Manny Mota, Dave Giusti, and Jerry Grote in that order. Then Jimmy Wynn to the Dodgers in 1974. And then John Mayberry to the Kansas City Royals. The Astros also blew a first round pick, selecting Phil Nevin over Derek Jeter, and they *RELEASED* J.D. Martinez!

My friend agreed the Morgan deal was a big loss for Houston. Then he asked me what I thought about the Astros loss of Nate Colbert.



Mark Wernick

He mentioned that Colbert could have hit more than his 103 HRs between 1970-1972 but for San Diego's 38-foot wall at that time. I mentioned in reply that the Astros got Colbert from the Cardinals in the Rule 5 draft, and the Padres drafted him from Houston in the 1968 expansion draft. Stuff like that happens. I also noted that Colbert had it no easier batting in the Astrodome, which in those days was baseball's most pitcher-friendly ballpark. And then I said,

"A worse deal for Houston might have been trading John Mayberry to the Royals for Lance Clemons and Jim York."

But as I dug deeper into my analysis of that deal, I learned something new. It required following a rather complex trail.

Jim York gave the Astros four decent seasons of relief pitching before Houston sold him to the Yankees, but Clemons never got into a game for the Astros, who traded him along with Scipio Spinks to the Cardinals for Jerry Reuss. Now that could have been an outstanding deal, as the Astros got two fine seasons from Reuss, especially 1973. But after '73 the Astros traded Reuss to Pittsburgh for Milt May. After leaving Houston, Reuss

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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.

Tribute to Bill McCurdy, the *Pecan Park Eagle*

By Maxwell Kates

No introductory issue of a periodical about the history of baseball in southeastern Texas would be complete, in my opinion, without a tribute to Bill McCurdy. Far beyond the geographic boundaries of Harris County, Bill's name was synonymous with the words *Pecan Park Eagle*, a newspaper he edited for the better part of 10 years.

On April 4, 2019, Bill McCurdy wrote and published an article entitled "Items from the Sangster Kid's Dream Reliquary" in the *Pecan Park Eagle*. And that was it. There were no more daily deliveries of the treasured online newspaper to its subscribers. Something did not seem right. Bill was not about to cease production of something he loved without an explanation. Was he ill? I instructed myself to "Remember your Jim McKay, 'Our greatest hopes and our worst fears are seldom realized.'" Our worst fears were realized on the morning of April 27, 2019, when we learned that Bill McCurdy had passed away.

William Oscar McCurdy III entered the world in Beeville, Texas on the final day of 1937. In the 81 years that followed, Bill lived life to the fullest. Along with his brother John and sister Margery, Bill was raised in the east Houston neighbourhood of Pecan Park. The new kid in town played sandlot baseball for the local club called the Eagles. Professionally, Bill earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Houston and his masters' degree from Tulane University before opening his practice in psychology in 1967. Bill went on to earn a Ph.D. in 1975. By the 1980s, Bill had become a husband to Norma and a father to Casey.

Outside of work, Bill took on as his passion the research and preservation of the history of baseball in the Lone Star State. He was a driving force behind the Texas Baseball Hall of Fame and in 1988, he joined the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR). Bill lent his athletic abilities to the Houston Babies, a vintage base ball team. According to

teammate Bob Dorrill, the Babies play "the 1860 Rules of Base Ball," which are based on "the New York Game." Bibliophiles will recognize Bill's name on the mastheads of two baseball biographies. In 2003, he told the story of Houston Buffs first baseman Jerry Witte in *A Kid from St.*



McCurdy Ancestry by Mike McCroskey

Louis. Eight years later, Bill and Jimmy Wynn co-authored *The Toy Cannon*. Bill contributed to a third baseball book, *Houston Baseball: The Early Years, 1861-1961*, which was edited by Mike Vance.

Perhaps Bill's signature accomplishment was his stewardship of the *Pecan Park Eagle*. Named after

Bill's childhood sandlot team, the newspaper ran over 3,000 issues beginning on July 21, 2009. Topics as diverse as Houston nostalgia of the 1940s and 1950s, baseball history and statistics, film and book reviews, and the Astros' World Series Championship of 2017 were all included in the *Pecan Park Eagle*. Most of those columns were written by Bill.

At this time, I would like to share some personal recollections of Bill McCurdy. For example, there were the song parodies. Bill wrote "Has Anybody Here Seen Larry" as a satire of the Irish vaudeville standard "Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly." The parody was a tribute to Houston Buffs' outfielder Larry Miggins. Larry grew up in the Bronx with Vin Scully and made Houston his year-round home after he hung up his spikes. The last issue of the *Shooting Star Express* contained Larry's article on Babe Ruth.

Not long after I met Bill, I read a book called *The World's Most Travelled Man*, the memoirs of Canadian globetrotter Mike Spencer Bown. In a 23-year time span, Mike visited every country in the world, saving Ireland for last. While stationed in the Emerald Isle, Mike revealed the local legend of "a man-eating sea ser-

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Baseball



Trivia

1. Who pitched the first Major League Baseball no-hitter on the west coast between his frequent and public socializing?
2. Who caught for eight seasons with the New York Yankees, then managed them for 11 seasons to three pennants and two World Series Championships?
3. Who earned the nickname Yankee Killer for his 28-13 record against them, even though his overall lifetime record was a mediocre 128-116?
4. Who was Alfred Manuel Pesano, Jr.?

Answers on page 6

Going to WAR over Astros' Greatest Second Basemen: *Biggio vs. Morgan*

By Alan Reifman

A few months ago, during a Zoom meeting of the Houston/Dierker SABR Chapter, a polling question came up, asking attendees who they thought was the greatest second-baseman in Astros history. The two obvious contenders were Craig Biggio and Joe Morgan. My recollection, based on statistical criteria, was that Morgan clearly had a better overall career than did Biggio. But overall careers were not at the heart of the question. It was, who was the better *Astro second-baseman*?

Biggio was an Astro his entire career, whereas Morgan had long stints with both Houston and Cincinnati and short ones with three other teams. On the other hand, Morgan

Lineup of Upcoming Events:

- May 17 Monthly Meeting: David Jerome on Bill Virdon**
June 14 Skeeters game at Constellation Field, Sugar Land

was a second-baseman his entire career, whereas Biggio was a catcher during his first four seasons and then played in the outfield during his age 37 and 38 seasons. As the votes rolled in, as I recall, more people voted for Biggio than for Morgan.

To my mind, the best way to resolve a question such as this is to go to WAR – Wins Above Replacement, that is. So, I went to the Baseball Reference pages for [Biggio](#) and [Morgan](#) to begin the research.* I found it useful to divide these players' careers into three stages: up to and including age 27 (capturing Morgan's first stint in Houston); ages 28-35 (which covers Morgan's years in Cincinnati); and ages 36 and older (when Morgan was floating around among different teams, including a second stint with the Astros). Graphs comparing Biggio and Morgan's WAR values during each of these three stages appear below.



Morgan reached big leagues at age 19, although he played in only a combined 18 games during his first two years. In 1965, when Morgan was 21, he amassed an excellent WAR of 6.2. With the exception of 1968, in which a 24-year-old Morgan played in only 10 games [due to a torn mediate ligament](#) in his left knee from a collision at second with Tommy Agee, he recorded annual WAR values between 3.8-6.2 every year from 1965 (age 21) to 1971 (age 27). All told, Morgan contributed 29.2 WAR during his first stint with the Astros. But for the injury, his WAR total in Houston almost certainly would have been in the mid-30s.

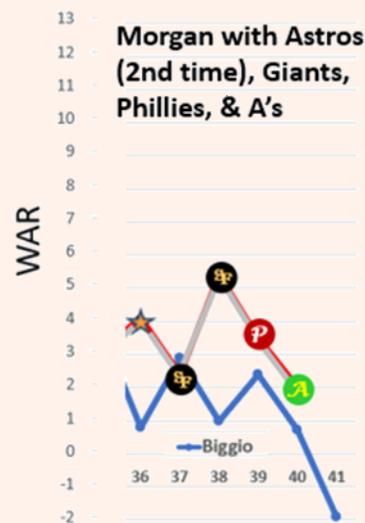
Biggio's major-league debut did not occur until age 22, when he appeared in 50 games for the 1988 Astros. His WAR was 0.5 that year, but for the next five years, it ranged between 3.5-5.4. Biggio's total WAR



by age 27 was 22.3. I would give Morgan the advantage when comparing each player's output up through their age-27 seasons.

During the next phase (ages 28-35), during which Biggio remained an Astro but Morgan played for the Reds, Morgan was clearly dominant. During his first five seasons in Cincinnati, he put up annual WAR between 9.1-11.4. We're talking Ruth, Mays, and Trout territory! For adjudicating purely the question of the best Astros second-baseman, Morgan's Cincy years are immaterial, yet I find them stunning.

Biggio's WAR was strong in his late 20s and early 30s, largely between around 5-7 per year and peaking at 9.8 at age 31 (1997). From ages 33-35, Morgan and Biggio's WAR values were virtually identical.



During the twilight of these players' careers (age 36 and older), Morgan rebounded above his final declining years in Cincinnati. Upon returning to Houston in 1980 (age 36), Morgan put up a 4.1 WAR, which he exceeded two years later in San Francisco (5.4). Biggio's final seasons were not as good.

The main argument for Biggio, in my view, is his greater longevity in Houston, 20 years, compared to 10

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Mayberry continued from page 2

pitched for another 17 seasons, during which he went 173-143, 3.50 with 31 shutouts and 1348 strikeouts and a memorable 1981 postseason with the Dodgers when he came back to bite the Astros in the posterior, making what could have been a good deal look terrible, and further branding the Astros as losers who always trade away their best players without ever receiving commensurate talent.

Meanwhile, Milt May had a slash line of .265/.319/.360 and 11 total home runs in two seasons with the Astros. Then May, along with Jim Crawford and Dave Roberts, was traded by the Astros to the Detroit Tigers for Terry Humphrey, Gene Pentz, Mark Lemongello, and Leon Roberts. Humphrey never played a game for Houston as they traded him to the Angels for Ed Herrmann. The Astros got two serviceable seasons from Herrmann as a backup catcher before selling him to the Expos. Gene Pentz gave the Astros two decent seasons out of the bullpen, then got released by the Astros after a poor beginning to his third season with the team. Leon Roberts gave Houston a couple of serviceable seasons as a backup outfielder before the Astros traded Roberts to Seattle for Jimmy Sexton, who served Houston for two seasons as a backup infielder/pinch runner before the Astros traded him to Oakland for Rick Lysander in a PTBNL deal; then returned Lysander to the Athletics in exchange for — apparently — no one and no money.

WAR continued from page 4

for Morgan. Biggio added 73.3 WAR to the Astros' ledger over his career, whereas Morgan added 33.3 to the Astros. Morgan's career WAR for all his teams was 108.1.

A third name that comes up in this debate is that of current Astro second-baseman [Jose Altuve](#). In his 10 years in Houston (ages 21-30), Altuve has contributed a total 40.2 WAR, with his best years being 2016 (8.3) and 2017 (8.1). Trailing Biggio's Houston career WAR by

But finally, after two fair-to-middling seasons as a starter with Houston, the Astros traded Mark Lemongello to Toronto for Alan Ashby. And that's where the John Mayberry deal begins to emerge in a new light, at least for me.

While John Mayberry went on to have some excellent seasons with Kansas City starting from 1972-1977 (especially '72, '73, and '75), Alan Ashby went on to anchor the Houston pitching staff as an outstanding, durable, defensive catcher for 11 seasons, 1979-1989, appearing in 11 post-season games for the Astros in three post-seasons, 1980, 1981, and 1986. And in Ashby's first season in Houston, 1979, the Astros occupied first place as late as September 9 before fading. This was unprecedented in Houston's 18-year team history.

It can be argued that Alan Ashby was the key to getting the Astros into the post-season. His ability to stabilize a pitching staff that went from a disorienting knuckleballer (Joe Niekro) to arguably the fastest human being ever to throw a baseball (Nolan Ryan), to another intimidating flame-thrower who stood 6'8" (J.R. Richard), to (later on) a split-finger specialist (Mike Scott) and fork baller (Dave Smith), who, like Niekro, also required a backstop magician to prevent snake-jazzing pitches in the dirt from getting past him, to some plenty baffling off-speed specialists like Ken Forsch, Joaquin Andujar, Joe Sambito, Vern Ruhle, Bob Knepper, and company, likely was a feat few, if any, other big league catchers

roughly 33, Altuve hypothetically could surpass it in seven more seasons averaging a WAR of slightly below 5, eight more seasons averaging a little over 4, and so forth.

*On Baseball Reference, in the "Player Value – Batting" section, there's one heading for WAR and two others for oWAR (offensive) and dWAR (defensive). For whatever reason, the sum of oWAR + dWAR slightly differs from WAR. I used the sum of oWAR + dWAR.

Astros Win Contest

Thirty-five members of our Chapter predicted the Astros would win between 78 and 102 games, indicating a wide range of opinions of the Astros' chances this season. The winner gets bragging rights over the off-season.

could have accomplished during that time period.

A few years after hanging up his cleats, Ashby managed in the Astros minor league system from 1994-1996; in 1997 he served a stint as the Astros bullpen coach. After that season, Ashby became a fixture on Houston airwaves, serving as a broadcast analyst in the Astros radio booth from 1998-2005; and then again from 2013 through 2016, all the while serving as a de-facto public relations ambassador for the Astros by making guest appearances at SABR meetings and other community functions. As an attendee at one of those SABR meetings, I found Ashby to be an outstanding speaker/teacher who only had to show me his gnarled fingers in order for me to realize what a challenging job he had catching for the Astros.

So in the final analysis, I believe the Astros did get their money's worth out of the John Mayberry trade, and probably *a whole lot* more than many people realize. From my analysis, I've concluded that Alan Ashby played an outsized role in bringing a long-suffering, stumbling franchise (a "turkey" of a franchise according to Red Smith) its first entry to the post-season and the world of respectability in major league baseball. Tal Smith clearly deserves significant credit, as he had the prescience to trade Lemongello for Ashby. But the work between the white lines, that was all Ashby's.

Thank you, Alan Ashby. I tip my Astros hat to you for your instrumental role in bringing a winner to Houston and the Astros team, even in spite of itself, serendipitously, as it's a certainty that team brass never envisioned they would be adding the crucial building block for creating a winner in Houston by trading John Mayberry for Lance Clemons and Jim York.

That is my conclusion, the result of a friend's simple question.

Lasorda continued from page 1

In 1988, the Dodgers drafted Mike Piazza in the 62nd round as a favor to Piazza's father, one of Tommy's friends. even when he told them it was coming.

As an analyst on TV, I had a high regard for his managing. In a 22-inning game we played in the Astrodome, he had Fernando Valenzuela pitch in relief, or pinch hit, I can't remember. But then he left him in the game and played him in left field and at first base. Fernando was a really good hitter. Third baseman Jeff Hamilton pitched for them that night and lost it, but was throwing 95 mph. Tommy made so many moves in those extra innings it was hard to keep up with them on the scorecard. Masterful is what I would call it.

I know some of the Dodgers players during When the new recruit took batting practice at Dodgers Stadium, he peppered the left field

bleachers with home runs. Lasorda was peacock proud. But the scout that watched him play first base at Miami Dade Community College was still unimpressed. He told Tommy that his friend's son had a weak arm and was deadly slow afoot. "What if he was a catcher?"

Tommy asked. The scout said that would be a different story. Tommy said, "So, now he's a catcher." And what a story it turned out to be. All the way to the Hall of Fame.

When I was 30 years old and at the end of my pitching career, Tommy was 49 and just getting start-



National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum



ed. For 18 years, while I was broadcasting Astros games, Tommy would tweak me about the Birmingham game during batting practice. After the 1996 season, he retired and I started managing the Astros. I saw him occasionally during my five years at the helm. He was good natured, but there was always a Birmingham dig in there somewhere.

Tommy often threw early batting practice when he was managing the team. What a smooth delivery he had. And what a textbook curveball. The hitters had some trouble with that pitch his years didn't like the exorbitant hugging that was part of his "Dodgers Family," Italian style. But there were none that doubted his faith in the team, what with the bleeding of Dodgers Blue and all.

I didn't like his act. Would have found it to be a bit much as a pitcher. He was certainly easy for opponents to hate, prancing around the infield like a pregnant duck.

But what a character. He was wildly entertaining as a speaker and I ended up with fond feelings for him in the end. He aged gracefully, but still aggressively. He was a baseball original. And that species is becoming rare.

I wonder how my life would have changed if I had pitched well against Birmingham and played for my hometown team?

McCurdy continued from page 3

pent [who] lives nearby and can only be slain by a man named McCurdy wearing clothing made of calf skin, wielding a club with three nails in it that have never been used to shoe a horse." Was Bill familiar with the legend? He was not, but when I told it to him, he loved it! Unbeknownst to me, at a party held in Bill's honor in August 2018, his baseball friend Mike McCroskey gave him a replica of the McCurdy club!

My final memory of Bill is of an important lesson he taught me. Bill taught me how to speak English. All right, I exaggerate a little. Bill taught me the proper way to pronounce the word "pecan." Apparently in Canada we say it incorrectly. Bill explained that it should be said puh-CONN, "with 'puh' as in 'pulverize.'" The Canadian pronunciation, PEE-can, evoked memories of tin cans placed by the bedside in the days which predated indoor plumbing. Considering that the pecan is the state tree of Texas, I suspect that his point is rather well taken.

The day Bill died, the Astros and Cleveland Indians were tied at 3 when Tony Kemp won the game for Houston with a walk-off home run in the bottom of the 10th inning. I could not have been the only one to have thought "that home run was for Bill." His Astros fell two games short of his preseason prediction of 109 wins and one game short of capturing their second World Series in three years, this time from the Washington Nationals.

Bill was very much looking forward to the tenth anniversary of the Pecan Park Eagle, which would have taken place on July 21, 2019. Like a collection of Texas legends ranging from Davey Crockett to Roy Orbison to Norm Cash, Bill's memory lives on through his family, friends, colleagues, and others who remember him. So begins a new chapter in chronicling the history of baseball in Houston.

Special thanks to Bob Dorrill and Greg Lucas for their editorial suggestions.

Trivia Answers

1. Bo Belinski
2. Ralph Houk
3. Frank Lary
4. Billy Martin