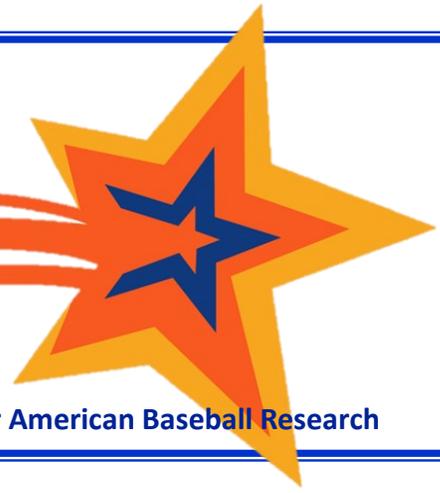


Houston Baseball

Shooting Star Express

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



Volume 3 Number 2



Fall 2022

President's Message

By Joe Thompson

Not that long ago, I was reading through some articles online when I ran across an article about bucket lists. I had a few moments, so I started reading it. The term "bucket list" has become quite popular. You often hear it in casual topics of conversation when someone might say, "Oh, that's on my bucket list!"

It has also shown up in pop culture references and movies. Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson played in a 2007 film called *The Bucket List*. The film told the story of two terminally ill patients who set off to complete their own bucket lists after creating their own list of to-dos.

I spent a few minutes thinking about my own bucket list after I read the article. I am 51 now and there are quite a few things that I would like to do. I wrote a few things down and went about my business for the day.

That night, after watching the Astros finish off the ALCS by sweeping the Yankees in New York, and watching the crowd and scene unfold, the bucket list article came back to me. I started thinking about creating my very own baseball road trip "bucket list."

I consider one of the greatest benefits of joining SABR is the opportunity to attend different events throughout the year, including a national convention that takes place in a

Message continues on page 6

Astros Season Recap: A Glorious Season

By R. Scott McCay

The Houston Astros claimed their second World Series championship on November 5, continuing a commanding string of six successful seasons as one of the top four teams in baseball. This victory shows everyone that the Astros can win it all without cheating and provide the baseball world with an untainted season of excellence.

Since the scandal was exposed in late 2019, the Astros have been the subject of unceasing vitriol from other teams and their fans. The Astros' protestations that they were merely keeping up with other teams' similar antics were ignored.

Before the 2018 season, the commissioner's report found that the team stopped cheating. However, the current players have still borne the brunt of the boos and negative press; some accusing the Astros of cheating later, without evidence.

Now the Astros sit again atop the baseball world, demonstrating that the team can and does win without violating the rules. They also showed how their farm system has developed some of the best young talent in baseball, including Jeremy Pena, the MVP of both the ALCS and World Series.

They started their season with a mundane April, barely over .500. However, Jose Altuve got hot in May and the Astros shot to the top of the AL West, leaving the Angels in the dust, whose season essentially ended after a 14-game losing streak.

June ended with a monumental week

in New York, no-hitting the Yankees and sweeping a two-game series with the Mets. The two games they lost to the Yankees were walk-offs, in which they never trailed until the end. The bullpen gave up a single and a homer to Aaron Judge, the likely AL MVP. The entire pitching staff held Judge to a .143 average over the season and ALCS, where the Astros swept the Yankees, clinching at a very quiet Yankee Stadium.

After the All-Star game, the Astros swept a day/night doubleheader from the Yankees, starting the Yankees on a dismal August streak that knocked them out of the AL's first seed. From there, the Astros went on cruise control and easily captured the top AL seed for the playoffs with 106 wins and a 16-game bulge over the second place Mariners.

Throughout the season, the Astros pitchers, both starters and relievers, dominated their opponents. The bullpen led all relievers in ERA and fewest hits. The

Recap continues on page 6



R Scott McCay

Inside Pitch

Solo Homers; Odds of Winning?	2
Articles Solicitation	2
Tal Smith Career, Part 4	3
Baseball Trivia	3
Automated Strike Zone	4
Centerfield Idols	5
Newest Members	5
Baseball Trivia Answers	6

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.

Editorial Board

Solo Homers? Odds for Winning Games

By Chris Chestnut

Earlier this season, I was watching an Astros game where our local nine hit three home runs but lost the game. The item I noted was that all the homers were solo shots. That led to the question – which team has hit the most solo home runs in a game and lost?

Using the available play-by-play data from Retrosheet, we go back to June 25, 2016. The Chicago White Sox were hosting the Toronto Blue Jays at what was then called U.S. Cellular Field (now Guaranteed Rate Field).

On a warm Saturday afternoon, the Sox tied a team record with seven home runs. And lost 10-8. All seven homers were solo shots, hit by Tim Anderson, Alex Avila, Adam Eaton, Brett Lawrie (with two), Dioner Navarro, and J.B. Shuck.

The Blue Jays became just the third team in major league history to give up seven home runs in a game and win.

Chicago joined Detroit as the only teams to lose after hitting at least seven homers. The Tigers did

it against the White Sox on May 28, 1995, and versus Boston on August 8, 2004.

Brett Lawrie became the first White Sox player since Ron Santo in 1974 to hit inside-the-park and over-the-wall homers in the same game, and Chicago hit three straight home runs in the second inning.

"I felt like I was pitching in bizarre world there for a minute," said Blue Jay starter R.A. Dickey, who equaled a career high by allowing four homers. "An outing where you strike out the side and give up three home runs, I don't know if that's ever been done."



Chris Chestnut

"Yeah, seven homers and you think you'd win the ballgame," Eaton said. "That's how baseball goes. Baseball is a weird game."

Season Wins Results

While the Houston Astros won 106 games, their second highest number of games during the season, nobody in the Larry Dierker SABR Chapter chose the correct number in our contest. Two tied for the lead with 102 wins and the tiebreaker was employed to pick the winner, Mark Wernick!

Mark came closest to the Sugar Land Space Cowboys' win total, so won the contest based on the tiebreaker. Peggy Dorrill, wife of past president Bob Dorrill, showed her prowess by tying Mark with picking 102 wins, but she was more optimistic about the Space Cowboys' season than Mark was.

Twenty-four members participated, but only two predicted the Astros would win over 100 games. Several picked in the 80's, and the average win prediction was 92.64, well short of the Astros' final total.



Larry Dierker
Chapter Officers

Newsletter
Editorial Board

President Joe Thompson	Editor Tony Cavender
1st Vice Pres Herb Whalley	Layout R Scott McCay
Pres Emeritus Bob Dorrill	Members Bob Dorrill
Secretary Marsha Franty Joe Thompson
Membership Chris Chestnut Wesley Story
Special Projects ... Mike McCroskey Mike McCroskey
Facebook sabrhouston Tal Smith
Website sabrhouston.org Mike Vance
Twitter @HoustonSabr	

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

Tal Smith's Legacies: A Career Like no Other

By Bill Brown

Tal Smith left a giant legacy when his 61-year baseball career ended. Among the long-lasting achievements that have affected baseball over the decades since his career began in 1958 with the Cincinnati Reds are his computerization and organization of the scouting and analysis of players, his groundbreaking arbitration work for major league clubs, the construction of the Astrodome, and the development of Astroturf. He took a last place team to a division championship – the first in Houston's history.

Captivated by baseball since age seven, Smith moved to Houston in 1960 and is one of two living members of the original front office of the Colt .45s (with Bill Giles). He was about to leave for Cleveland in 1963 when Judge Roy Hofheinz asked him to stay and become the liaison and project manager for the Astrodome. That assignment, including the development of Astroturf, took him away from his player development role for about three years. When he returned to a player personnel role, his data-driven mind led him to computerize information on players, leading the modernization of the entire industry into hard drives and software.

Tal also directed the collection of computerized data for the annual June draft of amateur players. He pioneered a system of assigning an overall ranking, called Overall Future Potential, for amateur players as they were selected in the draft. He also reorganized the scouting system under regional scouting directors to streamline the flow of information.

“He was at the forefront, from the standpoint that most of the other clubs would assign a scout to the whole Texas League or the whole Eastern League at that time,” said Hall of Fame executive Pat Gillick. “I know Tal was the one who basically

thought that organization coverage was better, because scouts would follow somebody from the time he got into professional baseball until he either departs or gets to the big leagues.”

“The 2 to 8 scale was his,” said former major league general manager Randy Smith, Tal's son. “He created and implemented it, and everybody uses it as a standard.” The Houston organization signed and developed more major league players than any other organization from 1961 to 1973.

“From the very beginning, I think that he was a good judge of talent and had the ability to foresee three or

four years down the line that if we get this guy and this guy and that other guy, when they come together we will really have something,” recalled Larry Dierker. “I think he had always thought about not just what is this worth now, but what will this develop into.”



Tal Smith with his Hall of Fame plaque

Blindsided by his sudden dismissal after the 1980 NLCS loss to Philadelphia, Smith turned his attention to starting a new business, Tal Smith Enterprises, to consult with major league teams. Soon the company was flourishing by winning arbitration cases. The first experience for Tal in arbitration came in 1974 with the Yankees.

When Drayton McLane, Jr. bought the Astros from McMullen in 1992, he elevated Bill Wood to general manager and asked him for advice. Wood responded, “Well, I know one thing you could do to help the ball club would be to reinstate Tal Smith – because he's right here in Houston, he knows all about our organization, he's a fantastic talent and it would be shame to see all that go to waste.” Tal, who handled arbitration cases for the Astros, agreed to return as team president in 1994.

When the first World Series for Houston finally arrived some 40 years after the Astrodome opened, it was a major achievement. “It was extremely satisfying, not just from a personal standpoint but on behalf of the fans and certainly all the employees that had devoted their work life to the club,” said Tal.

Smith continues on page 4

Baseball



Trivia

1. What HOF catcher pitched a complete-game shutout in his MLB debut?
2. Who is the only player to have played for 14 MLB teams?
3. What MLB pitcher received the most-ever votes for a Heisman runner-up?
4. Who was the key player traded by the Cardinals to the Cubs for Lou Brock?
5. What HOF pitcher played first base on his high school team with a future club owner, who pitched, before receiving a partial basketball scholarship?

Prepared by John Lloyd

Answers on page 6

Thoughts on Automated Strike Zone Experiment

By Herb Whalley

Major League Baseball's test of the Automated Ball-Strike System began this season on May 17 in the Pacific Coast League. On August 6, the Larry Dierker Chapter of SABR attended the game hosted by Sugar Land against Round Rock. We wanted to observe this experiment in action as well as seeing the upcoming

Lineup of Upcoming Events:

Nov 21: Monthly Meeting: Terry Puhl and John Racanelli at Spaghetti Western and Zoom

Dec 19: Monthly Meeting: Tony Adams on 2017 scandal at Spaghetti Western and Zoom

prospects of the Houston Astros and the Texas Rangers.

Prior to the game, chapter members in attendance met with Mike Capps, the audio announcer for the Round Rock Express. A significant portion of our discussion with him dealt with the impact of the Automated Strike Zone.

Mike had two very interesting comments about this experiment. He attributed shorter game lengths to the automation of calling balls and strikes. I believe the pitch clock, which coincided with the automated

strike zone, had the major impact of reducing game times.

Major League Baseball mainly wanted to prevent lengthening when an automated system is being used. Mike's comments about the problems that happened when players of significant height differences expressed a concern and was very interesting. There must be some manual adjustment to the strike zone involving batter's heights.

When an automated strike zone was used in the Atlantic League in 2019, there was a noticeable delay in the home plate umpire signaling a strike or a ball. On August 6, I did not see any noticeable delay. When I returned to a Sugar Land game in September, a challenge system was in place comparable to what you see in professional tennis tournaments.

That system seemed to work well, but a request to challenge had to be made and that did add some time to game length. If the same system is used for challenging ball and strike calls, then why can't the system be used for every ball and strike call? I am sure that implementation will depend on agreements with the owners,

tribute to Tal, a 40-year member of SABR:

"It's easy to remember when I first met Tal Smith. The date was October 18, 1977, and it was in the lobby of the New York Sheraton Hotel. It was mid-morning and I had just finished a meeting with Astros Public Relations Director Donald Davidson in his room at the hotel, where he offered me my first full-time job in baseball; the agreed upon salary (I would have said yes to anything) was \$800 a month, along with an additional \$50 per non-baseball event helping Paul Darst run the Astrodome scoreboard.

"Following my job interview, Donald took me down to the lobby

players, and umpires.

I would like to propose a radical rule change to the strike zone that likely will not be implemented. To avoid having to adjust the strike zone for every batter's height which requires manual intervention, a standard top and bottom of the zone could be implemented based on the average height of a ball player.

Ideally, this should decrease the size of the zone for a player like Aaron Judge and increase the size for a player the stature of Jose Altuve. Somehow, with the existing strike zone, Jose Altuve fails to walk nearly as often as one would anticipate.

Umpires likely would and should be given discretion to overrule a ball or strike call that is obviously wrong such as a ball that hits the dirt prior to reaching home plate but bounces through the strike zone.

I have also heard concerns about a ball that only barely crosses the zone. I think that any portion of the ball crossing the strike zone should be called a strike.

So, I don't see that as a fallacy to the experimental system. Regardless, I believe we will have an automated robo-ump calling balls and strikes but not to be seen in the very near future in the major leagues.



Herb Whalley

and introduced me to Tal. Although I had worked the entire 1977 season as a 21-year-old intern in the Philadelphia Phillies PR Department, I didn't know that Tal was the Astros' President and General Manager; I actually thought his name was Cedric Tallis, who at the time was running the Kansas City Royals!

"Eventually, I would figure out Tal's name and title and would embark on a professional and personal relationship which now spans 45 years. During that span, I worked with Tal on three separate occasions, not counting the Christmas break in 1980 when I housesat for Tal and Jonnie, which included fishing their

Smith continues on page 5

Remembering Centerfield Idols from Youth to Adulthood: *Joe DiMaggio to Jimmy Wynn*

By Bob Dorrill

Certainly, every preteen who grows up loving baseball chooses one player as his or her idol and devours every single piece of information he or she can obtain on this individual.

In my case my idol was the Yankee Clipper, Joe DiMaggio. I followed every newspaper account, magazine or radio broadcast that even mentioned Jolting Joe. (We didn't have TV at the time).

I even dreamed about Joe and my greatest thrill would be to see him in person, shake his hand or better yet get invited to his home. (I didn't know he lived in a New York City hotel during the baseball season). I did, however, get to see DiMaggio play in two games at Yankee Stadium one each in 1950 and 1951.

In Houston, I'm certain youngsters had the same dream about baseball players as I did, and, in most cases, the idol they chose was The Toy Canon, Jimmy Wynn. Little did I know when I moved to Houston in 1986 that my dreams for Joe DiMaggio would become real with Jimmy Wynn.



Bob Dorrill and Jimmy Wynn

I met Jimmy through a mutual friend, Dr. Bill McCurdy, who had written "Toy Canon," an autobiography of Jimmy Wynn. After some discussion Bill asked Wynn to speak at one of our regular monthly

sessions. Jimmy accepted the invitation and liked the experience so much he joined SABR.

Being an active member, he gave a number of presentations, participated in panels with Monty Irvin, Tal Smith, Larry Dierker, Bob Asprom-

Welcome New Members

Keith Fiman.....Houston, TX
 Will McKendrick.....Richmond, TX
 Syd Polk.....Austin, TX
 Zeke Becerra.....Cypress, TX
 Paul Geisler.....Lake Jackson, TX
 Ross Norwood.....Houston, TX
 Wes Pierce.....The Woodlands, TX
 Matt Overton.....Fulshear, TX

onte, Jose Cruz, and was always available for questions or autographs.

Jimmy attended Vintage Baseball games with us, helped at the annual Fan Fest of the Houston Astros, and invited me to a number of special Astros celebrations as his guest. As a special surprise at one of our SABR meetings at Minute Maid Park, Jimmy presented me with a seatback from old Yankee Stadium. The last time I saw Jimmy was at the first induction of the brand-new Houston Astros Hall of Fame where he received a tremendous ovation.

And yes, we visited each other's homes, went out to dinner with family, and all the rest. How lucky was I to fulfill my youthful dreams, but with another Hall of Fame centerfielder.

Smith continued from page 4

standard poodle Rookie out of the backyard swimming pool on an unseasonably cold December afternoon.

"In 1979, Tal promoted me from PR assistant to PR Director. Because I was spending most of my time hanging out in the baseball office anyway, he must have just figured that the added responsibilities of being a director would force me to spend more time down the hall in my own Astrodome office. He certainly underestimated my perseverance.

"After Tal was dismissed by the Astros following our dramatic loss to the Phillies in the 1980 NLCS, I started to look around for different opportunities and accepted a job as PR Director of the Pittsburgh Pirates shortly after the opening of the 1981 season. I would remain with the Pirates for

five seasons before accepting a job with Tal Smith Enterprises.

"In my TSE role, Tal gave me great exposure and experience in salary arbitration, club/client relations, and several other foundation building opportunities, all of which led to me returning to the Phillies in 1989 as an assistant to Phillies GM Lee Thomas, who I would go on to succeed in December 1997.

"Had it not been for Tal, I never would have established the credentials to qualify me for that baseball operations position, which would then lead to an eight-year run as the Phillies VP/General Manager.

I joined the San Diego Padres as a pro scout, only to be contacted by Tal again near the end of the 2007 season when Drayton McLane and the Astros were looking for a new General Manager. I'm sure with a

high endorsement to Drayton from Tal, I was fortunate to serve at Minute Maid Park for the final four years of Drayton's ownership and Tal's tenure with the team.

"Many people can point to the great things that Tal has done in the game and the way that he impacted it, both on and off the field. His work on the construction of the Astrodome, his building of the great Astros teams of the late '70s and early '80s, his impact on the salary arbitration process, his consulting with many of the game's top executives, and the expertise that he brought back to the Astros under Drayton's ownership, which led to another string of successful Astros seasons, have left an indelible mark on the game and many who served in it, including a 21-year-old intern whose life was changed by his support and friendship."

Bucket List Planning for Future Ballparks Tour

Message continued from page 1

different city every year. This past August, after a two-year hiatus because of COVID, SABR was finally able to celebrate its 50th anniversary convention in Baltimore.

One of the biggest joys of going to the national conventions is connecting with people from all over the country. Most of the people you meet are people that you may have heard about via SABR email messages or online events. It was nice change after two years of seeing people via laptop or mobile phone screens.



Joe Thompson

People might have a baseball-themed bucket list of their own, but one of my lists is to attend a major or minor league game in as many cities around the world as possible. The bucket list has grown a lot since joining SABR. I have expanded my baseball road trip bucket list recently to include baseball parks outside the United States, in places like Japan, the Caribbean, Ireland, and more.

I will not bore you with a complete list of parks I have been to here in the US, but here are a few: Besides Houston, I have attended games in

Baltimore, Boston, Corpus Christi, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Spokane.

While in Baltimore, I was able to scratch off Camden Yards from my list. If you have never been to the home of the Orioles, it is a definite to-do on a baseball road trip bucket list. I honestly believe that it is because of SABR that I was able to visit Camden Yards.

Ripken Field was also scratched off my list because of SABR. A few of us in the chapter had discussed taking a trip to Ripken Field while at the convention. Ripken Field is the home of the Aberdeen IronBirds, the Orioles High-A franchise.

The few of us that went to the game spent 10 dollars apiece to sit behind home plate. What a deal! As an added bonus, the IronBirds happened to be playing the Asheville Tourists that night, the Astros High-A team. I would like to scratch Lewis McCormick Field, the home of the Tourists, off my bucket list one day.

I have a long way to go to make it to every major league park but I am willing to give it a shot. I doubt that I will ever get close to putting a dent in visiting a lot of minor league parks. I



think my strategy will be to first attend minor league games in every city affiliated with a major league club. I could do that, I think. Then again, affiliates tend to change so much, who knows how much luck I will have.

The 2023 convention is set for Chicago next July. I have already talked with my wife about going up a few days early to see a Cubs game, since the White Sox will be the only team in town during the convention. That will knock off Wrigley and Guaranteed Rate Field off my list. Maybe I can knock out a few minor league parks as well.

Thanks to SABR though, I believe that my wife and I will at least have a shot at completing my baseball road trip bucket list. As inspiration, I think that I'll take to heart what Jack Nicholson said to Morgan Freeman in *The Bucket List* film when Freeman acted like completing his bucket list was impossible at his age. "We can do this," Jack said, "We should do this."

Recap continued from page 1

team led the AL in ERA, OBP, OPS, and fewest earned runs and hits, but finished second to the Dodgers in the MLB standings. The old baseball adage proved true: good pitching beats good hitting.

The playoffs started with a historic walk-off homer by Yordan Alvarez, then the Astros swept the Mariners and Yankees to reach the World Series. They lost the first game of the World Series when Justin Verlander blew a five-run lead, but salvaged game 2 behind Framber Valdez, who looks like the staff ace if Verlander signs elsewhere during free agency.

After Lance McCullers, Jr. allowed five homers to lose game 3, the pitchers regrouped and Cristian "El Reptil" Javier started a combined no-hitter that mirrored the one he started against the Yankees in June, only the second no-hitter in World

Series history. This slap-down of the Phillies left them so stunned that they managed just three runs in the next two games.

The Astros celebrated their victory on their home field for the first time. They won the 2017 World Series in Los Angeles and watched the Nationals and Braves celebrated their wins at Minute Maid. It's the first time since 2013 since a home team celebrated its World Series victory at home.

Now, some pundits are ranking these Astros among the all-time great dynasties, especially since the division era when preliminary playoffs made getting to the World Series more difficult. Beginning with the 2017 season, the Astros have been to the ALCS six times, winning four, and winning the World Series twice. Various methodologies have shown that the Astros rank high in base-

ball history compared to teams like the late-'90's Yankees, mid-'70's Big Red Machine, and the mid-'90's Braves, who won only one World Series in eight attempts.

What's exciting now is seeing how the Astros will build on this record to extinguish any lingering fallout from the cheating scandal that tainted the 2017 crown. Will these Astros, after they have continuously finished in the upper echelon of baseball after getting caught, finally receive accolades?

Trivia Answers

1. Roger Bresnahan
2. Edwin Jackson
3. Paul Giel
4. Ernie Broglio
5. Sandy Koufax