

Houston Baseball

Shooting Star Express

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



Volume 2 Number 2



Fall 2021

President's Welcome

By Bob Dorrill

August 7th was a very significant date for the Houston Astros and the Larry Dierker SABR Chapter, as on that day the Astros inducted six new members into their Hall of Fame. The individuals so honored were Judge Roy Hofheinz, Lance Berkman, Roy Oswalt, Bob Watson, Bill Wagner, and Cesar Cedeno.

What made this significant for our chapter is that five of the 10-person selection committee are associated with our chapter. They are Bob Dorrill, Bill Brown, Larry Dierker, Mike Vance, and Mike Acosta.

Only two of the committee members, Bob Dorrill and Mike Vance, are not employed by Major League Baseball or the Astros. The others on the selection group are Hall of Famer Craig Biggio, Astros Vice Presidents Gene Dias and Marion Harper, plus MLB Correspondents Alyson Footer and Brian McTaggart.

At our first Hall of Fame selection committee meeting in 2018, which included Houston Astros President Reid Ryan, we discussed eligibility requirements to be considered for the candidates. These included minimums for years with the team and years retired from baseball, as well as accomplishments, both on and off the field, for uniformed and nonuniformed personnel. Based on these qualifications, the Astros prepared a

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Astros' Season Shows Jekyll and Hyde Qualities

By R Scott McCay

The Astros entered the 2021 season hoping to dispel the “cheater” mantra that had built up over the Covid-shortened 2020 season. They knew they'd face hostile fans in all ballparks, especially of those teams that the Astros beat in the 2017 post-season. The main way to erase that reputational stain would be a World Series victory with the core group who won it in 2017. They came up just short, but diminished the stain; now they have a good chance of attaining that goal next year.

This post-season was a microcosm of the Astros' regular season. They blasted off in Oakland with an offensive barrage that repeated itself many times, with several painful lapses when timely hits were few and far between. This started a “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” personality to the team – streaks of great play interspersed with bouts of pathetic pitching or hitting, or both.

Throughout the season, the Astros played their best against the better teams. They dominated their wins, but lost gut-wrenchers, and had the AL's best run differential. Their 11-game winning streak in June that propelled them to the division lead showed their Dr. Jekyll qualities, but

right afterwards, two one-run losses to the Tigers and a sweep by the Orioles exposed Mr. Hyde attributes.

Four Astros were named to the AL All Star team, two elected by fans (Altuve and Correa), but they chose to stay with their families rather than face an expected vitriol from national fans and media. The acquisition of four relievers at the trade deadline showed the team was all-in, but they lost several young players who have already come back to haunt them.

The Astros beat down the White Sox in the ALDS, then gave a Dr. Jekyll performance against the Red Sox in the ALCS, after two blowout losses gave everyone pause. However, Mr. Hyde showed up in Atlanta with the rain and cold. The Astros' bats, then the pitching, disappeared when they were most needed.

Next spring, the Astros will blast off again looking for another World Series and reputational redemption.



R Scott McCay

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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 January 15 for our Winter issue. Start writing your opening pitch; 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.

Memories of a Eddie Robinson: player and executive

By Tony Cavender

Eddie Robinson, the oldest living major league ballplayer, passed away on October 4, 2021, at the age of 100 at his home in Bastrop, Texas. He played 13 years in the American League with seven of its eight clubs (all but the Red Sox) and was a four-time All-Star.

He grew up in Paris, Texas — the home of another well-known major league player, Dave Philly — and began his long career in Valdosta, Georgia in the Class D Georgia-Florida League in 1939 — the lowest of the low minor leagues. He played another year in Valdosta and was advanced in 1941 to Elmira in the Class A Eastern League as a power-hitting first baseman.

He soon exhibited unique power hitting ability in Elmira and with Baltimore in the International League before World War II broke out. After his three years in the Navy, he returned to Baltimore and was the league's MVP in 1946. He joined the Cleveland Indians in 1947, and was a member of Cleveland's 1948 World Series championship team.

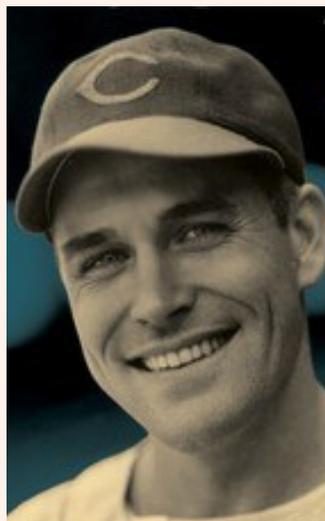
He was traded to the White Sox, where he hit for average and power. Frank Lane traded him to the Philadelphia A's where he and Gus Zernial were both great power hitters. In 1954 he was traded to the Yankees, and played there through the 1955 season. He stayed

in the majors until 1957, when he retired.

As it happened, this was only the beginning of his major league career. He became an executive for many teams over 40 years. He was the Braves General Manager when Ted Turner purchased the club, and then began a long association with the Texas Rangers, including serving as their General Manager from 1976-82.

He wrote an autobiography, *Lucky Me*, in 2011 with fellow SABR member C. Paul Rogers. In it, he recalled his career in baseball, both on the field and off. He scouted for several teams, including George Steinbrenner's Yankees, but declined to serve as its General Manager position in 1982.

He was a great friend and supporter of SABR, especially the Larry Dierker Chapter. He attended the National Convention of SABR in Houston in 2014, where he was a featured speaker and made many new friends for himself and SABR.



Eddie Robinson on a cover of his autobiography, *Lucky Me*

Museum Memorializes Bill Brown's Big Red Machine Broadcasting Work

By Brian Lepley

On Minute Maid Park's left and center field concourse, the Houston Astros Hall of Fame honors team legends.

The display debuted in 2019 and includes Gene Elston, radio voice of the Astros from 1962-1986, and Milo Hamilton, who was on the air from 1987-2012.

Another broadcaster debuted for the Astros in 1987 as general manager Dick Wagner helped get Bill Brown on the television team, where he worked until 2016.

Brownie may become the first-ever Astros Hall of Fame TV announcer but for now, he can appreciate being part of the Cincinnati Reds Hall of Fame and Museum.

The Reds facility, a two-story building integrated with the team store, is regarded as one of major league baseball's finest. An enormous room is devoted to the team's 80-plus years of broadcasting teams and, on a panel, is Bill Brown, TV announcer for the 1976-1982 Reds.

"I was hired by WLWT-TV in Cincinnati in 1972 after I got out of the Army," Brown remembers. He was drafted in 1970 after graduation in 1969 from the University of Missouri. The Army recognized his skills and Brown was on the Armed Forces Vietnam Network radio and television in 1971.

Like most on-air talent back then, Brown worked long hours, anchoring weekend sportscasts and working as a sports reporter on weekdays. He did occasional basketball play-by-play for the University of Cincinnati, Xavier University, and the Kentucky Colonels of the American Basketball Association. He cov-

ered Cincinnati Stingers hockey games, Cincinnati Kids MISL games, Cincinnati Bengals preseason games, pro tennis, and pro bowling.

"My first game on the air for Reds television was Sept. 22, 1972, as a substitute for Waite Hoyt, who was hospitalized," Brown said. "The Reds clinched the National League West division title in Houston that night, ironically."

From 1973-75, he filled in for Charlie Jones on TV play-by-play.

"I substituted for him on weekends in September when he was away doing NFL football on NBC," Brown said. "When Ken Coleman was the play-by-play voice in 1976, there was an

opening and I applied. The TV station did the hiring, with the approval of the Reds. The interview process was not extensive because they were familiar with my work."

In those pre-cable TV days, the network would only air about 50

games each year, he remembered.

"Bill did a fine job on the air in the years he did Reds baseball," said Marty Brennaman, Cincinnati Reds radio/TV broadcaster from 1974-2019 and 2000 Ford C. Frick award winner. "Ironically, Dick Wagner hired me in 1974 and Bill in Houston in 1986."

Chris Eckes, curator of the Cincinnati Reds Hall of Fame and Museum, tells the professional and personal reasons for Brown's inclusion at the facility.

"Bill was selected for the display because of both the length of his tenure and the fact that his inaugural season with the club was also the capstone season of the Big Red Machine era," Eckes said. "In addition, Bill's years with the Reds coincided with my introduction to the team as a child and I remember him as the voice of the Reds from my earliest days following the club."

Eckes had the chance to meet Brown at an earlier version of the HOF and museum.

I'm sure he would never remember it, but I had a chance to say hello to him when he walked through the

Brownie continues on page 6



Bill Brown, lower left, in Cincinnati Reds' Hall of Fame

Baseball



Trivia

1. What Astros player was a football All American and National Champion?
2. Yuli Gurriel is the latest Cuban player to win a batting title; who was the first?
3. Who won over 140 games and a Cy Young Award, plus pitched in three World Series, all after leaving the Astros?
4. Who won the 1953 World Series MVP with a .500 average and 1.4778 OPS?

Answers on page 6

Houston Babies Beat Red Sox in Vintage Game

By Bob Copus

As part of the annual Texian Festival at the historic George Ranch, two Vintage Base Ball teams met on the grounds of the historic ranch to play ball the way it was played in the 1860's: the Barker Red Sox, managed by Bob Copus, and the Houston Babies, captained by Bob Dorrill.

Lineup of Upcoming Events:

Nov 15: Monthly Meeting: Dr. Chris Phillips on Scouts and Stats - Spaghetti Western or Zoom

Dec 13: Monthly Meeting: Jack Bales on the '32 World Series - Spaghetti Western or Zoom

After a rousing rendition of the National Anthem led by Mike McCroskey it was time for the Blind Tom to yell "Play Ball."

It was a lively game witnessed by scores of cranks (fans) who sat on specially placed bleachers and lawn chairs. Behind the bleachers was a

stage set for the singing group, The Tanners, as well as tents where the singers camped out. Down the left field line was a new addition to the festivities, a beer tent where players and cranks could quench their thirst if they so desired.

Playing for the Babies were long standing teammates Bob Blair, Robert Pina, James Marken, Mark Rowan, and Joe Thompson. Newcomers included David Dorrill, Nick Thornquist, Rita Rowan, Eric Blair, Kallin Young, and five-year-old Jay Pina who had an outstanding left-handed swing.

Playing for the Red Sox were Bob Copus (nickname "Chowdah"), Mike Hayes ("Bam Bam"), Jeff Mudd ("Schoolboy"), Chris Mudd

("Pops"), Mike Marrie ("Bones"), and James Baumgartner ("Buzz"). Cranks that joined the Sox were "Righty Groves," "Stretch," and "Sketcher," a father, son, and daughter combination as well as "Scout," nine-year-old Jacob Baumgartner.



Manager Bob Dorrill in vintage Houston Babies uniform

It was an exciting game, with the Babies rallying late to an 8-7 victory. After the game, group and team photos were taken by family members and cranks that enjoyed the game, followed by a bag lunch provided by the George Ranch.

Also, players were asked to be in pictures taken by attendees of the festival. As Red Sox players walked around and enjoyed other events at the festival, they were met with "Go Astros," "better luck next year," and an occasional "Boo," all in fun.

It was a fun day with good sportsmanship and many laughs.

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list of all candidates who met the criteria for our consideration.

The initial Hall of Fame Class was inducted in 2019 and included Jeff Bagwell, Craig Biggio, Nolan Ryan, Mike Scott, Jose Cruz, Joe Morgan, Joe Niekro, Larry Dierker, Bob Aspromonte, Jimmy Wynn, Shane Reynolds, J. R. Richard, Don Wilson, Jim Umbricht, Milo Hamilton, and Gene Elston. There were no inductees in 2021, due to Covid-19.

Going forward, it is estimated that new classes will be made up of two or three individuals whose names will be announced each January at the annual Fan Fest.

Thanks to the Houston Astros, the selection committee was able to participate and be on the playing field with the 2020 Astros HOF class during the ceremonies along with returnees from the initial HOF 2019 class.



2020 Astros Hall of Fame Inductees, or family, from left to right in front row: Judge Roy Hofheinz's daughter Dene, Cesar Cedeno, Billy Wagner, Roy Oswalt, and Bob Watson's family: wife Carol, son Keith, and daughter Kelley.

2019 Astros Hall of Fame Inductees, from left to right in back row: Bob Aspromonte, Craig Biggio, Shane Reynolds, Larry Dierker, and Jose Cruz.

Umpire Joe West's Career and Records

By Fred Rodgers

As I was leaving Doug Harvey's Memorial service late January 2018, a fellow SABR member, Andy Strasberg, stated that Joe West is now the world's greatest living MLB umpire.

I then realized that, for 40 years I had been friends with umpire Joe West, who was also a historical baseball legend. Sure, I watched him work MLB games and, over time, he had become one of the best. But to be friends with a certain future Hall of Fame member? I had suddenly realized how lucky I was.

Joe West has come to the end of his baseball career. On Oct 1, 2021 Joe retired as the oldest umpire in baseball history at 68 years and 335 days. That's just one record he has garnered.

On May 25, 2021, Joe West worked his 5,376th game, breaking Bill Klem's record that stood for 80 years. Every game Joe worked to the end of the 2021 season was a new standing mark. Joe also holds the record now for most games worked, including postseason and All-Star games, breaking Bill Klem's old record. Also, this is Joe's 43rd season, a record in and of itself. (Bill Klem and Bruce Froemming held the old record at 37 years).

None of these records is likely to ever be broken again, now that umpires only work approximately 120-130 games a year. That would take 45 seasons plus and no umpire starts in the major leagues at 23 years old like Joe West did.

Joe West umpired his first MLB game on September 14, 1976. Walter Alston was manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers; Tommy Lasorda hadn't started his own legendary career; Reggie Jackson was a Baltimore Oriole; the Big Red Machine

was in control.

Joe is the only surviving member of his original umpiring crew of Paul Pryor, John McSherry, and Art Williams. Lance Berkman had just been born. Fernando Tatis, Jr.'s DAD was only one year old. The President of the United States was Gerald Ford.

Only four of the 24 managers who were employed at Joe's start in 1976 are still alive today.

The only baseball rule change that precedes Joe West's tenure is the AL use of the designated hitter, which began in 1973. Joe West has worked more games than the total number of games played at Dodger Stadium.



Joe West, left, and Fred Rodgers, right

Joe married Rita Scott in February of 2019 in St. Louis at a pub. Rita had been the manager of Mike

Shannon's restaurant for over 30 years. She is the best thing to ever happen to Joe.

Rita sent out a memo to all their friends that they personally invited to Chicago for the May 25, 2021, record-setting 5,376th game. Two buses would take the 116 lucky invitees from the hotel to the ballpark and back. A celebration party was held Wednesday the 26th after the day game.

Among the guests were the Oak Ridge Boys (who sang the National Anthem), Emmy Lou Harris, Larry Gatlin, Mark Eaton, Paul Krause, Larry Ziegler, Jim McMahon, among others. Other guests included current umpires Bruce Dreckman, Dan Bellino, Nick Lentz, and Vic Carapazza, and former umpires Don Denkinger, Ed Rapuano, and Jerry Crawford.

When the May 25th game became official after five innings, the

Welcome New Members

Courtney Baker Scottsdale, AZ
 Gus Conroy..... Spring, TX
 Hank Lott Chicago, IL
 Bruce McClure..... New London, NH
 Tristan Smith..... Missouri City, TX
 Lane Westernan Bellville, TX

White Sox gave a tribute to Joe West on their Diamondscreen. Among the celebrities honoring Joe was former President George W. Bush and country music icon, Garth Brooks. The famous San Diego Chicken, Ted Giannoulas, performed a skit with Joe on the field.

I do not know anyone with so many interests and personal achievements as Joe West. Besides his umpiring career Joe was a Little League catcher (some of his teammates were at the May 25 game), a star quarterback at Elon College in North Carolina, where he was team MVP as a senior, guiding his team to the Carolina Championship.

He was approached by MLB umpire John McSherry, who sponsored him in Jim Evans Umpire School. Joe graduated number one in his class. Three years later, Joe was in the major leagues at age 23, the youngest ever in the NL.

Joe West controls a game; he does not run it. To prove it, in 2011 Sports Illustrated had a polling of the umpires by the players and managers and Joe was in the top five of BOTH the Best Umpire and the Worst Umpire.

He has patents on a kevlar umpire's vest he invented called the West Vest. He was voted two plus terms as President of the World Umpires Association and successfully (no strike!!) negotiated two contracts for the union (quietly I may add!).

He has worked with three sets of father-son umpiring crews: Runge, Gorman, and Wendlestadt.

He has played in the Celebrity Golf Tournament and yearly plays in a Pebble Beach golf tournament every December. He has produced two CD's: Blue Cowboy and Diamond Dreams.

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museum during one of the Astros' trips to Cincinnati many years ago," Eckes said. "Suffice it to say, it was a huge thrill for me."

Thrills stacked up from 1975-1981 for the Reds and Brown.

"The highlight was, of course, the back-to-back World Series titles but we were allowed to broadcast the National League Championship Series games against the Phillies in 1976 and the Pirates in 1979 on a local basis," he said. "The rivalry with the Dodgers was strong, and the sellout games and fierce competition was memorable. The presence of so many Hall of Famers and interesting players made the job a dream job."

After the Dodgers toppled the Reds in 1977 and 1978 for the National League West titles (and losing both World Series to the New York Yankees), the Reds reclaimed the division the next year.

"The 1979 season was distinctly different as the Reds transitioned to a team without Pete Rose," Brown said. "They had a gritty team and the September pennant race games with the Astros were enjoyable."

Joe Morgan was the next Reds superstar to leave, rejoining the Astros in 1980 when Houston edged the Dodgers for the division.

Next for Brown was the 1981 strike year when the Reds had the

best record in baseball, 66-42, and missed the playoffs.

"The split season was a strange time, and there was strong disappointment when the team with the best record did not win either half of the season and missed the playoffs," Brown said. "The next year, 1982, was the biggest disappointment because the team lost 101 games and I got fired.

"Actually, that was probably justified. I did not have a good year either!" At 35 years old, Brown found himself at a crossroad.

"I gave up pursuing baseball jobs because it was so competitive and, having been fired by WLWT, I thought that stigma would keep me from getting another chance," said Brown.

When he was fired, Reds general manager Dick Wagner sent him a note saying the team had no say in Brown losing his job.

Flash forward to 1986, Los Angeles, where Brown is producing a syndicated national sports talk show. The Astros came to Dodger Stadium, on their way to the division title.

"I called Dick and asked if he was coming with the team and he said he was, and he agreed to be my guest for our show," Brown remembered. "I gave him a ride to his hotel, and he asked if I was trying to get back into baseball. I told him that I



was not pursuing anything but would love to get a chance."

Two months later Wagner contacted Brown about an opening and told him how to get in that hiring mix.

"The Astros whittled down their applicant list to three of us, flying each of us to Houston on a different day and auditioned each of us as a surprise," Brown said. "We all did the same three innings of an Astros and Dodgers game."

Now 40, five years after the team with the worst record in baseball fired him, Brown began his 30-year announcing career with the Astros.

For now, Brown will be remembered by Reds fans that see him in the Hall of Fame and Museum next to Great American Ballpark on the bank of the Ohio River, placed there by a fan who will never forget his play by play of the Big Red Machine.

In the opinions of the millions of Astros fans that had the same experience, Brown's Astros HOF plaque is a matter of time.

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He also produced, with myself and former Detroit Tigers pitcher, Bill Slayback, a "Tribute to Ernie Harwell sung by Joe West" that is played regularly on Youtube.

I have had the pleasure of singing on stage with Joe at Gilley's in Pasadena, TX, skiing the slopes with him at Mammoth Mountain, CA, golfing at the Doral in Miami, FL, and introducing Joe as a guest speaker for the Larry Dierker SABR group.

For Joe's record-breaking game I had commissioned sports artist Christopher Paluso from San Diego to pro-

duce a plaque honoring Joe's two big accomplishments. MLB gave him a brand-new set of golf clubs to fit him to a tee.

My favorite story about Joe West is also about the legendary voice of the Dodgers, Vin Scully. The Dodgers were playing the Braves in Los Angeles and there was a runner on first with one out.

The Braves set up like they were going to bunt. Steve Garvey came running in while Davey Lopes ran to cover first. But the batter changed his mind and slapped the ball toward right field. The ball hit the runner and everyone thought he was out.

Except Joe West. The rule has one exception. If no fielder can make a play on the batted ball and it hits the runner it is a dead ball and considered a hit. Vin Scully himself was not aware of the exclusion and after criticizing Joe that night, Scully issued an apology to Joe in the next morning's LA Times newspaper. As Mel Allen would say, "How about that!!!"

Trivia Answers

1. Darin Erstad
2. Tony Oliva
3. Mike Cuellar
4. Billy Martin