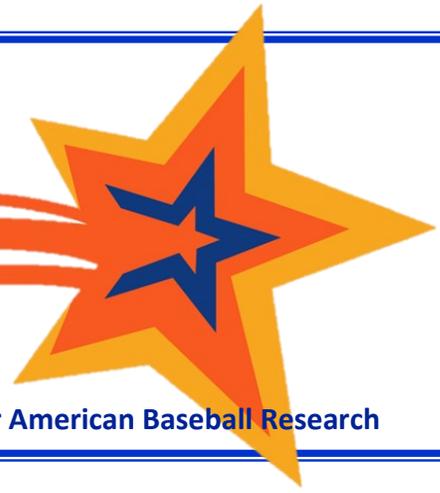


Houston Baseball

Shooting Star Express

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



Volume 2 Number 4



Spring 2022

President's Welcome

By Joe Thompson

The 2022 Astros baseball season is underway, and I am excited about the possibility of the club making it to a sixth straight ALCS and to another World Series. I think the Astros have spoiled the fanbase the last few years with all their success, but I hope that the club can keep this run going. I have thoroughly enjoyed watching the club in October these last few years. Now, there are a few things that concern me about the 2022 club overall, but I think, in the end, this team will take Astros fans along for another ride into late October.



Joe Thompson

I have some concerns about Astros pitching. I think the bullpen will be fine if the back half of the pen with Montero, Neris, and Pressly can remain healthy. For the starters, I hope Lance McCullers, Jr. can come back and be as effective this year as he was last year. The problem is we do not know when exactly he is going to be able to come back. That can be a big problem for the club's success moving forward.

I think that Justin Verlander is back, and he will amaze and remind everyone out there just how good he really is. I want to say that the performance of Luis Garcia, Christian Javier, and Framber Valdez will be the key to the success of the Astros pitching staff, but I am just not

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Tal Smith's Middle Career Years with Astros, Yankees

By Bill Brown

Tal Smith is now the last man standing from the original Houston Colt .45s, with the passing of Eddie Robinson at age 100 late in 2021.

When Smith joined the Colt .45s, they hadn't been named yet. New General Manager Gabe Paul brought Smith with him from Cincinnati as assistant to the general manager. "That was exciting. We went on the payroll November 1, 1960," recalled Smith. "The personnel office – it was just me initially. We acquired the Buffs as our AAA club."

After a Buffs home game, Paul called Smith and told him to assemble the staff. The news Paul gave them was shocking: Paul was leaving for Cleveland. "We were six months into the new franchise. Several months later I can recall the owners calling me in to advise me on a confidential basis that Paul Richards would be coming at the end of the season. I was sworn to secrecy."

The reason for the secrecy was Richards' job as manager of the Baltimore Orioles. He violated baseball's rules by sharing the scouting information for two teams at the same time. During the Orioles' season, he called Smith under the code name "Blackie" and held a 6:30 a.m. clandestine meeting in Chicago to talk about the Colt .45s.

"I had some problems with Paul's ethics," remembered Smith. (Judge Roy Hofheinz called me in front of Richards and asked me questions about staff or trades, and I was young enough or probably foolish enough to answer as directly as I could. Sometimes that wouldn't sit well with Richards.")

Tal was promoted to farm director in April 1961, and he started the minor league system from scratch. As the major league expansion club struggled through a 64-96 maiden season, the prospects began their movement toward a job opportunity in Houston. By September of 1963, the Colt .45s fielded an all-rookie starting lineup including top prospects Rusty Staub, Joe Morgan, and Jimmy Wynn.

"That was interesting, because those were the days prior to the amateur draft," remembered Smith. "The amateur draft came into effect in 1965, but in our formative years there starting in 1961 through 1964 we were trying to sign players and build an organization. We were successful in signing Rusty Staub in 1961 and several other players that had great promise. Rusty was probably the most prominent of those, although Dave Giusti is another one that comes to mind. We signed a lot of players, and frankly during the first 13 years of the franchise from 1961 through 1973 we signed and developed more major league players than any other organization at that time."

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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 July 15 for our Summer 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

Dierker comments on proposed "Shiftless" Rules

By Larry Dierker

As a part of their yearly overreaction to cycles in the game, the geniuses at MLB are talking about eliminating shifts on the infield. The key here is *infield*.

Clearly, the trend of stationing the second baseman in shallow right field and bringing the shortstop across to the first base side of the bag has been effective against almost all left-handed hitters. The hard ground balls through the *hole*, that used to be hits, have become outs. The hole is gone.

As a former pitcher, I thought it was a gimmick. Like having the infield playing back with a man on third and then charging in like blitzing linebackers as the pitcher starts his delivery. Tony LaRussa started that tactic, as far as I know. I thought it would bother the batters, but it didn't seem to. That wasn't long ago and it's already an anachronism.

Another strategy that is still used, or at least was used with pitchers hitting, is the Wheel Play. That strategy was virtually eliminated when MLB decreed that the game

was better with more sluggers and fewer bunters.

In the good old days, when the pitcher came up to hit with men on first and second with no outs, he would try to bunt the runners over to second and third. If the runner on second was a lumbering slugger, the defense was almost always the

Wheel Play. This strategy was designed to get the force out at third. As the pitcher delivered the pitch, the first and third basemen charged in to field the bunt, while the shortstop covered third. It was *little ball*, and it was also exciting. Like the squeeze play.

One by one, the nuances of baseball have been eliminated. There aren't many dinosaurs left to slay.

Before I venture into the recent discussion of shifts, I need to dispel the notion that left-handed hitters should learn to hit to left field to defeat the shift. They can't. Good pitchers can almost force lefties to pull the ball by throwing breaking balls down and in, and off-speed pitches. Hitters would have to have a golf swing to hit these pitches to left field. And they would have to give up their power in the process. As a pitcher, I didn't like the shifts at first. But the more games I watched, the more I realized that the shifts would have been my friend.

Shifts are relevant because they work. So, what would I do about it? As I understand it, the new rule would require two infielders to play on either side of the second base bag. I could beat that rule easily. I would simply put the second baseman in short right field. I would



Larry Dierker

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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.

Dierker continues on page 5

Deacon Jones Honored by Fort Bend Commissioners

By Mike McCroskey

In a belated ceremony due to health issues, Larry Dierker SABR Chapter friend, Grover William "Deacon" Jones was honored for Black History Month by the Fort Bend County Commissioners Court on April 5, 2022. Shown in the accompanying picture alongside his daughter Monica, Deacon receives a

Proclamation from County Judge K.P. George for both his work in the community and for being the first African American ballplayer to be honored with a plaque in the Cooperstown National Baseball Hall of

Fame. He is flanked on either side by two of the four Fort Bend County Commissioners.

As a 17-year-old High School American Legion ballplayer, Deacon's White Plains, New York, high

school team traveled to Briggs Stadium in Detroit to play against Crenshaw, California, who were playing for their third consecutive championship, led by shortstop Sparky Anderson.

Although White Plains lost to Crenshaw, captain Jones was selected as the tournament's outstanding play-

It was the first time ever that a player from the losing team was designated American Legion Junior Baseball Player of the Year. The winner of this award has historically had a plaque displayed for the following calendar year in the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Deacon thereby became the first African American honored with a plaque in Cooperstown.

After pictures were taken with the Proclamation, Deacon made a short and simple speech. He said his Daddy always told him that "no man was an island." Everyone needs their circle of friends. So, he thanked his friends in Fort Bend County for taking some time to let him know that his life was appreciated and for giving an elder

statesman a little moment to "stop and smell the roses." Applause and a standing ovation followed as Deacon took his seat. In all, it was a very nice and sincere ceremony, and a well-deserved honor for our friend.



er as well as the American Legion Junior Player of the Year. He led in average (.408), hits (20), and tied for the lead in home runs with two, according to The Sporting News on September 19, 1951.

Chapter Members Predict Astros, Space Cowboy Wins

Twenty-seven Chapter members predicted the Houston Astros would win between 86 and 102 regular-season games (out of 162) and the Sugar Land Space Cowboys would win between 64 and 92 regular-season games (out of 150). Winners will be announced at the ends of both seasons.

Last year, Greg Moore and John Hudec tied for the lead, both predicting the Astros would win 95 games. These two fans prevailed over 33 other entries in the contest.

The prize in the past has been bragging rights, though our President is planning to award a more attractive prize this year.

Baseball



Trivia

1. Who was the first African-American baseball player in the American League?
2. Who was the centerfielder for the Big Red Machine?
3. Who was the first African-American professional baseball player?
4. What do the Waners, Lou Kretlow, and Willie Stargell have in common?
5. Who threw a nine-inning complete-game no-hitter and lost the game?

Answers on page 6

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Larry Dierker was another of those players. “When you count the guys who have significant major league careers that were obtained by the Colts .45s/Astros within about a five- or six-year period, I don’t think there’s any established team or expansion team anywhere that has produced as many guys – probably 10 of

Lineup of Upcoming Events:

May 16: Monthly Meeting: Ted Meyer on Baseball Dynasties at Spaghetti Western and Zoom

June 20: Monthly Meeting: Arlene Lassin on the Phillies at Spaghetti Western and Zoom

15 of them – that had 10- or 15-year careers with some All-Star appearances and everything else,” said Dierker. “We did everything but win a championship, and I think that would have happened if Tal had stayed here and had the power. We

wouldn’t have traded away Rusty Staub and Joe Morgan and Mike Cuellar. We wouldn’t have made those dumb deals if Tal had been running the show instead of Spec Richardson.”

Hofheinz asked Smith to be the liaison and project manager for the Astrodome construction when Tal had one foot out the door on his way to a job in Cleveland. “I said, ‘Judge, I’m flattered but I’m not experienced.’ He said he knew that but went on to say some nice things about my organizational skills and my ability to learn things on the fly. This was an opportunity to stay here, and I’d heard enough about the Dome and seen the model and heard the Judge speak, and I thought it was a unique once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It presented a sink-or-swim challenge.”

Tal entered the world of lamella trusses, tension rings and knuckle columns. “There was a great team of architects and engineers and contractors on the project,” he recalled. “They certainly took care of the technical aspects. It was my responsibility to make sure that when

we took over, the building would be functional and operational, so there were a lot of things that came into play.” He called it “a fascinating experience.”

One of the major focuses for Smith was the scoreboard, which was not included in the basic contract between the county and contractor. Tal made many trips to Des Moines, Iowa, to meet with Fair Play Scoreboard and work with a scale model. It was the first animated scoreboard, and that required a great deal of extra attention.

“The scoreboard speaks for itself,” Tal summarized. “I thought it was a magnificent piece of work that they came up with that really entertained anybody at the Astrodome. I actually felt that people that were coming into the stadium for the first time or seeing a ball game in there were obviously in awe of the building itself and the fact that it was domed and air conditioned, but the one feature they seemed to talk about on their way out was the scoreboard. That just really enraptured people.”

When the Astrodome opened April

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sure about that yet. Time will tell. Finally, can the real Jake Odorizzi please stand up? He needs to perform well this season, or the club needs to let him go.

The loss of Carlos Correa and his role as the *de facto* team leader on and off the field worries me the most about this year’s club. I would argue that Correa was the team leader, and he grew into that over the years. I remember watching when the Astros drafted him #1 overall in the 2012 draft and thinking that night, “I hope the Astros know what they are doing.” Correa made his way through the Astros system rather quickly and became a staple on the big-league club by 2015. I remember Correa acting as the team cheer leader during the playoff runs the last few years. His excitement was contagious.

When the sign-stealing scandal broke out, Correa again stepped up and became the voice of the club. When the club continued to succeed after the scandal, Correa kept reminding everyone just how good the Astros had always been, despite the naysayers saying otherwise. When Framber Valdez and other pitchers seemed to lose their cool on the mound, Correa was there talking to them. Correa’s bat cooled down considerably last year, especially in the playoffs, and this

made it a little easier to see him leave for the Twins considering what he was asking for salary-wise.

When the team let Correa have his moment on the field at the end of last season, I was one of those giving him a standing ovation while watching the game from home on television. I hope the Astros knew what they were doing when they let him, the greatest shortstop in club history, walk. I just hope losing a field general like Correa and replacing him with the kid Jeremy Pena does not hurt the club that much. Pena has shined early this season and I hope his success continues.

I think the offense will not suffer that much with the loss of Correa. Besides the best Astros hitter ever in my opinion, Jose Altuve, the offense should not lose a step with Alex Bregman, Yordan Alvarez, Yuli Gurriel, and Kyle Tucker in the lineup. I would say that Alvarez’s bat in the lineup is key and keeping him healthy will be most important this season. As Alvarez continues to adjust to pitchers adjusting to him, his presence alone should keep opposing managers around the league worried late into the night.

Finally, I am someone who loves speed on the base paths and players that can change the outcome of a game with their feet almost by themselves. Some of

my favorite Astros players of all-time fit into this mold: Cesar Cedeno, Enos Cabell, Craig Biggio, Michael Bourn, Willy Taveras, and Terry Puhl. The player that excites me the most about the 2022 Astros also fits into this mold. That player is Jose Siri.

Astros fans got to see a little of Jose Siri last year and for most of us he excited us and scared us half to death with his play on the field and base running. He made some mistakes, but he injected a level of excitement every time he got on base. I think this year he will come into his own and become a complete player.

On March 25, 2019, the Dayton Dragons, High-A Affiliate for the Cincinnati Reds announced that Jose Siri had joined the list of the “20 Greatest Dragons” in club history. The list was announced as part of the organization’s 20th season celebration. The list included such names as Jay Bruce, Edwin Encarnacion, Joey Votto, and Didi Gregorius. That is a strong list of baseball stars. I can only hope that Siri shows Astros nation why he was added to that list as one of the greatest Dragons ever.

So, let’s get ready for another season of Astros baseball. I am ready for it. I would love to be planning for Halloween this October while watching another Astros run to the World Series.

New Collective Bargaining Agreement Changes

By Tony Cavender

Here are some of the public provisions of the recently negotiated collective bargaining agreement (“CBA”), which caused the delay of the 2022 season:

- There will be a full season of 162 games, with three days added to the regular season, and a series of doubleheaders will be played to complete the season’
- The postseason playoffs will be expanded to 12 teams; there will be three division winners and three wild card teams in each league.
- Single elimination tiebreaker games have been eliminated.
- The DH will be available in both leagues.
- Clubs can enter into local sponsorships whereby sponsor patches can be affixed to uniforms and batting helmets.
- The minimum salary will be increased to \$700,000 in 2022, rising annually to reach \$780,000 by 2026.
- Minor league minimum salaries for players with past major league experience will increase.
- The competitive balance tax, or “luxury tax,” will grow twice as fast as it has in the last two CBAs. There will be expensive “surcharges” for exceeding the thresholds.
- There is a new “pre-salary arbitration bonus pool “to reward players who perform at high levels before they enter salary arbitration. Salary arbitration salaries will be guaranteed for the first time???
- The parties will decide by July 25, 2022, whether to establish an international draft.



Future bases will be 18 inch square, but some predicted other sizes.

Welcome New Members

Kyle KellyHouston, TX
 Vince Trovato.....Houston, TX
 Brian AlcottTomball, TX
 Thomas BellBaltimore, MD
 Craig EstlinbaumBay City, TX
 Donald MilnerBandera, TX
 Patrick Milum.....Pearland, TX
 Phyllis MiraTomball, TX
 Quinn SmithMontgomery, TX
 Kevin Fontenot.....Sugar Land, TX
 Rob HamiltonWillis, TX
 Jimmy Scruggs.....Fulshear, TX
 Pete CottrellUnspecified

- A new draft lottery selection system is designed to prevent teams from “tanking; to obtain higher draft picks by intentionally losing games.
- A new Joint Competition Committee, composed of active ballplayers, MLB representatives and one umpire, has been created to consider rules changes, and how to handle excessive defensive shifts, and the strike zone.
- There are improved financial benefits for former players.
- Team rosters will remain limited to the 26-man roster limit that increases to 28 in September.

Dierker continued from page 2

station the shortstop a millimeter or so to the third base side of the bag.

As the pitcher started his delivery, the shortstop would move to his left, on the second base side. That would force the hyperactive rules committee to require the shortstop to hold his position. That would eliminate charging in with a man on third, which is no big deal. But it would also eliminate the Wheel Play.

I wonder if the lawyers at MLB considered that. In a way, it too is no big deal because the pitcher, is (was) the only player that bunted in this Powerball phase of the sport. Sadly, there is hardly any strategy left in baseball these days.

Now it seems that the geniuses are more concerned with sign stealing, which is no big deal because it’s easy to counter by simply changing signs fairly often. For me, strategy is way more important to the quality of game than infield alignment.

But these days home runs are the only offensive strategy. And striking out the hefty upper cutters with high velocity fastballs is the primary defense. Power hitting against power pitching. Relatively few balls are put into play these days. And it takes longer to play nine innings.

While I’m opposed to eliminating shifts, I understand why it seems important. Anyone can see the advantage. But I have another idea that would address the issue without vio-

lating the beauty of the sport. It’s so simple: Require the infielders to stay on the infield.

It’s the infielder in the outfield that is killing the left-handed hitters. The shortstop isn’t all that important. It makes me wonder whether the people who make the rules have ever played the sport.

After the DH was implemented in 1973, baseball settled down for a couple of decades. But replacing the two independent leagues with MLB has brought an onslaught of new and unnecessary rules — new rules in reaction to trends that would likely dissipate on their own. More isn’t always better. Perhaps it’s just a way to justify getting a paycheck.

Smith continued from page 4

9, 1965, with an exhibition game, the Astros played the Yankees in front of President Lyndon B. Johnson, Texas Governor John Connally, and a packed house. Mickey Mantle was the first batter. Tal called it “the one most memorable event in my professional life,” referring to the night before the game. He was in a group of architects, engineers, and workers applying finishing touches to the Eighth Wonder of the World. “I can recall standing out in the middle of the playing field right under the gondola in the center of the Dome. There were still people scurrying and checking this and that and the house lights were on. I looked around at what had been created and just marveled at it.”

Amidst worldwide attention that put Houston on the international map, the Astrodome attracted millions of visitors for events and for tours of the building. The Astros did not get any benefits in the win column, finishing 65-97. In fact, they were forced to deal with stadium issues that affected the players. When sun streamed through the skylights, the fielders could not see fly balls. Coats of paint were applied to the top of the panels, dulling the glare of the sun. That addressed one problem but created another. The grass on the field died when it was deprived of the sun’s rays. Tal found himself with an important assignment. Judge Hofheinz told him, “Tal, you’ve got whatever resources you need. Go find a solution to this.”

Tal recalled, “I dealt with that for some time, and this became a national story that had great awareness. I would hear from a lot of people with a lot of ideas. Some of them were goofy. Some of them were from people in the industrial sector or the agricultural sector that would suggest various things. My office was just laden with all kinds of samples of products with chemicals and coatings and surfaces. During this time, I had a call from the athletic director at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, Phil Theibert. He was aware of the problem. He said he was part of a committee of athletic directors that had a Ford Foundation grant to study finding suitable surfaces for playgrounds, particularly in the inner cities, where they would get a lot of wear and tear. He said, ‘As a result of that, we’ve got a product up here. We’ve got a test installation at a private school.’ One of the architects, Jim Mueller and myself, flew up to Prov-

idence and met Theibert and went over to this small private school, the Moses Brown School, and in their gymnasium on the surface – what would be the playing court for basketball, for example – they had this product which was green fibers that looked like grass. We ran on it and bounced balls off it, and I came away with the conclusion as did Jim Mueller that this presented the possibility of something that might solve the issue.” AstroTurf was born.

Tal moved back into his player personnel role after the Astrodome project was completed. Judge Hofheinz parted ways with Paul Richards and installed a triumvirate to run the team, with Spec Richardson taking over as general manager, Grady Hatton as field manager and Tal running the minor leagues. His data-driven mind led him to computerize information on players, leading the modernization of the industry into hard drives and software. He also directed the collection of computerized data for the annual June draft of amateur players.



Gabe Paul and Tal Smith, '73

He developed a system of assigning an overall ranking, called Overall Future Potential, to rank amateur players for their selection in the draft. He reorganized the scouting system under regional scouting directors to streamline the flow of information. Scouts were assigned to follow entire organizations, including all of the minor league clubs of the organization. The Houston system was producing outstanding talent. But a series of damaging trades by Richardson caused setbacks to the organization. Tal predicted to a Houston sportswriter after the 1971 deal with Cincinnati including Joe Morgan that Morgan would become an MVP. That happened in 1975 and again in 1976.

Gabe Paul called again, and Tal departed the Astros in 1973 to join the New York Yankees as their executive vice president under new owner George Steinbrenner. Tal joined the Yankees just after they hired Bill Virdon to be their new manager. Tal’s experience working for Steinbrenner was a positive and productive one. The team emerged from the doldrums to contend for a playoff spot in 1974, but Steinbrenner fired Virdon nonetheless to pursue Billy Martin.

Days after Virdon was fired, Smith decided to accept another overture to return to Houston as the team’s new general manager. He hired Virdon shortly



afterwards, and the two began building a last-place team into a division champion in a whirlwind turnaround with limited financial resources. “The hiring of Bill Virdon, who was just an exceptional manager, was one of the key moves. He was able to take a club and really mold it together. They gave great effort and were always very tenacious,” remembered Smith. “We were always in a lot of close, low-scoring ball games. The Astrodome obviously was more of a pitchers’ part than a hitters’ park. Runs were hard to come by. I can recall in 1979 and 1980 Jose Cruz led the club in home runs one year with something like 13.”

The Astros were in receivership, owned by Ford and GE Credit Corporations. But Tal Smith found no problems working in a structured management situation, trading some veterans and accumulating young pitching. The combination of Smith’s astute analysis and Virdon’s discipline brought improvement with an approach that emphasized pitching, solid defensive play and small ball. By 1979, after Smith bolstered the club with acquisitions of catcher Alan Ashby and shortstop Craig Reynolds, the Astros fell only 1 ½ games short of a division title.

Virdon was a stickler for fundamentals, mastering the art of winning low-scoring games with a solid defense and very little power. Sacrifice bunting and tremendous range in the outfield were staples of the Astros. If the players were not executing, Virdon was quite willing to bring them out onto the field after a game to work on some fundamentals. Or if Cliff Johnson didn’t run out a popup, the whole team could be called in the next morning for a baserunning workout.

Next in Part 3: The momentous 1980 season and Tal Smith Enterprises.

Trivia Answers

1. Larry Doby
2. Cesar Geronimo
3. Moses Fleetwood Walker in 1884
4. All were born in Oklahoma
5. Ken Johnson in 1964 (Colt .45’s)