

Houston Baseball

Shooting Star Express

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



Volume 1 Number 1



Summer 2020

President's Welcome

By Bob Dorrill

Welcome to the Larry Dierker Chapter of the Society for American Research ("SABR") and the first edition of our newsletter: "Houston Baseball Shooting Star Express." Both the chapter and newsletter highlight the rich history of Houston and local baseball.

The "Shooting Star" embraces the Houston Astros and their entry into the National League in 1962 as the Colt .45's. Early Astro and Colt .45 uniforms had a smoking gun across the chest. The famous Astrodome scoreboard had cowboys and shooting pistols bursting as part of its unparalleled home run display. The "Star" pays homage to the space industry and NASA's Mission Control located here, while the "Express" celebrates the old Houston train station where Minute Made Park now sits, plus a certain pitcher of national fame.

Our chapter meets on the third Monday of each month at 7:00 p.m. and we currently use "Zoom" for our sessions. We host speakers from all aspects of the baseball world, as well as encourage members to make presentations. Our active members include former players, broadcasters, baseball executives, authors, and fans. Monte Irvin, Jimmy Wynn, Marie "Red" Mahoney, and Bill McCurdy were regulars at our meetings before their passing.

SABR is an international organization dedicated to the history of baseball, with committees covering every aspect of the sport. There are over 57 local chapters, plus national committees concentrating on baseball history, statistics, ballparks, umpires, Negro Leagues, the business of baseball, women in baseball, player



Houston Babes Manager Bob Dorrill

biographies, and a host of other topics. SABR sponsors an annual national convention at locations rotated around the country. Our chapter hosted SABR 44 in 2014.

At our meeting this June, 45 members of our chapter enjoyed visiting by video for over 90 minutes with long-time major league pitcher Mike Stanton, who is second all-time in games pitched. We also have monthly trivia contests that challenge our baseball knowledge.

In the past, the chapter has embarked on several special projects, such as writing a narrative on Houston baseball, "Houston Baseball, The Early Years, 1861-1961." This year's project is publishing a quarter-

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From the Top of Tal's Hill: Thoughts on MLB 2020

By Tal Smith

I write this a few days prior to what is expected to be the opening of the 2020 Major League Baseball season. By the time you read this, we will indeed know whether baseball is back and if there will actually be the semblance of a season.

SABR members and baseball enthusiasts everywhere will doubtlessly rejoice in the fact that the national pastime has finally returned. Hopefully, less ardent fans will also appreciate the return of the game and find some solace from the diversion during these difficult and troubling times brought on by the pandemic.

But, questions abound. Here are some of particular concern.

Once underway, will the season be again interrupted or suspended as the

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Articles Solicitation



Want to get into the game? Tired of sitting on the bench? Play ball with us by sending in articles for future newsletters! Give your fellow chapter members, and other SABR'ites, solid hits of wisdom, wonderment, and wit in an article of your choice that relates to baseball, especially Houston baseball. Rookies are welcome; our cracker-jack editors will tone up your prose into major league quality. Just send your article, from 200 to 500 words, to umpire/editor Tony Cavender at anthony.cavender@pillsburylaw.com by the ides of October (15th) for our Autumn issue. Start writing your opening pitch and join the lineup!

Pandemic Games

By Bill Brown

It doesn't require an international pandemic for baseball fans to realize what they are missing. After all, we've lived through labor stoppages in 1972, 1981, 1994, and 1995. Fans in the 1940's had to live without many baseball stars during World War II. But this time it's been different. This time, our summer nights were filled with no live sports at all. No golf or tennis, auto racing, or Olympics. No college sports. For many of us, entertainment has consisted of binge-watching Netflix shows or even reading books!

With all of the extra time on our hands and in a virtual deep freeze when it came to finding some meaningful work to perform, some of us are quite limited. For some, there's playing golf – one of the few "safe" activities available. Conversations. Music. Radio and television. Newspapers. A summer like 2020 leads us to think about how many hours we actually spend with baseball. For avid followers of one team, there's a game just about every day from April through September. There are pregame shows and postgame



Bill Brown

shows. There are talk shows and podcasts. There are internet articles and highlight clips. There are nightly highlight shows and analytical reports. Extensive coverage, including box scores, in newspapers and magazines. I once read a story about Gene Mauch spending hours reading box scores in the mornings. According to the article, he could figure out how the bullpen matchups evolved in a game by tracing the game backwards from the final out.

What has struck me during this down time is the role of sports in our society. Certainly, there are many institutions with more importance to our lives. For many people, sports rank pretty low on the totem pole when it comes to ranking the most meaningful interests in their lives. For ardent sports fans, however, it ranks high.

Jack Buck and Harry Caray were two nightly companions for me in Missouri, listening to St. Louis Cardinals games on the radio. For you, it might have been Vin Scully, Ernie Harwell, Chip Caray, or Jon Miller. These broadcasters almost enjoy "family" status for many of us. In the summer of 2020, baseball broadcasters have been sitting out the months along with everybody else. So were football, basketball, and hockey broadcasters. All of them have been in a state of suspension of sorts, silenced from



Chapter namesake Larry Dierker (center) with, from left, Chapter Officers Joe Thompson and Mike McCroskey, newsletter contributors Greg Lucas and Tal Smith, and Chapter Officers Marsha Franty and Bob Dorrill.

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.

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Negro Leagues Celebrate 100 Years

By Mike Vance

For millions of Americans, the recent discussions of our country's history of racism are many years overdue. For millions of others, it marks welcome attention being focused on a struggle they face most every day.

One big force that marched on the front lines of the Civil Rights Movement was baseball. Jackie Robinson's breaking of the entrenched color line in the big leagues came over a year before the other giant step of the late 1940's: President Harry Truman's desegregation of the United States military. It was also the death knell for the wildly popular Negro Leagues as the country's African-American baseball fans firmly applied their allegiances to the Brooklyn Dodgers, Cleveland Indians, and New York Giants, who all brought in the star players previously relegated by segregation.

During those last gasps, the top echelons of the Negro Leagues placed a team in Texas for the only time. It happened here in Houston when a local dentist purchased the



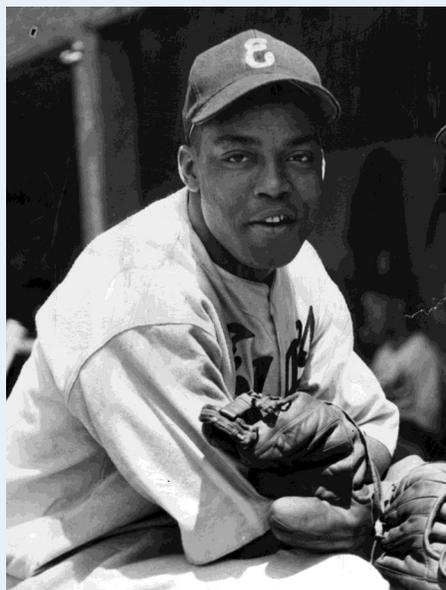
Mike Vance

vaunted Newark Eagles from Effa Manley and brought them to the Bayou City in 1949. Just two years prior, the club had been a powerhouse. By the time they moved south, however, star hitters Larry Doby and Monte Irvin were in the majors. Leon Day and Ray Dandridge declined to move to Jim Crow Texas, and their contracts were sold. The club's leading pitcher, Max Manning, simply failed to report. Texas-born Hall of Famer Biz Mackey, one of the all-time great catchers, had hung up his spikes a year earlier at age 49. Yes, you read that correctly.

The team that played at Houston's Buff Stadium for two sea-

sons was short on star power and even shorter on paying fans. For its second season, the team brought in Houston native Red Parnell as skipper, but attendance still lagged, and they again finished last in the Negro American League. In 1951, they de-camped for New Orleans.

Parnell had been a top notch outfielder with the old Houston Black Buffaloes of the late 1920s. The Black Buffs were one of the best minor league level squads in the nation



Courtesy of National Baseball Hall of Fame

Monte Irvin, pictured, spent the last years of his life in Houston, but the same year his former team, the Newark Eagles, moved to the city, he debuted with the New York Giants.

during those years, and hosted the Colored World Series for two seasons after the demise of the Eastern Colored League.

Their opponents in those two post season series were the Kansas City Monarchs and the Chicago American Giants, members of the Negro National League. The NNL had brought segregated baseball into the big time with better organization, scheduling, and player control. It had been the brainchild of another Texan, pitcher and entrepreneur Andrew "Rube" Foster. The initial meeting took place in Kansas City in February 1920, and it is that centennial that sports fans everywhere should be celebrating.

I recently had the honor of playing host for an online panel discussion about this rich baseball history. The guests were longtime Astros player and current team executive Enos Cabell and Bob Kendrick, the president of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City. Each brought a terrific amount of good history and perspective. Given the tenor of the times, we also had a frank discussion about how the past and future often overlap.

Please spend an hour of your time enjoying a rich discussion of baseball history and how it intersects today's events. Grab a cold beverage, turn up your speakers and click this link: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=696915711154854&ref=watch_permalink

Baseball



Trivia

1. There have been ten Commissioners of Baseball. How many can you name?
2. What Astros led the league in batting average, home runs, and runs batted in?
3. What AL and NL Presidents were previously major league infielders?
4. What Astro pitchers have won the Cy Young Award?

Answers on page 6

2020: A YEAR THAT WILL LIVE IN INFAMY

By Greg Lucas

Although that headline seems extreme, especially since it was borrowed from Franklin D. Roosevelt's declaration after the Japanese Navy attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, it fits. And not just for sports, and more specifically baseball fans, but almost everyone who inhabits our earth.

Lineup of Upcoming Events:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| Aug 17 | Monthly Meeting: Tom Stone on book of best teams and Kris Gross on Astros scouting |
| Sept 21 | Monthly Meeting: Joe Gallagher on Radio Baseball |
| Oct 19 | Monthly Meeting: Bill Nowlin on book of Umpires |
| Nov 16 | Monthly Meeting: Mike Vance on Negro Leagues |
| Dec 14 | Monthly Meeting |

Death tolls rise, illnesses continue to grow, and, with no proven treatment or preventive vaccine, there is no end in sight as this was written seven months into 2020.

But a baseball schedule of sorts begins. Professional basketball tries to finish its most recent season and NFL fans have their fingers crossed that a season can make it all the way through.

Never in the history of the country or professional sports have things been in more turmoil. The Spanish Flu just over 100 years ago did not stop baseball. Neither did World War I or World War II. Weather disasters moved some games, but didn't stop seasons. Oh, some labor disputes cut seasons short and/or started late, but only one — in the National Hockey League — cost fans a whole year.

In 2020 EVERYTHING has been disrupted with no end in sight. And its effect on sports as we know them

now will last longer than can be fully comprehended yet. Tal Smith touches on that in another portion of this newsletter. But we all have to be ready.



Greg Lucas

In the meantime, the majority of the country cares little about sports not being played. Some even object to the special treatment (and protection) athletes are afforded to keep the virus from being an uninvited member of the roster.

Yet as the games start appearing on TV, with the fake crowd noise and cardboard seat fillers in many stadiums, TV ratings are expected to be very high. Curiosity has to take a seat next to a lot of real baseball fans for that. How long that lasts will be directly connected to how the players and teams are performing. In a short 60-game schedule, the optimism evident every spring is far more legit. If Washington had played a 60-game schedule last year, they wouldn't

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result of players and others involved in the game being quarantined or hospitalized with Covid-19?

How will players react to playing in front of empty stands? How will it affect their adrenalin after the excitement of the first week or so wears off? Will it be too much like playing on the back fields during spring training?

Questions await players, fans

How will players react to the confinement and social restrictions imposed by the MLB protocols and the lack of amenities that they normally enjoy at the major league level?

Will continual concern over their health and that of their families cause some players to opt out during the season?

The usual 162-game season is often referred to as "a marathon, not a sprint." The 60-game schedule this year will be more like a 400 meter

dash. For several years now clubs have relied on analytics for roster composition and in-game strategy. The 162-game season generally provides sufficient data for clubs and managers to gauge tendencies and probabilities.



Tal Smith

A 60-game season provides a much smaller sample (37% of a 162-game one) and is less reliable. Will managers feel more empowered to make decisions based less on numbers and more on their own experiences, their knowledge of their players and their gut instincts? I hope so.

It will be a somewhat different game in other respects, too, as a result of the rule changes that have been implemented. How will the requirement for relief pitchers to face a minimum of three batters or com-

plete the half inning affect pitcher-hitter matchups and bullpen deployment? How will the rule to start each half inning of extra inning games with a runner on second base affect game strategy?

Revenues and Trash Cans

The shortened schedule with no fans in the stands will greatly reduce club revenue. How will this affect the free agent market for 2021 and other decisions on player personnel?

And lastly, now that six months have elapsed since the "trash can" scandal, how will the 2020 Astros be received? Has the moratorium cooled some of the acrimony that was initially displayed by players on other clubs, the media, and the general public?

Only time will tell the answers to these and other questions. I truly hope all goes well for many of us (and certainly most of those reading this newsletter) need BASEBALL and welcome the game back.



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the airwaves and helpless to describe anything for anybody. There has never been a time like this in our lives, as we all realize every day.

Thankfully, the broadcasters started getting ready to return to work in July for baseball and a little later in the other sports. Some were not paid during the pandemic. Some were furloughed. As with minor league baseball players, minor league broadcasters suffered financial harm without any season to describe. Even those who were fortunate enough to receive their salaries could wonder if their careers had been damaged by the layoff. Beyond the pandemic, there was reason to be concerned about many minor league teams going out of business. The landscape of minor league baseball seemed devastating to many experienced observers. Beyond 2020, there is legitimate cause to be concerned about the future of sportscasting as a profession. Many broadcasters are paid by the game. College sports could be suffering major damage. Stanford University already has eliminated many sports on campus.

Broadcasting Personalities

During the self-quarantining days at home, the thought came to me to write a book about sportscasting for the young people who are pursuing the dream many of us cherished when we were their age. I interviewed many top sportscasters for the upcoming book *Sportscasting 101*, which will be published soon by Amazon. Those of us who are now senior citizens are very thankful that we didn't have to face the challenges and uncertainties our much younger

friends are going through now. Texas A&M's Dave South had planned to retire in 2020 anyway, but the early end to the baseball season for the Aggies hastened his departure from the air. Perhaps he'll return in 2021 for some appearances.

He's had a most interesting career, as he detailed in the book. The University of Texas broadcaster Craig Way has had a marvelous career, beginning with extensive work broadcasting high school games in Texas before joining the Longhorns. As he prepares for the 2020 football season, there are some great unknowns facing him regarding whether the players can get through the season healthy.

All of the Astros broadcasters are featured in the book. Julia Morales has a unique life story and her 2020 brings a different twist with her pregnancy. She might be one of the few broadcasters to be relieved at being unable to travel with the team, although doing remote interviews with players from the studio in Houston will present some different challenges for her.

Todd Kalas and Geoff Blum continue to establish themselves as a team of close friends who work well together in bringing the viewers a nightly conversation about the team. Kevin Eschenfelder and Mike Stanton offer analytical perspective on the pregame and postgame shows. Brian Bogusevic has been a good addition to the studio shows. Robert Ford has a unique story about his entry into the Houston scene. Steve Sparks plunged into broadcasting like a cliff diver into the ocean, but he quickly swam to a good spot as an analyst who of-

Welcome New Members

Stephen Bertone.....Conroe, TX
 Colten CastleberryLubbock, TX
 Frank CollinsStevens, PA
 Peter CoolbaughBaltimore, MD
 Kevin GarrettMadison, MS
 Norm Ginsberg.....Newton, MA
 Jaken HermanConroe, TX
 Joe HirschHouston, TX
 Joseph JordanCatonsville, MD
 Nic LoiaconoLexington, KY
 Donald MeisenheimerKaty, TX
 Roderic Nelson.....Colorado Springs, CO
 Alan ReifmanLubbock, TX
 Charles St. Clair.....Houston, TX
 John Trainor.....Braintree, MA
 Philip Trygar.....Spring, TX

fers strong commentary and reliable play-by-play.

College broadcasters Adam Young of New Mexico State and Nate Gatter of the Big Ten and SEC discussed the nuts and bolts of their profession and the college choices they made. They're two young broadcasters who offer special insights for today's high school and college students. Hall of Famer Eric Nadel of the Texas Rangers gives great advice for students and tells fans how his style evolved after beginning with hockey.

Dallas Stars broadcasters Ralph Strangis and Josh Bogorad explain their preparation and backgrounds. Dallas Cowboys play-by-play voice Brad Sham and Houston Texans mainstay Marc Vandermeer pass along their techniques and tell their life stories in a fascinating way. San Antonio Spurs radio broadcaster Bill Schoening details his award-winning style and offers a story young broadcasters can appreciate about his life journey. Charlie Pallilo represents the journalistic approach of one of the most successful sports talk radio hosts in the country.

The summer has not been "lost," but fortunately we anticipate returning to our old habits of watching the telecasts of Astros baseball and other sports events. It will be unusual not to head for Minute Maid Park, but for now we'll take what we can get!



Favorite Astrodome Memories over the Years

By Mike McCroskey

One of my most vivid Astrodome memories is a home run by Andre Dawson when he was with the Montreal Expos. I have never seen it mentioned in any of the Dome history articles that are frequently published, but I verified this story with Astro historian Mike Acosta at a recent Fan Fest.

I don't remember the specific game situation, only that from my ground-level seats at third base, as Dawson hit the ball, I almost snapped my neck looking straight up! The ball was extremely high as it passed third base. It landed in the left field upper deck two or three rows behind, and a little to the right of, the seats marked by the Doug Rader and Jimmy Wynn monster home runs. It was easily the longest home run I had ever seen hit at the Astrodome.

At other games I saw both Willie Stargell of the Pirates and Lance Parrish of the Expos rifle line drives over the centerfield fence. Both of these blasts were impressive because they were hit very low, but still had the power behind them to travel over 400 feet.

I saw a similar line drive homer hit by Johnny Bench: The ball split the outfielders in left center and banged off a temporary plywood inner fence that was added to make the Dome more hitter friendly. The ball hit the plywood loudly on the fly, then bounced back towards the infield, scooting along on that old, slick AstroTurf. An infielder ran out to get the ball from shallow left field while the outfielders watched from the wooden fence. By that time, Bench, no speedster himself, had crossed home plate standing up with an inside-the-park home run, the only one of his career.



Infamy continued from page 4

have made the postseason, let alone win the World Series. Some team will get hot early and be the one to beat in 2020. Teams can't wait for early surprises to come down to earth. Presuming everyone can play all 60 games and the virus doesn't invade and require shutdowns, 2020 may have a redeeming value. The pennant races could be interesting with unexpected results.

The Astros have a killer top of the pitching rotation with Verlander, Grienke, and McCullers. After that, there are some big questions with the final two rotation spots, as well as with the bullpen as the season begins. The offense should be solid, but even the best hitters sometimes have slow starts. The Astros and other clubs can't afford to have key hitters and pitchers off to slow starts....or sustain serious injury...or get the coronavirus. The season just won't be long enough.

So, while 2020 has already earned its spot in infamy (and I have purposely avoided mentioning social issues, politics, or riots) perhaps the last few months will at least give hope for the future and 2021 will be known as "The Year When Normalcy Returned!"

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ly newsletter. In addition, individual members, such as Larry Dierker, Bill Brown, Greg Lucas, Larry Miggin, Mike Vance, Joe Thompson, Scott Barzilla, and Bill McCurdy have written multiple books relating to their baseball experiences. We also participate in the Houston As-

tros Fan Fest annually, assist in securing plaques at former ballpark locations, and attend Houston Astros and Sugar Land Skeeters games as a group.

Come join us, you'll be glad you did. For more information go to our website, facebook page, or twitter account at the addresses in the officers/editorial box on page 2.

The Smells-A-Little-Fishy Lineup

Compiled by Bill McCurdy

#	Batting Order	Year	Pos	BA	HR	RBI
1	Ralph Garr	1974	LF	.353	11	54
2	Kevin Bass	1986	RF	.311	20	79
3	Mike Trout	2016	CF	.315	29	100
4	Tim Salmon	1995	1B	.330	34	105
5	Mickey Rivers	1977	DH	.326	12	69
6	Geronimo Gil	2002	3B	.232	12	45
7	Eddie Lake	1945	SS	.279	11	51
8	Bert Whaling	1913	C	.242	0	25
9	Sam Fishburn	1919	2B	.333	0	2
Pitchers		Year	Pos	Won	Lost	ERA
P	Dizzy Trout (R)	1944	P	27	14	2.12
P	Eddie Fisher (R)	1965	P	15	7	2.40

Trivia Answers

- Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, Happy Chandler, Ford Frick, General William "Spike" Eckert, Bowie Kuhn, Peter Ueberroth, Bart Giamatti, Fay Vincent, Bud Selig, and Rob Manfred.
- Jose Altuve for batting (three titles), no Astro has led the league in home runs, and Jeff Bagwell once led the NL in RBIs.
- Bobby Brown and Joe Cronin of the AL and Bill White of the NL.
- Mike Scott, Roger Clemens, Dallas Keuchel, and Justin Verlander.