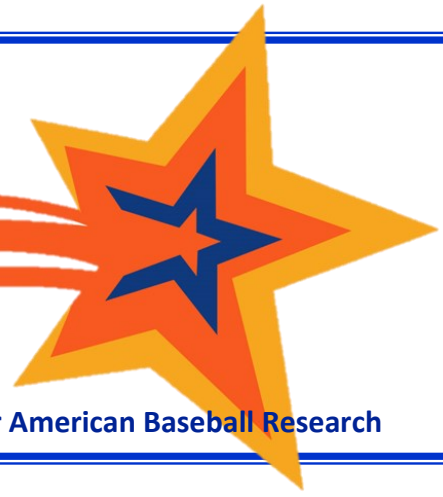


Houston Baseball

Shooting Star Express

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



Volume 4 Number 2



Fall 2023

President's Message

By Joe Thompson

I hope all of you enjoyed the 2023 baseball season. Another one in the books. The season ended on a very frustrating note. The Astros were just one win away from a third straight trip to the fall classic.

The team just could not get the job done, losing the final two games of the American League Championship Series (ALCS) at home, and having almost everyone baffled as to why the club could not win at home. To me, though, the way the ALCS unfolded was just a reflection of how the entire season went for the club. In fact, I would sum up the team's performance throughout the season and their loss to the Rangers in the ALCS in one simple phrase: frustrating but not surprising.

When I was younger, I would often spend my evenings listening to Gene Elston call Astros games on the radio. I lived in a house where, believe it or not, it was often warmer inside than outside, and so I would set up my radio in the yard and spend the evenings under the stars listening to Gene and Milo Hamilton call games. That experience stuck with me as I got older. This is why I have always preferred listening to baseball games over the radio rather than watching them on



Joe Thompson

television or streaming them online.

The 2023 season was going to be different for me in terms of listening and watching Astros games. This was the first season in a very long time in which I did not have a job that required me to work at night, so I was going to be able to watch more games rather than listen to them on the radio. I looked forward to evenings at home watching games instead of driving around just listening to the games.

What I watched as the season unfolded was not what I expected to see when the year began. As the year went on, the team's performance on the field frustrated me. Bad or inconsistent pitching from starters and relievers, poor hitting, questionable coaching, and less than spectacular defense became a regular occurrence, and it concerned me very much.

On September 24, 2023, after the Astros were swept at home by the Kansas City Royals, I proclaimed on Facebook that October

was going to be a lot less stressful for me than it had been in a very long time, because I thought that the club was going to miss the playoffs.

Then, a week later, the Astros swept the Diamondbacks. Not only was the club back in the playoffs, but they had seemingly come back from the dead and won the division to se-

Message continues on page 5

J.P. France comes of Age in Rotation

By Aidan Franklin

In early May, the Astros were faced with an issue that was missing during the 2022 season: injuries. The offense was already lacking its catalyst, Jose Altuve, to begin the 2023 season.

When Jose Urquidy and Luis Garcia were put on the Injured List in late-April and early-May, respectively, the injury situation became more serious. The long-term loss of two innings eaters, with Garcia out for the season, meant the Astros' front office had some rearranging to do, especially when Lance McCullers was also lost for the season.

Enter J.P. France. The New Orleans native and Mississippi State alum made his first start on May 6 at T-Mobile Park in Seattle... and shined. France threw five innings of shutout ball, tallying five punchouts and only allowing three hits.

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Little League World Series Brothers

By Carl Grijalba

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 500 to 1500 words, to umpire / editor Tony Cavender at anthony.cavender@pillsburylaw.com by January 15 for our Winter issue.

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.

At publication, the Astro announced Joe Estrada will be the new manager. We welcome any articles about him!

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

Brothers Colby and Cory Rasmus played major league baseball as well as in the Little League World Series. Colby had a ten-year major league career and played two of those years for the Houston Astros in the 2015 and 2016 seasons.

Pitcher Cory Rasmus played four years in the major leagues with the majority of his career for the Anaheim/Los Angeles Angels. On May 27, 2013, Cory pitched against his brother Colby for the first time. Colby hit a double.

Early in their baseball career, Colby as a thirteen-year-old and his twelve-year-old brother Cory, both received world-wide attention by playing together for Phenix City, Alabama, representing the U.S. South team, coached by their father Tony Rasmus, in the 1999 Little League World Series.

In the first U.S. Pool game, U.S. South/Phenix City lost to the defending champions, U.S. East/Toms River, New Jersey, 6-0. Toms River pitcher Casey Gayner pitched a complete game one-hitter. The lone hit for U.S. South came from Zack Martin, a lead-off single in the fourth inning. Colby Rasmus

pitched a complete six-inning game, giving up eight hits and three walks, with seven strikeouts. His brother Cory caught his brother's pitches and was the lead-off hitter.

In the second LLWS game, U.S. South played against Brownsburg, Indiana, representing U.S. Central. Trailing 4-1 in the bottom of the sixth, Kyle Tidwell hit a walk-off grand slam to win the game 5-4. Colby, the first baseman, went 2 for 3 and scored a run while his brother Cory went 0 for 3.

U.S. South's third game resulted in a 12-0 win over Idaho, representing U.S. West. The win earned their place in U.S. Championship game in a rematch

with Toms River. U.S. South had four home runs in the game; Cory and his teammate Brandon Monk hit back-to-back home runs in the fourth inning. Colby hit a solo home run that was the last run of a five-run rally in the fifth.

The rematch with Toms River in the U.S. Championship game only completed the first inning because of rain with Toms River leading 2-0. The next day, Phenix City scored three runs in the bottom of the second inning. A solo home run by William Gaston helped secure the 3-2 victory. The Rasmus brothers both went 1 for 2 at the plate. Coach Rasmus said after the win, "There's no doubt they had the momentum last night. Yet today I think the guys could get to him (Gaynor). The rain delay did help us a lot." Colby added, "We wanted to face him."

In the World Championship game, Osaka, Japan, the International Champions, allowed only two hits in their 5-0 victory in front of 42,000 fans at Howard J. Lamade Stadium. Only Cory and Zack Martin got a hit for U.S. South. Cory went 1 for 3, and Colby went 0 for



Carl Grijalba



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Rasmus continues on page 5

France continued from page 1

From his first major league start to the All-Star Break, France posted a 3.26 ERA across 66.1 innings in 11 starts. In the first half of the season, France proved to be a reliable starter, however, some of his underlying metrics suggested that he might regress over the course of the season.

During the first half, France posted a Fielding Independent Pitching ("FIP") of 4.76, suggesting that he had some defensive help to keep his ERA lower than his FIP. This is supported by his first half Batting Average on Balls in Play ("BABIP"), which landed at 0.254, below the usual league average of around 0.300.

France had a relatively high left-on-base percentage at 83.6%, but these usually regress and land at around 70% for most pitchers. This means that while France was getting into some jams, his pitching and defense behind him was able to get him out, which could have helped his ERA.

During the second half of the season, France struggled with control. Highlighted by a 10-earned-run performance at home versus Boston in August, France seemed to have lost some of his initial success.

Based on his first-half numbers, this is not exactly hard to believe. France finished the second half with a 4.37 ERA across 70.0 innings in 12 starts.

Here is where we see a divergence in France's numbers from the first half. France posted a 4.57 FIP with a BABIP of 0.320. This increased BABIP might explain part of the reason that France's overall ERA was elevated compared to his first-half ERA. Hitters were more consist-

ently putting France's pitches in play and getting them past defenders.

His home runs numbers did not change, allowing 10 in the first half and nine in the second, but France had a harder time getting out of jams,

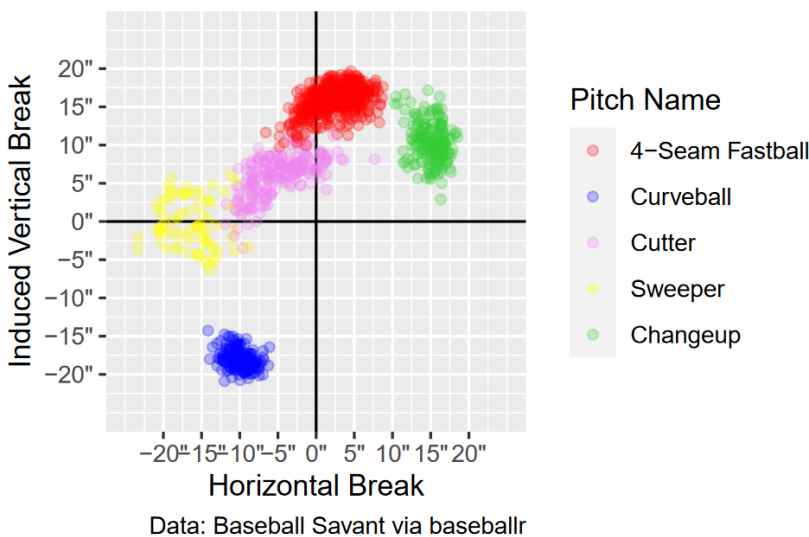
ball suffered in the second half, dropping its run value from average by the end of the first half to negative-2 by the end of the season. Looking at a plot of his pitch movement, France's four-seam fastball had more arm-side

run in the second half than it did in the first. France's 4-Seam finished the year with an Expected Weighted On Base Average ("xwOBA") of 0.422, which might have been even higher if it hadn't performed slightly above average in the first half.

Overall, it was a solid season for the rookie J.P. France. He provided much needed support to a rotation that desperately needed it at the beginning of the season and continued to need it throughout the year.

J.P. France Pitch Movement

2023 MLB Season Second Half | Pitcher's POV



posting a 71.7% left-on base percentage. France's walk percentage also increased from 7.7% to 8.4% in the second half.

Of note, France's four-seam fast-

France's cup(s) of coffee with the Astros should at least keep his name around in discussion for the back-end of the rotation next season with Lance McCullers Jr. and Luis Garcia out until at least July.

Baseball



Trivia

1. Who was the first Texas Rangers manager?
2. Who were the other two pitchers from Spahn and Sain, pray for rain, days?
3. Who was the player/manager of the 1948 World Series champions?
4. Who won the 1948 Rookie of the Year and the 1974 World Series as manager?
5. Who won the 1996 Cy Young Award as a starter and saved 154 games in career?

Prepared by John Lloyd

Answers on page 6

Donn Clendenon's Presence as an Absentee Astro

By Phil Boudreaux

The Astros had spent the bulk of the 1960s signing and cultivating young talent. In the model of some of the most successful teams in baseball, they had worked hard to develop a homegrown nucleus heading into the 1968 season. The team had developed two potential ace pitchers in Larry Dierker and Don Wilson to go along with a young group of hitters that were led by Jimmy Wynn, Rusty Staub and Joe Morgan.

The year of the pitcher and the upcoming major league baseball expansion led to problems which stunted the team's growth and eventually forced a re-set. But a player who never suited up for the Astros had a huge impact on the future of the franchise.

In 1967, Jim Wynn battled Hank Aaron until mid-September for the home run lead in the National League. Aaron knocked 39 homers to top Wynn's total of 37. Rusty Staub, playing his age 22 season, finished fifth in the league with his .333 batting average. These were the top performances in the first five years of the franchise.

The Astros were the youngest team in the National League except for the dreadful New York Mets. The Astros also had put together a young double play combination of Joe Morgan and Sonny Jackson and looked strong up the middle.

New general manager Spec Richardson came on board, set off some changes, and added some veterans to the team. He sent Jackson to Atlanta in the off-season in a deal that landed veteran shortstop Denis Menke and starting pitcher Denny Lemaster. Staub was moved to first base following the trade of veteran Eddie Matthews to the Tigers for reliever Fred Gladding.

Both the moves helped the team improve marginally from 69 wins to 72 in 1968. Any real improvement was likely quashed when Morgan went down in the first week of the season with a broken ankle and

missed the rest of the year. The Astros moved Menke from shortstop to second base.

The Houston front office initially had to work very diligently to acquire amateur talent before the era of the amateur draft. Many people outside of the original baseball markets in the Midwest and Northeast were not very aware of the new franchises that were created in 1961 and 1962. It was difficult to have players sign with the new teams. The Angels' signing of the last of the Bonus Babies in Rick Reichardt in 1964 led to the beginning of the draft a year later.

Richardson had been in the Astros front office since the franchise began in 1961; he had also worked in the Houston Buffs front office. Owner Roy Hofheinz kept on Richardson, along with Paul Richards and Tal Smith.

In 1968, with the year of the pitcher at hand, pitching numbers soared out of the norm. Three pitchers in the National League had losing records despite sub 2.75 ERAs: Bob Veale of the Pirates, Don Sutton of the Dodgers, and Astros lefty Mike Cuellar.

Richardson began to shake up the Astros roster, but the long-term health of the franchise was damaged. However, the deals that Richardson made led to the building of the first .500 team in franchise history in 1969.

With the expansion draft, Richardson was trying to protect the team's core coming into its prime. The Astros sent Cuellar to the Orioles in a deal that included former AL rookie of the year, outfielder Curt Blefary. The Astros dealt another member of their rotation to the Cardinals, Dave Giusti. Don Wilson, Larry Dierker and Denny Lemaster were to be at the top of the Astros rotation,

with promising Tom Griffin knocking at the door in the minors.

The Astros acquired veteran catcher Johnny Edwards, who helped solidify the pitching staff. Giusti would be taken by the Padres in the upcoming expansion draft, and the Astros lost both of their 1968 catchers in the draft: John Bateman and Ron Brand.

Richardson was not done dealing, however. After having some trouble in negotiations with Staub, the Astros dealt him to the expansion Expos for veterans Donn Clendenon and Jesus Alou in mid-January, only a few weeks before the start of spring training.

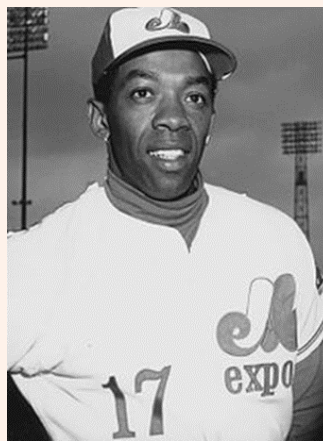
The timing of the deal was unique and came in the time of year when annual contracts were being finalized. The Expos built their expansion marketing campaign around Staub's acquisition. The

Astros were expecting to have Alou and Curt Blefary man the outfield on either side of Wynn in center.

Once the team opened spring training, Clendenon announced he would retire rather than report to the Astros and play for manager Harry Walker. Clendenon had played for Walker when he was with the Pirates and was not willing to do so again.

Clendenon had attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, which had a tradition of assigning juniors and seniors to mentor incoming freshmen. Clendenon was assigned to a recent graduate and family friend who was attending the Crozier Theological Seminary at Morehouse, Martin Luther King, Jr. The trade to Houston came just months after the assassination of King in Memphis. Clendenon was not going to budge.

Clendenon was prepared to work full-time with Scripto Pen Company, where he had worked in the off-



Donn Clendenon as an Expo

Clendenon continues on page 6

Ballparks Tour by Ump

By Jimmy Scruggs

This is the final installment of Jimmy Scruggs' Ballpark Reviews.

National Park, Washington, D.C. (2014) – I traveled all that way to see the Astros. Nice statue of “The Train.” Good job. My walk-up view was The Capitol.

Colt .45's Stadium, Houston, Tex. – I wasn't living in Houston and couldn't enjoy the heat and mosquitoes. Both epic, I've been told.

Astrodome, Houston, Tex. – I was fortunate to see the 1986 MLB All Star game and some classic 90's playoff games.

Minute Maid, Houston, Tex. – When I ask out-of-towners, they say they like it. I do. Was there for classic 18-inning playoff game. Thank goodness the Braves put in Farnsworth. Clincher versus Yankees in 2017 playoffs. Crane's plans for build-up around the ballpark will cement Top 10 status.

Welcome New Members

Frank LeeKingwood, TX
 Christopher Gilbert West Columbia, TX
 TeRon GreeneHouston, TX
 Cesar SaldiviaKaty, TX
 William WadeLane City, TX
 Carlis Wright Robinson...Missouri City, TX

The Big A, Anaheim, Cal. (2000) – Well, it's close to Disneyla*nd and the 405.

The Ball Park at Arlington, Arlington, Tex. – Multiple visits including Game 5 of 2011 WS with my son Jonathan. As Casey said about Busch in the 1966 MLB All Star game, “it holds the heat well.” Second of the new era of ballparks. Pretty good job

Ballparks continues on page 6

Lineup of Upcoming Events:

Nov 20: Monthly Meeting: Zak Ford on Dusty Baker Chapter at Spaghetti Western and Zoom

Dec 18: Monthly Meeting: Greg Lucas on his new book at Spaghetti Western and Zoom

Jan 6: Annual Winter Meeting of Rogers Hornsby Chapter at Texas State University, San Marcos

Jan 15: Monthly Meeting: Jay Verrill on Astros Business and Analytics at Spaghetti Western and Zoom

Jan 20: Fan Fest at Minute Maid Park

Feb 3: SABR Day in America

Rasmus from page 2

2. Japan became the World Champions, but Phenix City, Alabama, was the United States Champion. Coach Rasmus said after the game, “This has been the best

and most memorable event in my life. I think I took a different approach to today's game. I figure if we didn't win, we still accomplished a lot.”

Colby and Cory experienced a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to play in the Little League World Series that gave them lifelong memories.

Message continued from page 1

cure the #2 seed in the playoffs. The regular season had been extremely frustrating but in the end the team ended up where I thought they would have ended up, winning the division.

The Astros playoff performance to me reflected their regular season performance: bad pitching, inconsistent offense, and less than stellar defense. The team's inconsistent play eventually caught up with them when they lost all their home games in the ALCS. The Astros were not going to repeat as World Series champions.

Despite the frustration of the season, I am not surprised by where they ended up at the end of the year. From 2017 onward, the Astros are, in my opinion, the first truly dominant MLB franchise of the twenty-first century. The team was one win away from a third straight World Series trip.

Going back to 2017, the team has been two wins away from five straight World Series appearances, and four wins away from seven straight World Series appearances. Frustrating to Astros fans because we thought that we would have at least one or two more World Series championships, but not surprising because we know how good they have played over this time.

Steve Schaeffer of the *Houston Chronicle* wrote an article just after the club won their second World Series title. On November 14, 2022, in an article called “How Astros compare to top MLB dynasties of modern era,” he asked what constitutes a baseball dynasty and if the current Astros fit that description.

He wrote, “But let's say we pondered which teams in the divisional era (1969 and beyond) were the best over a six-year period. What's a situa-

ble methodology to rank them?” His results might be surprising to some. Of the ten teams he included in his list, the #2 team was the current Houston Astros just behind the 1996-2001 Yankees and just in front of the 1970-1975 Oakland Athletics.

The 2024 Astros should be primed and ready for a next run towards an eighth consecutive ALCS trip and a chance at a third World Series title since 2017.

The off-season is going to be extremely frustrating for all those teams trying to figure out how to stop the Astros machine. Frustrating because at the end of the season 2024,

I will not be surprised if we are talking about planning another World Series parade for the people of Houston. Maybe I will go back to listening to more games on the radio.

Ballparks continued from page 5

with TGI Fridays in right field upper deck.

Globe Park, Arlington, Tex. (2022) – Baseball in an air plane hanger.

Doubleday Field, Cooperstown, N.Y. (Multiple visits) – Next to The Hall.

Minor League Parks of note:

Russwood Park, Memphis, Tenn. – They had a sign that if you hit it, the player got \$5K. Future MLB'er Dale Long hit it and ran around the bases backwards. Destroyed by fire 1960 Easter Sunday night.

Victory Field, Indianapolis, Ind., **Chickasaw Bricktown**, Oklahoma City, Okla., **Auto Zone**, Memphis, Tenn. are all mini throwbacks.



Hope I sparked your interest for a MLB road-trip. My pleasure sharing.

Clendenon continued from page 4

season. The standoff lasted into spring training and climaxed with a meeting with several key players, according to writer Ed King.

Expos owner Charles Bronfman, commissioner Bowie Kuhn, and Scripto president Arthur Harris met with Clendenon and tried to threaten him to return to the Expos. Hofheinz reportedly said he would buy the pen company which would have led to the demise of Clendenon's off-season job.

Normally, if a player does not report to his new team or retires, the deal is voided by the commissioner's office and the players are returned to their original teams. The Astros front office enlisted Smith to research this, and he found a precedent reflecting this from a few decades before.

Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley reached out to Hofheinz and encouraged the Astros to seek other compensation to complete the deal. Reluctantly, the Astros accepted pitchers Jack Billingham and Skip Guinn along with a hefty sum of \$100,000 to complete the deal. This was done just a couple of days before the end of spring training at the start of April.

The Astros were left to scramble to fill their hole at first base. Curt Blefary was moved to first base, where he started 149 games for the team, and connected on 12 homers. He was not able to fill the power void Richardson had hoped for.

Norm Miller ended up getting most of the playing time in right field, and the Astros ended up using

Gary Geiger and Sandy Valdespino as the backups. The team acquired Tommy Davis from the Seattle Pilots in a waiver deal coming the stretch. The reserve players for the Astros hit only four homers.

The Astros also spent the entire season hiding Cesar Geronimo on their roster. As a Rule V draftee from the Yankees, the Astros found only eight at-bats for Geronimo that season as their last man on the bench.

Clendenon started slowly for the Mets, since he had missed all of spring training. Once acquired by the Mets, Clendenon was installed at first base by Gil Hodges, whom Clendenon had befriended in Florida during a spring training earlier in his career. Hodges had also started his career as an outfielder who was moved to first base, so Clendenon had sought him out for guidance.

Ed Kranepool, the last of the 1962 Mets, moved to a pinch-hitting role for the team. The Mets sent Steve Renko and Kevin Collins to Montreal in the deal. Clendenon would get a ring for his efforts in 1969 for the Mets. Clendenon went on to slug a dozen homers for the Mets after being acquired at the June 15 trade deadline. Clendenon began platooning with Kranepool, but caught fire down the stretch.

Hodges maintained a platoon in the playoffs, and Clendenon did not get a start in the NLCS against the Braves' right-handed starters. Once the Mets advanced to the World Series, Clendenon's role increased as the Orioles rotation sported a pair of lefties, Dave McNally and former Astro Mike Cuellar. Cuellar shut

down the Mets in the first game, 4-1. Clendenon had a pair of hits and scored the first World Series run in Mets franchise history.

In the second game of the World Series, Clendenon connected for a homer off of McNally as the Amazing Mets began their furious comeback. Clendenon would homer three times in the series and be named the Series MVP. He would appear on the Ed Sullivan Show along with many of his Met teammates.

The Astros finished at the .500 mark for the first time, after having a dreadful April. Walker would manage the team for another two and a half seasons before being fired by Richardson despite a 67-54 record in August 1972. He would never manage in the majors again.

The veteran acquisitions had begun to age out for the Astros. Richardson remained with the team into the 1975 season when they began their huge fallout. Attendance at the Astrodome fell under a million for the first time since it opened.

Richardson was replaced by Smith, who began the process of rebuilding the farm system. The trajectory of the franchise was changed dramatically by a man who never put on the Astro uniform.

Trivia Answers

1. Ted Williams
2. Bill Voiselle and Vern Bickford
3. Lou Boudreau
4. Alvin Dark
5. John Smoltz