

Houston Baseball

Shooting Star Express

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



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Winter 2022

President's Welcome

By Joe Thompson

Bob Dorrill began serving as president of the Houston chapter back in 2004. The chapter has grown over the years from just a few enthusiasts to one of the most active SABR groups in the nation. Full of engaged baseball fans, this chapter provides many opportunities to talk about baseball. A lot of that is because of Bob's effectiveness over the years as a chapter leader. Taking over as president of the Larry Dierker chapter will not be easy, but it will be fun.



Joe Thompson

On April 3, 2010, the Astros played their final spring training game against the Toronto Blue Jays at Minute Maid Park. The late Bill McCurdy wrote up a story about that day [here](https://bill37mccurdy.com/2010/04/04/easter-saturday-fanfest-at-minute-maid-park/) (<https://bill37mccurdy.com/2010/04/04/easter-saturday-fanfest-at-minute-maid-park/>.) The game did not turn out so well for the local nine, but it is a day I will never forget.

My wife and I were walking around when we came upon a SABR booth. I spent a little time talking with the people there about SABR. I participated in a trivia contest and

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Tal Smith Elected to Astros Hall of Fame

By Bill Brown

SABR congratulates 40-year SABR member Tal Smith, a former SABR vice president, on his selection to the Houston Astros Hall of Fame in 2022. Longtime Colt .45/Astros player/broadcaster/manager Larry Dierker, for whom the Houston SABR chapter is named, agrees with many that Tal Smith, with the exception of team owners, has had the biggest impact on the team in its 60-year history.

Two defining events in Smith's 60-year baseball career had nothing to do with baseball. The first was taking a speedwriting course in order to get his first job in baseball. The second was diving into the world of architecture and construction to become the liaison and project manager for the Houston Sports Association for the construction of the Eighth Wonder of the World, the Houston Astrodome.

Construction started on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco the year Tal Smith was born, 1933. Herbert Hoover was President of the United States when that year brought a new President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The country was in the Great Depression. The Dow Jones Industrial Average was 53.84 in mid-March.

As a seven-year-old in Massachusetts, Smith was "absolutely captivated" by baseball as he listened to the 1940 World Series on radio, matching Cincinnati and Detroit. Bil-

ly Werber, Ival Goodman and pitchers Bucky Walters and Paul Derringer led the Reds to a World Series triumph.

With his father working as a retail executive, Tal's mother dropped him off at Fenway Park at age seven for his first major league game in person. "I begged and pleaded with her to let me go to Fenway Park for an afternoon game in 1941. I think I bought my own ticket and after the game was over, I had to wait for her outside the ballpark to retrieve me. In those days it was a lot safer for kids."

He watched a team featuring Hall of Famers Joe Cronin, Bobby Doerr, 21-year-old Ted Williams and Jimmy Foxx. The youngster spent hours at home near the radio listening to broadcaster Jim Britt describe the Red Sox and the Boston Braves, painting the picture the listeners formed in their minds. Radio is the

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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 antho-ny.cavender@pillsburylaw.com by April 15 for our Spring 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.

Editorial Board

Hall of Fame fails by not electing Bonds, Clemens

By Mike Vance

Barry Bonds, the best hitter of my lifetime, and Roger Clemens, who won more Cy Young Awards than anyone ever, fell short of the Hall of Fame for the tenth time, ending their consideration by the alleged Baseball Writers of America. To put it bluntly, I find this to be the biggest pile of bull dookey in the history of pastures.

No one who's ever smelled rosin is questioning the qualifications of Bonds and Clemens. Bonds won three MVP awards before he even gave a thought to performance enhancers. He had seven MVPs overall. But steroids don't improve your batting eye, and Bonds has a lifetime average just shy of .300. He is among the all-time leaders in hits, RBIs, and runs scored. He is the all-time leader in walks, both intentional and otherwise, and obviously, the man had more home runs than anyone in history. He was fast. Barry Bonds hit

77 triples and is the only player in history to have 500 home runs and 500 stolen bases. On the defensive side, he won 8 gold gloves and finished in the top ten in defensive WAR four times. How does he really compare to the best ever? He's third all-time in offensive WAR behind Ruth and Cobb, two guys who played in segregated ball and never had to face a Black pitcher, or even a dark-skinned Latino pitcher, for that matter. Consider that when you're talking about "fair play."



Mike Vance

Roger Clemens was arguably the most dominant pitcher in baseball from 1986 to 1992. Four of his five best seasons came during

those years. In those seven seasons, he led the league in wins twice, ERA four times, shutouts five times, complete games twice, strikeouts twice, won two Cy Youngs and one American League MVP Award. It was not until a few years AFTER that run, when his numbers began to decline and his injuries mounted, that he is accused of looking into HGH.

So, what is the issue? It's that the Baseball Writers of America are, as a group, a bunch of petulant, self-absorbed children. These knights of the keyboard, who never made it past T-ball, felt slighted or personally wounded. Don't forget that this same group denied the MVP Award to Ted Williams in a year that Teddy Ballgame won the Triple Crown. Add to that that a good portion of the pious lickspittles who made this decision haven't written about baseball in a decade. Others don't believe that the sport exists outside the AL East. Big Papi is the lone inductee this year. I love the guy, but he was tarred by the same performance enhancing drugs brush that hit Bonds and Clemens.

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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.

Former President's Farewell Message

By Bob Dorrill

It all began on November 12, 2004, at the Texas Baseball Hall of Fame Induction Banquet when Bill Brown and Greg Lucas approached me about restarting the local SABR chapter and suggested the Live Sports Café as a possible location for a monthly meeting. Our very first session one month later was at the Live Sports Café and attracted 16 SABRites. Phil Boudreaux made the first ever presentation on his baseball card collection.

As the years rolled by met at various additional locations in and around Houston, including Lucky's Bar, the Ragin' Cajun Restaurant, the Westin Hotel, and now the Spaghetti Western Restaurant.

During the 18 years I was President, we conducted over 230 meetings, which included monthly meet-

ings, attending Astro and Skeeter games, Astros Fan Fests, Houston Babies vintage baseball games, and hosting the annual five-day SABR 44 Convention in 2014 with eight different player panels. In fact, we implemented SABR's first-ever Day at the Ballpark where we spent 10 hours at Minute Maid Park for sessions and a ballgame. Of note, this is the only day in the history of Minute Maid Park where in August the roof was open.

At each meeting we scheduled prominent baseball speakers many of whom spoke to us numerous times. In a forthcoming newsletter issue, we'll compile all our speakers.

Some of the significant chapter accomplishments during my tenure include the following:

Writing and publishing "Houston Baseball – The Early Years 1861 – 1961".

Hosting SABR's 5 Day National Convention in 2014.

Establishing a vintage baseball team, The Houston Babies, which is still active.

Starting a quarterly newsletter "The Shooting Star Express," which has published six issues.

Conducting a realistic arbitration case with Tal Smith as official arbitrator.

Being selected by the Houston Astros for their Hall of Fame Selection Board of Fame,

Recognizing our own Tal Smith as a member of the Houston Astros Hall of Fame class of 2022.

We especially want to thank Tal Smith, Bill Brown, Greg Lucas, Larry Dierker, Mike McCroskey, and Marsha Franty, who have been with us for almost the entire 18 years, plus Bill McCurdy, Monte Irvin, and Jimmy Wynn, who were amazing friends while they were alive.

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"theater of the mind" when it comes to baseball, and Smith was enraptured to have a front row seat as he absorbed the sounds of the game. He was drawn to the rhythm of the sport, the crack of the bat and the sounds of the crowd. "I listened to radio a lot and I could relate to the announcers. Radio was really fostering my interest in the game."

Tal remembers getting on his bicycle at his home in the suburb of Hingham about 15 miles from Boston and riding to a newsstand to get a freshly published midweek copy of *The Sporting News*. "I started reading that I guess before I was eight years old, because I can still recall having 1941 issues of the magazine, although I still regret disposing of them after college," Smith reminisced. He recalls collecting not only baseball cards but military trading cards of airplanes and ships.

"I can recall there was an officer that lived across the street from us within the confines of the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot and he had a couple of teenage boys. I guess as a result of just talking from across

the street I would go over and play catch with them. They would arrange for me to get in through the guard gate. I remember blackouts, air raid warnings and that kind of stuff. There were a lot of precautions on the East Coast making sure that you didn't have any illumination at night. Air raid wardens would come around to check about whether you had all the black curtains drawn and no lights

visible."

The passion with baseball stayed alive through his high school years. Tal discovered Culver Academy in Indiana. "I actually went there as a boy when I was 8, 9, 10 and 11. That was my parents' idea. My mother was born in Indiana. My dad had come across a movie titled "Tom Brown at

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Baseball



Trivia

1. Who came in second to Don Newcombe, his teammate, for Cy Young and MVP?
2. Who won eight games for Houston over his career and had his number retired?
3. For what MLB team did Moonlight Graham play right field?
4. Who won Rookie of the Year for Cleveland, but had only 210 MLB plate appearances after that?
5. Who played two seasons with the White Sox and won an NBA championship with the New York Knicks?

Answers on page 6

Bill Virdon Remembered at May '21 Chapter Meeting

By Dave Jerome

On Monday, May 17, 2021, I provided an update on my biography of Bill Virdon to the Larry Dierker Chapter of SABR. When this was mentioned to Bill and Shirley Virdon, they too wanted to attend since we could Zoom in from the comfort of their home. So with the Virdons, along with my wife, Kathy, we gave an update on our book project.

Lineup of Upcoming Events:

- Feb 5: SABR Day in America: Meet live to talk Baseball at Jax Grill, 1613 Shepherd, 12 - 3**
- Feb 21: Monthly Meeting: Dan Walsh on baseball stamps - Spaghetti Western or Zoom**

Among several others known to the Virdons, Tal Smith, Larry Dierker and Bill Brown were all present that evening. I had the opportunity to interview Tal and Larry prior to that occasion. Later, Bill and Shirley had the opportunity to visit with their friend, Bill Brown, in Springfield last summer when he and his wife passed through the area going to and from Sedalia, Missouri. Bill and Shirley enjoyed the May 17 meeting a great deal and it meant a lot to them both to see so many in virtual attendance that night. Shirley especially enjoyed seeing Tal Smith's wife, Jonnie, who she had not seen for a few years.

As was summarized on that Monday night, Bill Virdon had be-

come a baseball professional that had not only achieved success for himself but was also instrumental in helping others become great MLB players. Too many times biographies such as this are ignored or not pursued at all, but such stories are important for those of us who want to preserve professional baseball history and to honor those who made such significant contributions.

By the fall of 1975, by all accounts, Bill Virdon had become a successful Major League Baseball player, coach and manager. Virdon was the '55 NL Rookie of the Year with the St. Louis Cardinals. He was inexplicitly traded to the Pittsburgh Pirates early the following season where he finished second behind Hank

Aaron for the '56 NL batting title. During the 1960 World Series against the Yankees, Virdon was an unsung hero where his remarkable defense and timely clutch hits led to a Pirate victory. In the era of Willie Mays, Virdon won the '62 Gold Glove award. His last career at bat in '68, as a player-coach for the Pirates, he hit a homerun in the ninth inning that took the game into extra innings.

After Pittsburgh defeated the Baltimore Orioles in the '71 World Series, Virdon was named manager of his beloved Pirates. The Pirates of 1972, perhaps the best team in the National League, was firmly Virdon's team. Pittsburgh would lose in the final game of the NLCS to the Cincinnati Reds because of a wild

pitch in the bottom of the ninth inning. The following year, Pittsburgh GM Joe L. Brown fired Virdon late in the season; a decision that Brown would later regret.

In January 1974, Bill Virdon was hired to manage the New York Yankees, who had not been competitive since 1964. The Yankees quickly returned to their winning ways and Virdon was named the Sporting News '74 AL Manager of the Year. Bill and Shirley Virdon would form a close friendship with Yankee Co-General Manager Tal Smith and his wife Jonnie.

Virdon, as both a player and a manager, had always let his actions speak for themselves. He had never been boastful or flamboyant. But those traits were what the new Yankee owner, George Steinbrenner, wanted in a manager. Even though Virdon had whipped the Yankees back into shape and had made them contenders again, Steinbrenner had Virdon fired on August 1, 1975. Gabe Paul, the Yankees' President and Co-GM indicated that Bill had done nothing wrong.

A week after Virdon was fired in New York, Tal Smith was named the new General Manager of the Houston Astros. At the time Smith took over in Houston, the Astros were in sixth place and 35 games back in the NL West. While acknowledging that manager Preston Gomez was a good baseball man, Smith nevertheless opted for new leadership. Smith offered the job to Virdon. Under Virdon, the team

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surprisingly won. Baseball trivia was never my strong suit. I am a story guy. I picked my prize, a copy of *Sports Classics: American Writers Choose Their Best* edited by Howard Siner.

I joined SABR later that month and attended my first local meeting in May 2010. Since then, I have attended in-person and virtual meetings locally and throughout the US and

Canada. I have participated in research symposiums, writing projects, and attended national conventions.

Some of my most enjoyable moments over the years has been attending chapter meetings and visiting with former Astros players like Larry Dierker, Jimmy Wynn, Kevin Bass, and Jim Deshaies. These are people that I knew of only from radio and television. Listening to their stories and those that cover them has made me feel like a kid in a candy store. I

have made new friends because of SABR, and I see baseball in a whole new light.

I still have the Siner book. I still love listening to stories. Every time I attend a SABR meeting or talk with a baseball fan, I get the opportunity to hear a new story. Tell me a good baseball story and you have my attention. As the new president of the Houston chapter and as a baseball fan, I look forward to many more years of great stories.

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Mike Piazza is in, and went through the same scrutiny. Of course, they played in the biggest markets.

The hypocrisy is astounding. MLB knew full well that steroid use was rampant, but did nothing since the home runs were great for the owner's wallets. When pressure built, they launched the Mitchell investigation and had their Claude Raines "I'm shocked!" moment. Let's not forget that neither Bonds nor Clemens were ever suspended by MLB. This is a vendetta based on innuendo, if you look at it from a legal viewpoint.

The Baseball Hall of Fame at this moment is somewhere between a joke and badly broken. Since Frankie Frisch and his cronies voted in a few of their buddies via the first Veteran's Com-

mittee, it has seen players enshrined who lower the bar. Similarly, Jerry Reinsdorf and Tony LaRussa got Harold Baines in a few years ago. Baines was a good, solid ballplayer. A Hall of Famer, he's not. Yet go to Cooperstown and you can see his plaque. If you want to see the best hitter of the last half century and one of the best pitchers ever to toe the rubber, though, you'll need to look elsewhere.



Chapter Officers, Newsletter Editorial Board Members, and others, from left: Herb Whalley, Bob Dorrill, Joe Thompson, Mike McCroskey, Tom Plemons, Marsha Franty, Bill Brown, Chris Chestnut, Tony Cavender, and Scott McCay.

Welcome New Members

Jack BalesFredericksburg, VA
 Robert PinaSugar Land, TX
 Adam ScardinoTomball, TX
 Kenneth SnellHouston, TX
 Courtney BakerScottsdale, AZ
 Gloria RubacHouston, TX
 Will CornBrenham, TX
 Charles NormanHouston, TX
 Matthew AlbertsonHavertown, PA
 Charles GregoryNacogdoches, TX
 William JenkinsBellaire, TX

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would go 17-17-1 for the remainder of the '75 season, finishing 43 ½ games back in last place in the NL West. For the Astros, however, things were about to change.

Over the next three seasons, Tal Smith, who also became club president, and Bill Viridon would build the Astros into contenders for the first time in franchise history. By the end of the '79 season, the Astros, at 89-73, would finish second in the NL West. Viridon would be named the UPI 1979 Manager of the Year.

Beginning with the '77 season, fan attendance had grown to over one million. Fans were no longer coming to experience the Astrodome itself; they were coming to watch their Astros. Annual fan attendance would exceed two million by the end of the '80 season.

The 1980 Houston Astros, who finished first in the NL West, went to their franchise first NLCS against the Philadelphia Phillies. The battle that ensued between the Astros and the

Phillies, that went into the tenth inning in game five, is perhaps the best NLCS in MLB history. While the Astros ultimately lost 3-2 to the Phillies, they nevertheless made their formidable presence known in MLB.

Bill Viridon was named the Sporting News 1980 NL Manager of the Year, while Tal Smith was named the 1980 NL Executive of the Year. Smith and Viridon formed perhaps the closest relationship between a club president/general manager and a field manager that had ever existed in professional baseball, perhaps even the closest to this day. Bill Viridon remains the winningest manager in Houston Astros' history at 544-522 over his eight years as Houston's skipper.

In the fall of '96, Astro President Tal Smith and new manager Larry Dierker called on Bill Viridon to be Dierker's bench coach for the '97 season. All Viridon had to say was that "I'm in." Viridon was happy to be reunited with his good friend, Tal Smith, and he was excited to be there for his former pitching ace, Larry

Dierker.

Bill and Shirley Viridon celebrated their 70th Wedding Anniversary on November 17, 2021. On Sunday, November 21, the two received family and friends in honor of their 70 years together. Viridon's biography was completed on that Monday when I read Bill and Shirley the preface to the book. Bill Viridon smiled. Early Tuesday morning, November 23, the 90-year-old former professional baseball player passed away peacefully surrounded by his loving wife Shirley, along with their three devoted daughters Deborah Lutes, Linda Holmes and Lisa Brown.

Notes:

Bill and Shirley Viridon were interviewed over a two-year period for purposes of completing the biography on Bill Viridon. Tal Smith and Larry Dierker were also interviewed as a part of the book project. Some comments from that project are represented here. Baseball-Reference was the source of baseball statistics.

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Culver” in the 1930s. It was his idea to send me to summer camp there.” Situated on a beautiful lake 30 miles from South Bend, Culver presented an ideal setting for the camp. Tal wanted to attend high school at Culver Military Academy as a result of his fondness for the school. “It was sort of a miniature West Point,” recalled Tal, who felt it was great training for leaders. He was editor of the school newspaper.

How did he select Duke University for college? “At that time, I knew I didn’t have the talent to be a player at the college level, but Duke had an outstanding baseball program which I had read about. Jack Coombs was the longtime coach there and a great pitcher for Connie Mack and the Philadelphia A’s.”

Coombs won 31 games for the 1910 A’s and three more in the World Series. Duke “had sent a number of players to the big leagues and I was aware of that. My dad had taken a position in North Carolina and Duke always seemed to have a magical air to it.” Smith recruited Culver students for Duke. Some 13 of 150 in his graduating class went to Duke.

“By the time I got to Duke University, I was still focusing on some way to be part of baseball. I always had interest in radio. After my high school graduation and before I entered Duke that September of 1950, my dad was able to get me what amounted to an unpaid internship at the local ABC affiliate in Durham, North Carolina. I’d go down there early in the morning and help pull records or answer the phone or do whatever they had for me to do. As the summer progressed, due to attrition I actually started pulling a staff shift on that station when I was 16 years old. I didn’t much care for spinning records, but I did like reading the news and commercials were okay.”

At Duke University, Tal was at

the microphone doing play-by-play on area radio stations for Blue Devils baseball and basketball games for his last three years. “For summers, I was still trying to do something to relate to baseball. I wrote a lot of letters. During exams one day, there was a notice on my dorm room door that I had a telegram. It was a wire from J.G. Taylor Spink (editor and publisher of *The Sporting News*) asking me to call.” He landed a job for \$75 a week with *The Sporting News* in the summer of 1953 when the St. Louis Browns were spending their last summer in that city before moving to Baltimore.



Tal Smith announced Duke games during college

Tal served as an officer in the U.S. Air Force after college but found weekend employment at a radio station at New Bedford on Cape Cod. He hosted a Saturday football show. After his two years of service, he wrote to all 16 teams in Major League Baseball for a job in 1957. Cincinnati offered

him a pathway, but there was a requirement Tal did not meet. Reds General Manager Gabe Paul impressed upon Tal the value it might have to learn stenography to take notes at front office meetings on the road away from Cincinnati because his female secretary, Miss Levy, did not travel with the team. Smith returned to Durham, North Carolina and took a class in speed writing at Croft Business School. It was not part of the Duke curriculum, he joked. Eventually the Reds offered him a job for \$350 a month.

Tal joined a small Cincinnati front office of 12 people as administrative assistant for scouting and player development. He traveled in farm director Bill McKechnie, Jr.’s car to spring training in Laredo, Texas, passing the towering Shamrock Hilton hotel and noticing its prominence. He would soon be seeing it from much closer. The Reds had a logistical nightmare of spring training arrangements, including exhibition games in Matamoros and Reynoso, Mexico. His world included 11 minor league teams at levels A, B, C and D in addition to AAA and AA.



“Fortunately, in the couple of months we had prior to spring training, I would bus from where we were living in Swifton Village in Cincinnati to the Reds offices. With all the stops, it took a certain amount of time in between, and the same was true for the return trip in the evening. I would take the Blue Book, which at that time was sort of the baseball reference for all of the professional baseball rules and regulations governing the major-minor league relationship. It was quite thick. I studied it and learned it well. What really served me well with the Reds, not only in that spring training but in the remaining two and half years or so there, was that I knew more about the rules than anybody else in the office. If people had questions, they would come to me. From the standpoint of learning the business, it was sink or swim. I had to, because my boss was ill and left. My new boss, great guy, was new to his job and he didn’t know as much as I did about the administrative aspects. We had to get through it.” On top of the job demands, daughter Valerie was born March 6 and Tal was unable to see her until he returned home about eight weeks later.

By November of 1960, he was on his way to Houston at the invitation of Paul. Paul had been hired as the new general manager of the expansion Houston Colt .45s, and Smith joined him in the move. He felt the excitement of being on the ground floor of a new organization.

The full story of the Houston phase of Tal Smith’s career is the subject of Part 2 in our next issue.

Trivia Answers

1. Sal Maglie
2. Jim Umbricht
3. New York Giants
4. Joe Charboneau
5. Dave Debusschere