

Houston Baseball

Shooting Star Express

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



Volume 4 Number 4



Spring 2024

President's Past Convention Memories

By Joe Thompson

Hello to all of you. The 2024 baseball season is well underway! Even though Astros fans are probably not happy with how things have begun this year, there is confidence in many of us that, come October, the team will once again be ready for another deep playoff run.

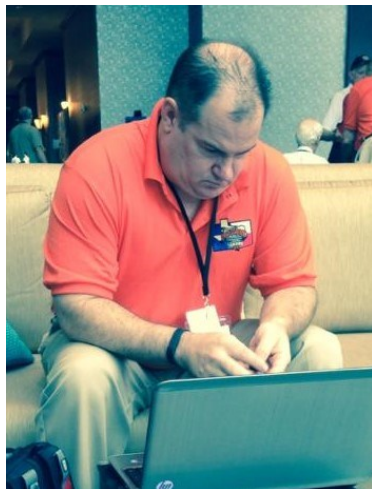
This year might be a little different as our team has gotten a little older and some of the key pieces to our deep playoff runs in the last few years, primarily our pitching, are either injured or are not performing all that well.

This might just be a different type of year for Astros fans. I fear it might be a year that newer Astros fans are just not used to. So far, with the early season struggles, I have noticed that a lot of people seem to be having some trouble finding positives.

Some people may have to focus on other things or try to find some positives out of this team this summer as the team tries to get back to what we are used to. I feel confident they will work this out but for now I have tried to focus on other things. This slow start has allowed me to focus on potential summer and fall travel locations,

and to think about missed opportunities.

This summer, I plan on attending SABR 52 in Minneapolis. This will be my fifth convention to attend. I know that this does not seem a lot considering I have been a SABR member for going on 14 years now, but it is not like I did not want to go.



Joe Thompson preparing for his presentation at SABR 44 in 2014.

Whether it was New York City, Miami, or San Diego, the idea of seeing a game in these cities was one of the reasons I really tried to save enough to go every year. Alas, for most of those years, it simply was not meant to be.

You must understand that for most of that time, I was a graduate student, teaching assistant, part-time professor, and a pizza delivery driver. Those jobs do not really pay much and with a family, it was just hard to plan a convention trip. Things are a lot better now and I feel fortunate that I can go to these conventions every year.

Spending time with members from our own chapter who go, listening to all the great presentations, and going to games in different cities has become

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Astros' Worst Start

By Phil Boudreaux

The Houston Astros have started the season slowly, to put it mildly, but this season is not the worst start in club history. It has company with the 1969 club, an eight-year-old expansion team that rivals the current group in futility, if not in pedigree.

The Astros of 1969 were a revamped club, as the team pursued some changes on the field after a very disappointing season in 1968. But the Astros' slow start derailed any hopes that the team would be a feared rival in the new National League West. But as the team found out, you can't win the pennant in April, but you can lose it there.

The Astros had made several off-season trades, acquiring former AL rookie-of-the-year Curt Blefary from Baltimore, adding Jesus Alou from the Expos, and trading for catcher Johnny Edwards from the Cardinals. The Astros also inserted Tom Griffin in their rotation even though he had never thrown a pitch in the majors.

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Chapter Entries for Astros Wins and Two Tiebreakers

By Herb Whalley

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 crack-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 July 15 for our Summer issue.

The editorial board would like to honor the Hall of Fame players who passed away within the past few 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.

Forty-eight chapter members submitted their predictions prior to the first game of the 2024 season. Submissions included the number of wins the Astros would achieve during the 2024 season.

There were two tiebreakers also submitted for this season's contest: Members predicted the total season number of Jose Altuve hits and Kyle Tucker home runs.

Predictions for Astros wins ranged from 83 to 103. The mean was calculated at 94 which means there were slightly more predictions leaning to the higher number of the range. Carl Ingram predicted 103 wins. Larry Dierker predicted 83.

I suspect, with the Astros' slow start; many would now revise their prediction toward the lower number of wins. Last year's winner, Bill Brown, predicted 89 wins.

Altuve's hits ranged from 105 to 204. The mean prediction for Altuve was 164. Altuve is off to a very nice start in this category, so anything over 164 probably is looking pretty good.

Tucker's home runs ranged from 25 to 38 with the mean calculated at 32. This is a very tight range in my opinion. I attribute this to Kyle Tucker's consistency over his career.

Best of luck to all our entrants.

Name	Wins	Hits	HRs
Carl Ingram	103	157	30
Lou DeScioli	102	172	32
Chris Gilbert	102	143	32
Cesar Saldivia	101	189	37
Robert Fait	99	201	28
Gloria Rubac	99	110	30
Bob Stevens	98	189	30
Fred Soland	98	185	32
David Preston	98	182	34
Marsha Franty	98	124	31
Bob Dorrill	98	204	32
Wesley Story	97	204	31
Koby Farries	96	193	31
Mike McCroskey	96	187	36
Mack Bush	96	167	32
Jonathan Goodwin	96	160	35
Josh Sullivan	96	156	35
Ted Meyer	96	146	33
Ira Levinton	95	200	37
Jon Walk	95	180	25
Phyllis Mira	95	120	30
Greg Moore	94	195	31
Joe Thompson	94	195	35
Mark Wernick	94	187	37
Billy Moore	94	141	27
Grant Sovereign	93	202	32
Ken Lilley	93	173	33
John Lloyd	93	150	33
Matthew Rejmaniak	93	105	30
Roland Bassett	92	163	34
Mark Hudec	92	115	30
Reinaldo Gonzalez	91	179	33
Phillip Boudreaux	91	178	31
Craig Estlinbaum	91	167	27
Wayne Roberts	91	160	31
Carl Owens	91	135	32
Mike Vance	90	171	38
Vinnie Vrotny	90	163	33
Patrick Petty	90	162	32
Bill Brown	89	185	32
Herb Whalley	89	142	35
Tal Smith	89	138	32
Maxwell Kates	88	162	28
Chris Roblin	87	171	33
Chris Chestnut	87	148	31
Geoffrey Beiermeister	87	112	26
Timothy Healey	86	139	32
Larry Dierker	83	167	30

**Larry Dierker
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Favorite Ballparks: Major, Minor, and Negro Leagues

By Bob Dorrill

For more than 20 years, my wife Peggy and I have had a passion for visiting baseball parks: major league, minor league, or Negro league where professional games have been played. Over the years we have visited and photographed over 200 such sites and have only been denied access to the field one time.

Each location brought us a unique story and the following recollections are just a few of these personal stories.

Original Yankee Stadium, New York: In 1961, at age 12, a friend and I took the bus from our hometown to the Port Authority Terminal in New York City, then jumped on a subway to 161st Street and the stadium. We arrived early enough to collect autographs and take photos on my brand-new Kodak Brownie camera. Unfortunately, Joe DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle, and Yogi Berra had already arrived. We approached 12 Yankees, received no autographs, but one player stopped to pose for a photograph, who immediately became my favorite player: Billy Martin.

We saw another group by the visitors' entrance and one player was signing autographs. We raced over and got the autograph, not recognizing the person. It was Lou Brissie, a Cleveland Indian starter and World War II hero. It was my first autograph and I still have it.

Yankee Stadium II, New York: Bruce Quinn, my brother-in-law who lived in New Jersey, and I attended a Yankee / Red Sox game on Saturday, June 11, 2004. Upon arriving at the stadium, there was a temporary rain delay so we decided to walk around. I spotted Tal Smith and asked Bruce if he would like to meet Tal. He knew of Tal as Executive Vice President of the Yankees and President of the Astros.

Tal greeted me by name me and asked if we had been at the game the night before when six Astros pitchers had no-hit the Bronx Bombers. Unfortunately, no. I introduced Tal to

Bruce, who stood there like a deer in headlights. He couldn't speak. As we walked away, Bruce grabbed my shirt and said in amazement "Your really do know Tal Smith."

Rickwood Field, Birmingham Alabama: Opened on August 18, 1910, and is recognized as the oldest baseball park in America. Legendary Connie Mack helped design the ballpark modeled after Forbes Field in Pittsburgh.

It was the home of the Birmingham Barons and Birmingham Black Barons on alternating weeks. This is where Willie Mays began his professional career and where such superstars as Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Ted Williams, Stan Musial, Shoeless Joe Jackson, as well as Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and Cool Papa Bell played baseball.

Today, the field is in excellent condition and still in use, with billboards reflecting advertisers of the 1920's. It has also been the backdrop for scores of baseball movies. The

Negro stands and clubhouse home dugouts are accessible to everyone. Peggy and I were fortunate to get a private tour of the entire facility, including the field, press box, and roof.

Sportsman Park III, St. Louis: St. Louis has seven sites where professional baseball was played. Sportsman Parks I, II and III were all located in the same place, with home plate in different areas of the old ballpark. All that remains is the old ballpark offices currently being used by the

Herbert Hoover Boys Club, a huge mural on a side of the office building facing the street that portrays the rich history of the ballpark, and an unmarked grass field.

When we arrived in the small parking lot, we were met by a security guard who frankly questioned us about being in that "tough neighborhood" at 4:30 in the afternoon. We thanked him for his advice and entered the building anyway, where and found no reference at all to the old ballparks.

The manager told us there had once been markers on the exterior

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Bob Dorrill next to historical marker for Rickwood Field in Birmingham, AL.

Baseball



Trivia

1. Who was the oldest Hall of Fame rookie and what age was he as a rookie?
2. Who caught Larry Dierker's no-hitter and when was it?
3. What three positions did Connie Mack play?
4. Who was the youngest Hall of Fame player when elected?
5. Who did Vin Scully replace in the Dodgers' broadcast booth?

Prepared by John Lloyd

Answers on page 6

Ballparks continued from page 3

fence, but they had been stolen so often that they weren't replaced anymore. We walked the grass field and imagined what the park must have looked like. We brought with us some old time photos of the ballpark, which we shared with the employees.

League Park IV, Cleveland: This ballpark was renovated recently and was the home of the Cleveland Indians, and the Negro league Buckeyes from 1910 to 1948. It was here where Joe DiMaggio's 54-game hitting streak was stopped. We visited the former ticket booth and portions of the first base stands remain.



Entrance to Rickwood Field in Birmingham, AL

Yogi Berra Learning Center and Field, Little Falls, NJ: A complete Yogi Berra Museum is located onsite with much of Yogi's memorabilia on display, including his MVP awards, uniforms, and, of course, his many and varied American League and World Series Championship Rings. It was here that Yogi and George Steinbrenner settled their longtime feud and shook hands.

Spring Training Field, Kissimmee, Fla: Peggy and I traveled to Florida for 12 consecutive spring trainings to watch the Astros for a week. Each year, we had a project to secure autographs from the entire roster on either a ball, bat, or helmet.

Because of the friendly atmosphere, it took no longer than two days to achieve our goal.

One of our favorite players was Jose Lima of "Lima Time" fame. He was acquired from Detroit along with Brad Ausmus.

Lima's record at Detroit was 1-6, so he didn't know

if he would make the team. Still, he was extremely friendly and even taught Peggy a little Latin dance move he shared with Moises Alou. He knew we were season ticket holders and asked where our seats were. Since we were behind home plate, it was easy to spot Jose and he waved to us on a regular basis.

One year at spring training I got a little bold and asked Jose if maybe I could have one of his bats. "Absolutely," he responded, but we never discussed the subject again. On the next to the last game of the season, Jose asked if we were coming tomorrow to which we replied yes. Upon arrival, Jose was in the dugout, spotted us, went to the bat rack and brought me a game-used autographed Lima bat. For some reason, I asked if he might be pitching that day and he said no; it was his day off.

Imagine my surprise when I saw Jose warming up in the bullpen for the eighth inning. Sure enough, he came in and did his thing. During the bottom of the eighth, Lima was the lead-off batter. He put on his batting helmet and went to the bat rack. A number of fans sitting near us yelled for me to give Jose back his bat. As I got up to go to the dugout, manager Larry Dierker came over to tell our friend he was going to be pinch hit for. Lots of relief from both sides.

Conventions continued from page 1

one of the highlights of my summers. I also enjoy the special guests and former players who speak at the conventions.

To this day, I feel fortunate that I was able to see Ozzie Guillen's and Mike Veeck's talks in Chicago, Sig Mejdal's and the Babe Ruth panel in Baltimore, Steve Blass and John Candelaria in Pittsburgh, and finally, not that I am biased or anything, all the Astros players, executives, managers, and others that were at SABR 44 here in Houston.

As a side note for SABR 44, it was special for me in a few different ways. It was my first convention to attend. I volunteered to help the chapter with a few things including

monitoring one of the presentations.

I also made a presentation based on my own research. That presentation, on baseball's drug policies, along with questions from the audience, helped me rethink some of my ideas for my dissertation, which I completed in 2018.

SABR 52 this summer in Minneapolis should be just as exciting for me as previous conventions. I will once again be able to reconnect with SABR friends from around the country and spend time with members of our chapter who will be there.

Maxwell Kates, one of our chapter members from Toronto, started a tradition in Baltimore where all of us get together for dinner one night. I am looking forward to that dinner in Minneapolis.

Besides the great presentations I will be able to listen to, I will also be able to sit and listen to the great Twins of the past: Rod Carew, Tony Oliva, Bert Blyleven, and Jim Kaat.

Finally, as part of my all-inclusive package, I will be able to attend a Twins game and a St. Paul Saints game. I could not be more excited to visit Target Field, home of the Twins, and CHS Field, home of the Saints.

So, despite the slow start to the Astros season, I do have other things to think about when it comes to baseball this summer.

Until June 7, SABR members can pay a discounted rate of \$265 for convention registration. I hope all of you can join me this August. I am sure we will have a lot to talk about.

Rubbing Elbows with Baseball Royalty

By Mike McCroskey

One of our Larry Dierker Chapter members has a long and storied career around baseball luminaries such as George Steinbrenner and Ted Williams.

Dick Bily was born December 12, 1930 (the same year as George Steinbrenner), and grew up in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. His parents moved to Dallas, Texas, when he was in high school, graduating in 1949. He then enrolled at the University of Texas ("UT") in a pre-law program. He later was graduated with a BBA in Business Administration and Insurance.

Lineup of Upcoming Events:

May 23: Monthly Meeting: David Jerome on Bill Virdon at Spaghetti Western and Zoom

June 17: Monthly Meeting: Speaker and topic to be determined at Spaghetti Western and Zoom

July 15: Monthly Meeting: Speaker and topic to be determined at Spaghetti Western and Zoom

While a freshman at UT, he enrolled into the Air Force Reserve, as he did not want to get drafted into the Army. There was a conflict in Korea about that time so his unit got activated and he spent two years on active duty. However, he spent the majority of this time playing on the Air Force baseball, basketball, and golf teams with their special services unit.

He then returned to UT, where he had a partial basketball scholarship, having made All-League at his Sunset High School in Dallas. His 6'5" height was not a detriment to his basketball career; but after transferring to Dallas, he had to sit out a year of eligibility, so he played basketball for Dallas Aeromotive in an Amateur Athletic Union ("AAU") league. Also, he played a lot of pick-up baseball on a public field in Dallas Oak Cliff, along with some other pretty good ball players. He once even pitched to Ernie Banks in one of these games.

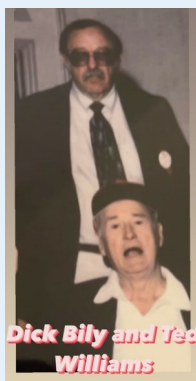
There was a former White Sox pitcher named Johnny Rigney who dated Dick's sister, Beatrice, for a while. However, he later married Charles Comiskey's daughter and became somewhat of a big shot with the White Sox, while still remaining friends with Beatrice.

Dick was still playing baseball in the Dallas area where he used to go out on the field early to watch their AA team, the Dallas Eagles, before games. At some point they saw him on the field and asked him to pitch batting practice. One of the players he pitched against then was former Major Leaguer Pete Gray, famous for having only one arm. Pete Gray scared him a bit, because he had a bit of an attitude that wasn't pleasant.

He also guarded a player for Baylor named Jackie Robinson (easy name to remember) who wound up in the White Sox organization. Somehow, Dick parlayed all these connections into a spring training tryout with the White Sox in 1957.

He hurt his arm and ended his playing career the second week of spring training, but he liked Florida and wanted to stay. Using his insurance degree, he talked Aetna into letting him enter a sales training class in Tampa while he was doing marketing for them and later established his own agency.

At a social event in 1982, he struck up a conversation with a lady and impressed her enough that she thought he would make a good mentor for her son. The lady was Mrs. George Steinbrenner, and the son



Welcome New Members

Mack BushRichardson, TX
 Jonathan GoodwinKaty, TX
 Xin Qi HuangHouston, TX
 Christian KruegerFulshear, TX
 Connor KurconHouston, TX
 Jacob LappHouston, TX
 Diego MartinezHouston, TX
 Pat SparksKaty, TX
 Tyler SuarezMagnolia, TX
 Angel ArroyoUnspecified
 Reinaldo Gonzalez.....Houston, TX
 Soojin KimUnspecified
 Matt MurphyProsper, TX
 Corey BirtChantilly, VA
 Stephen Cifrulak.....Houston, TX
 Carlos Quevedo.....Houston, TX

Dick would mentor was Hank, born in 1957.

Dick and Hank became very close, and this was Dick's envoy to the baseball world. He became George Steinbrenner's insurance agent and a good friend of Ted Williams through the baseball social circuit. I know he got an autograph from Joe DiMaggio and played golf with Mickey Mantle.

The accompanying photograph was taken by Dick Collins, who worked for the Hall of Fame from 1966 – 1998. Dick Bily described him as an Irishman who drank and cursed a lot. He had no problem in slinging curse words at Hall of Famers while telling them to pose properly for his photographs.

Last summer, Dick Bily was featured in a blog authored by Yankee community consultant Ray Negron, linked [here](#). Interestingly, Ray was hired by the Yankees after being nabbed for spraying graffiti on a Yankee stadium wall by George Steinbrenner himself. He started as batboy, then moved into the front office in a variety of community outreach positions. He has written several articles and books about his life in and around Yankee Stadium.

Dick is still highly regarded by the Yankees and acts as a consultant for many of their decisions. They might not have a "Yogi" anymore, but Dick is still with them as their towering "Yoda."

Worst start continued from page 1

The Astros moved an All-Star second baseman to the outfield, but this experiment ended after a month. They missed the power with the trading of Rusty Staub and the team only hit nine homers in the first month of the season. They also struggled with the glove early in the season, with Joe Morgan getting an audition in the outfield to give it some pop, but this was abandoned after the first month of play.

The Pittsburgh Pirates and St. Louis Cardinals entered the season as the favorites to win the National League, but the new Western Division was considered to be wide open and up for grabs by any team other than the expansion San Diego Padres.

The Astros, with new manager Harry Walker, were hoping to get off to a fast start. The 1969 schedule was different for baseball, with each team playing all of their divisional opponents 18 times, nine times each at home and on the road. Also, the season was front-loaded and back-loaded with games against divisional opponents.



Phil Boudreaux

The Astros opened their season against the Padres at old San Diego Stadium. Dick Selma limited the Astros to only five hits and outdueled Don Wilson 2-1. Jesus Alou, acquired from the Expos as part of the Rusty Staub trade for Donn Clendenon, who never reported to the Astros, got three hits and scored the only Astro run.

Veteran Johnny Podres pitched seven innings of shutout ball, before giving way to reliever Tommie Sisk who would close out a 2-0 win. In the final game of the series, the Padres got one-hit baseball out of Dick Kelley for 8.1 innings as San Diego won again. The Astros left San Diego with only 10 hits; Alou had the team's only extra base hits, a double and a triple, and scored the team's only run.

The Astros came home to face the Dodgers and promptly lost the first two games of the series as well. In the final game of the series, the Astros would have to face future Hall-of-Famer Don Drysdale. Shortstop Denis Menke and third baseman Doug Rader slugged homers off Drysdale early, the first homers for the team of the season. The Astros held on for a 5-2 win behind Don Wilson.

The Dodgers stayed for a wrap-around Monday game, which the Astros won, followed by a win against the Braves, which gave the team a three-game winning streak to move to within three games of first place. Then, the bottom fell out. The Astros dropped the finale to Atlanta before heading to the West Coast again for a quick series with the Dodgers.

The Astros looked to get back on the winning track and Don Wilson pitched well, leaving in the seventh with a 4-2 lead. Closer Fred Gladning came in after a leadoff walk and then retired the first six batters he faced in the seventh and eighth. Catcher Tom Haller led off the ninth with a double and came home on Bill Sudakis' double to narrow the lead to 4-3.

Harry Walker called for Jack Billingham to pitch and he retired Paul Popovich. He also gave up a single to future rookie-of-the-year Ted Sizemore to advance the tying run to third base. Reliever Skip Guinn was summoned, then walked Ron Fairly to load the bases before striking out Willie Crawford. Another reliever, Dooley Womack, came in and walked right fielder Bill Russell and tie the game. First baseman Wes Parker coaxed another walk, and the Dodgers had a walk-off walk to earn the victory.

The following night had a similar outcome as the Astros broke a 3-3 tie with an RBI single by Denis Menke



to give the Astros a rare lead in the ninth. Larry Dierker tried to finish out the win, but the Astros defense wasn't able to hold.

With two outs in the ninth, outfielder Andy Kosco hit a grounder to shortstop Leon McFadden. McFadden wasn't able to make the play and pinch-runner Bobby Darwin tied the game. Walker pulled Dierker and brought in Guinn to face the veteran Haller, who greeted Guinn with an RBI single to extend the Astros' winless streak to four games.

The losing streak continued as the team lost the finale to the Dodgers. The Astros came home to face the Reds and dropped their next two games to stretch the losing streak to seven. In the second game against the Reds, the Astros were three-hit by Mel Queen and Clay Carroll, losing 14-0.

The loss dropped the Astros to 3-12; they were 7½ games behind the first-place Braves. They trailed the fifth-place Padres by two games. Only the Astros and Padres were below .500 on the young season.

Larry Dierker was able to nail down the Astros' fourth win of the season with a two-hit shutout of the Padres at the Dome, winning 4-0. The Astros bats were largely quiet.

Stay tuned for our next issues, when we will wrap up the Astros' 1969 season and their efforts to overcome the slow start. Will history repeat itself this season?

Trivia Answers

1. Dazzy Vance - rookie at age 31
2. Ed Herrmann on July 9, 1976
3. Catcher, First base, Right field
4. Sandy Koufax - elected at age 36
5. Ernie Harwell