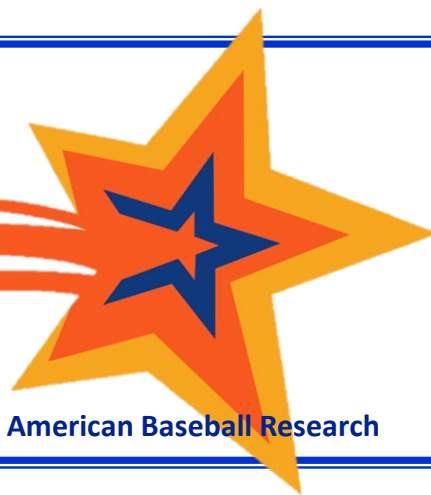


Houston Baseball

Shooting Star Express

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



Volume 3 Number 3



Winter 2023

President's Message

By Joe Thompson

One of the joys of doing research is that you often find things that you never expected. About a month after the Astros won their first World Series in 2017, I was on a dissertation research trip at Notre Dame. The Joyce Sports Research Collection located inside the Hesburgh Library on campus is one of the largest accumulations of sports-related print and manuscript matter in the world.

On a very cold November day in South Bend, I was glancing through copies of *Baseball Digest* from the 1970s and 1980s looking for anything that talked about baseball's growing substance abuse problems when I came across something that stopped me cold and brought back a flood of memories. It was something I had not seen in almost 30 years.

My parents allowed me one magazine subscription when I was a kid. I wanted *Baseball Digest*. About a month after the Astros lost the 1986 NLCS to the New York Mets, my November 1986 copy of *Baseball Digest* arrived. On the cover that month was Astros second baseman Bill Doran and a message across the cover that said "How About a Little More Respect for the Astros!"

I re-read the same John Keunster's article "Astros Deserve More Respect for Their Performance in '86," that I had read in 1986. Keun-

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Brownie elected for Houston Sports Hall of Fame

The Editorial Board congratulates our SABR colleague Bill Brown ("Brownie") on his election to the Houston Astros Hall of Fame. Most of our readers should be familiar with Brownie's involvement with broadcasting Astros games and writing sports books, plus his election to the Cincinnati Reds' Hall of Fame, as reported in our Fall 2021 edition.

Brownie has been an active participant in Houston baseball for decades. He has written many newsletter articles, including a four-part piece on Tal Smith that concluded in our last issue. The pieces on Tal commemorated Smith's selection to the Houston Astros Hall of Fame last year.

Bill Brown grew up in Sedalia, Missouri, and started his play-by-play career calling high school games while attending the University of Missouri. After graduating from Mizzou, Bill joined the U.S. Army as a broadcast specialist working for the Armed Forces Vietnam Network.

Before coming to Houston in 1987 as part of the Astros broadcasting team, Bill had called games for the Cincinnati Stringers, Xavier Mustangs, Cincinnati Bearcats, and Cincinnati Swords before joining the Cincinnati Reds from 1976 to 1982. He

later served for several years as the producer and anchor of the Financial News Network and then Sports Director for HSE Pittsburgh.

Since joining the Astros he has been a consummate professional for 30 years, earning achievements and awards, such as election to the Texas Baseball Hall of Fame, Texas Sportscaster of the Year, Fred Hartman Meritorious Service in Media award, the Media Wall of Honor at Minute Maid Park, the Cincinnati Reds Hall of Fame, and now the Houston Astros Hall of Fame.



Bill Brown, aka Brownie

Through it all Brownie has been a "pro's pro" as said by his one-time partner Marty Brenneman while "painting a perfect picture with words." He is also the author of three baseball books. Once again, Congratulations Brownie!

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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 anthony.cavender@pillsburylaw.com by April 15 for our Spring 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

Recap of Hornsby Winter Meeting

By Herb Whalley

The annual winter meeting of the Hornsby SABR Chapter returned to the Old Main building on the campus of Texas State University in San Marcos, TX, on Saturday, January 7, 2023. The previous two meetings were held via Zoom due to the Covid outbreak. The Old Main building is over 100 years old and still going strong. The room used for the meeting has been refurbished recently, but it still reflects the grandeur of the past.

Gilbert Martinez, president of the Hornsby chapter, works in that building, and has been able to reserve it for the chapter's annual winter meeting. This year, three members of the Dierker Chapter traveled to San Marcos for the meeting: Joe Thompson, Mark Wernick, and Herb Whalley. Mark was able to come out on top in the trivia contest, which celebrated the life and career of Vin Scully with questions about the no-hitters he called during his career.

Gilbert opened the meeting with a remembrance of Bill Gilbert who had significant involvement with the

Hornsby and Dierker chapters. Following some award presentations, those present were distributed ballots to participate in a mock Hall of Fame ballot process. Participants had most of the remainder of the day to vote for up to 10 ball players like a member of the Hall of Fame balloters.

After the results were tabulated, no one received over 75% required for selection. The top three choices, in order, were Scott Rolen, Todd Helton, and Billy Wagner, but no one received more than 58% of the vote.



Herb Whalley

The real Hall of Fame voters selected Scott Rolen, with Todd Helton and Billy Wagner finishing second and third, but not being elected. On January 16, the Dierker chapter held its own mock election. According to the Houston folks, Billy Wagner should have been elected as he received 83% of the vote. Jeff Kent and Andy Pettite finished second and third respectively, but not with more than 75%. Obviously, the Houston vote was just a bit Astro biased. Scott Rolen only received 28% of the vote.

Jerry Miller, a long-time Dodger fan, made a slide show presentation on the life and career of Vin Scully. The presentation also focused on Jerry's major life cycle events that correlated to the periods of Scully's career. It was very obvious that Vin Scully had a long and outstanding career. Earlier, several participants in the meeting spoke about their favorite moments of the 2022 baseball season. Of course, several spoke on the Astros, but others spoke about different memories of last season.

Bailey Hall and her uncle, Mike Bryan, closed out the morning session with presentations. Bailey, a new member of the Hornsby chapter and a teenager, presented a slide

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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.

Behind the Mask of a High School Umpire

By Jimmy Scruggs

Many years ago, catching gear was nicknamed “the tools of ignorance.” What name would you give umpire gear? I used to tell fans I get paid for abuse...

Rule 3.09 – “...Players of opposing teams shall not fraternize at any time while in uniform.”

I got my start in umpiring in 1999 doing Pony Baseball ages 8-18. We had moved to the greater Houston area in 1992 and I coached my son in the league. After he stopped playing, I decided to umpire in our league as a way of giving back as our family's involvement in the baseball program helped us meet a lot of people. Some of which we still stay in contact and remain friends.

Rule 4.07 – An ejected coach or player is permitted to take a seat in the stands, as long as he changes into street clothes and stays “well removed from the vicinity of his team's bench or dugout.”

As with any new job, you get help from more experienced people and the better ones become mentors. I was fortunate to have my share. One stressed to me the importance of timing in making a call. He explained how he made three calls on one play at the plate: he called the runner out, then safe because the catcher dropped the ball, and then out as the runner failed to touch home plate.

I had a play at first base in a high school game. I was sure the batter/runner was going to be safe, so I started my safe call. Well, his final stride shorted the base, and the throw beat him to the bag. I switched to an out call and repeated it three times. When the coach came out to ask about the call, I explained the situation and said the first base coach

backed me up.

Timing is also important in calling balls and strikes. In 5A-6A high school baseball, pitchers have command of three or four pitches. I always ask each team's catcher in the first inning, “What pitches do your pitchers throw.”

In MLB, the umpires have a file on every pitcher. In lower divisions of baseball, players swing at obvious balls and you don't want to use your “ball/strike” call.

Rule 5.09(g) – Runners advance one base if a pitched ball lodges in the umpire's or catcher's equipment. I had this play once in a high school game at Memorial Park.

After three years at the Pony League level, I wanted to see if I could umpire at the high school level. From 2001-2004, I umpired high school junior varsity and sophomore games in the greater Houston area. I gained a lot of valuable experience and also met more experienced um-

pires who served as mentors. In 2005, I became an approved varsity umpire and was certified (highest level) in 2012. I met more experienced umpires and gained new mentors.

One of my most memorable high school games was at Delmar 2015 with Westside playing Bellaire the week before the end of the season. From the way the games played out that Friday night, I had home plate responsibility at the Saturday marquee game in Houston.

Bottom of the first and Westside up, the batter hit a Texas leaguer to left. I moved from the plate to the pitcher's mound and made the call – Catch. If we had a three-man crew, the third base umpire would have made the call.

The Westside coach came out and asked me what I saw. I told him that he saw where I made the call and that I had a good look from that location. He turned and walked back to the bench. The key point was I had hustled to get in the best possible position.

Rule 6.05(n) – If a two-strike pitch hits a runner attempting to steal home, in the strike zone, the batter is out. The run does not score if there

Umpire continues on page 4



Jimmy Scruggs

Baseball



Trivia

1. Who was the first relief pitcher to win the Cy Young award?
2. Who was the first catcher to win the Rookie of the Year award?
3. Who managed the Cincinnati Reds for the first time in 2008?
4. Who started an All Star game and then pitched only one more time?
5. What was the name of the Cleveland franchise before Guardians/Indians?

Prepared by John Lloyd

Answers on page 6

Astros Fan Fest attracts over 35,000

By Bob Dorrill

Imagine hosting 3,945 people at an open house. Imagine setting up a SABR booth at the Astros Fan Fest and have all 34,000 plus people pass your table.

That is exactly what happened on January 21 at Minute Maid Park in conjunction with the Houston Astros 2023 Fan Fest. Fortunately, 15 members of our chapter volunteered to staff our table in three individual shifts from 10 am to 4 pm.

These members include Joe Thompson, Susan Thompson, Bob Dorrill, Bob McCann, Lou DeScoli, Scott McCay, Tony Cavender, Grant Sovereign, Erin Sovereign, Koby Far-

ries, John Lloyd, Patrick Petty, Phyllis Miro, Lucha Rodriguez, and Gloria Rubec.

The team was kept busy by introducing fans to SABR, passing out what seemed like thousands of baseball cards to youngsters, auctioning a Larry Dierker autographed baseball to one lucky fan, and selling some SABR-related baseball books. We

also secured the names of many prospective SABR members.

Fans were kept busy running the bases, pitching in the bullpen, throwing baseballs on the field, collecting autographs, and getting photographs taken with Astro players. There was something for everyone.

Of course, the highlight for us was the introduction of our own Bill Brown into the Houston Astros Hall of Fame. What a wonderful honor for such a special person.



Fan Fest volunteers provided information and showed and sold SABR publications to numerous Astros fans. From left to right, Lou DeScoli, Bob McCann, Bob Dorrill, Joe Thompson, Patrick Petty, and Scott McCay.

Lineup of Upcoming Events:

Feb 4: SABR Day with Memorabilia Exchange at Jax Grill at 1613 Shepherd from 11-3

Feb 20: Monthly Meeting: Dan Good on Ken Caminiti at Spaghetti Western and Zoom

Umpire continued from page 3

are two outs.

Based on the umpire crew size (2, 3, 4, or 6), there are different rotations that come into play. In MLB, with nobody on and less than two outs, the second base umpire (nicknamed “the rabbit”), is in short left or right center. If he goes out on a ball, he stays out and the rest of the crew reverts to three-man mechanics. The third base umpire goes to second base for a potential play and the home plate umpire creeps toward third base. If a play at third materializes, the plate umpire takes it and the first base umpire moves to home.

The three-man mechanics come into play if an umpire is ill and unable to start or injured while the game is in progress. In full-time three-man mechanics at the MLB level, the second base umpire would not be in the rab-

bit position at any time.

Umpires also have their own sign language. If the plate umpire points to his wristwatch position, that’s to remind all crew members of a potential timing play: If runner(s) are on base with two outs and the ball is in play. You want to make sure if you have or don’t have a third out before a runner would cross home plate. Even if it is obvious that the runner scored before the third out, I point to the plate and announce, “count the run.”

To signal an infield fly, the home plate umpire touches the bill of his cap. Other crew members use the same signal to acknowledge. If the situation changes and the infield fly rule is no longer in play, the home plate umpire makes a wiping motion across the chest of his uniform.

Other signs include the following:

If the home plate umpire points to home, he’s telling everyone he’s staying at home plate, no matter what the play will be. If the home plate umpire gives a sign like he’s twisting a doorknob, he’s alerting the other umpires that he will rotate to third.

Rule 8.02 – In the case of wet weather, the umpire can instruct the pitcher to put the rosin bag in his pocket.

With the strike zone, balls and strikes are a much-talked-about topic in MLB games. As a varsity high school umpire, I gave one ball outside the plate on both sides. Why? My answer is to keep the game flowing. I stressed to be consistent.

I was in the sixth inning of a high school varsity game and called a strike. The batter looked at his third coach with the look that he couldn’t

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Minor League Teams Prepare for New World

By Tony Cavender

In 2022, minor league baseball drew almost 31 million fans, which was a drop from 2019 when over 40 million fans attended minor league baseball games. A major league baseball realignment agreement with the minor leagues caused the number of teams to be reduced to 120, with a concomitant reduction in the number of games played in a season.

Gone are the days when a Pacific Coast club would play 200 games. The minor leagues are represented by 120 teams, and I believe the realignment agreement restricts the number of minor league teams each MLB club can support.

Earlier this year, a brief was filed in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the

Second Circuit, supporting a challenge to MLB's decision to reduce the number of teams as being a violation of the antitrust laws. This exemption has been the law for nearly 100 years, and its economic theories seem outdated.

The U.S. Department of Justice filed an amicus brief in the case that urges the Court to uphold baseball's antitrust exemption on very narrow grounds, unique only to baseball, as the underlying rationale for the original decision (that baseball does not impact interstate commerce) has been widely questioned.

A union to represent minor league players is being formed, and

Welcome New Members

Derek Allen	Nacogdoches, TX
Alex Blair	Clarendon Hills, IL
Nick Clarke	Houston, TX
Koby Farries	Dickinson, TX
Scott Hickey	Pearland, TX
Luis Jarma	Houston, TX
David Johnson	Kingwood, TX
Greg Randolph	The Woodlands, TX
Andrew Schaefer	Houston, TX
Paula Swain	Houston, TX

MLB has agreed to increase the players' salaries.

I assume the umpires will be interested in forming their own union, especially as the umpires will generally supervise the innovations that MLB wants to bring to the game to speed up its pace.



Photo by Thomas Cavender

This photograph was taken last year at Lindquist Field, the home of the Ogden, Utah, Raptors. The games are very enjoyable, and the club is an asset to the community.

Umpire continued from page 4

believe that was a strike. His coach's response was "he's been calling that pitch a strike all game. Swing the bat." Best complement an umpire can get.

My goal was not to miss more than five pitches in a seven-inning high school game. Other than being fooled by a pitch, missing a call would revert to a timing issue. When you have a bad half inning, take a minute and regroup.

With MLB plate umpires, some are much better than others with proof by strike zone and the league

grading them after the games. The fastest pitches I saw were upper 80's – lower 90's with some good movement. I can only imagine upper 90's – 100's with a lot of action. Establish your zone and stay there.

Timing, Timing, Timing. The stress of calling the plate is why the plate umpire goes to third base for the next game, nicknamed "The Rocking Chair."

Rule 8.01(f) – A pitcher is allowed to change his pitching arm in the middle of an at-bat, but only due to an injury. The ambidextrous pitcher does not get an opportunity to warm up his other arm.

Ejections – I didn't go looking for them. I was pretty consistent on balls and strikes and hustled on the bases to get in the right position at a complete stop.

At the high school level for 14 years, I ejected one coach and one player. As we say in the business, "they needed to go."

Missed calls – With me it was usually timing or being tired from the stress of work and daily life. I always worked full time when umpiring. If you kick a call, you give the coach more room to vent and hopefully move on. And don't repeat the mistake.

Uncovering Gems while Researching Baseball

Message continued from page 1

ster had showered the club with praise and said people around baseball needed to start noticing and respecting the Astros. “They, in effect, were the Rodney Dangerfield’s of baseball,” Kuenster wrote.

The Astros had become “rather special” that year under manager Hal Lanier and the team had been on a mission to expel the pain of the 1980 NLCS loss to the Phillies. “In the year of Halley’s Comet, it seems entirely appropriate the Houston Astros have enlivened the baseball firmament this season in an effort to win their first National League pennant ever,” Kuenster wrote.



**Joe and Susan Thompson
at Notre Dame campus**

After reading the article again, I faintly remembered how the pain of that 1986 NLCS loss thirty years earlier subsided a bit and a feeling of joy and anticipation for the 1987 season came over me. Like Kuenster, though, there was no way of knowing at the time that a squandered 3-0 lead

going into the ninth inning of game six of the NLCS would be the closest that the team would get to a World Series until 2004.

I looked at Doran on the cover and thought of his role on that team. To this day, I feel that Doran was as much responsible for the success of that team as was Mike Scott, Nolan Ryan, Glenn Davis, Jose Cruz and the other core players of that club. That club was special and could have given Houston its first ever World Series title. Sadly, it was not to be.

From Joe Morgan to Jose Altuve, Astros fans have been blessed with Hall of Fame quality second basemen. To me though, Bill Doran deserves a place in that conversation as one of the best to play that position for the club. He might not have been in the same sphere as those mentioned earlier, but in my opinion, his ability to steal bases, his defense, and his role as *de facto* leader on the field more than made up for his less than elite



offensive prowess.

Most Astros fans remember September 25, 1986, and Mike Scott’s no-hitter to clinch the ’86 division crown. On the broadcast that day, the great Gene Elston and Bill Worrell described how important Doran was to that team. Worrell said it was the “intangible things” that made Doran so valuable to the ’86 club.

“A real bulldog. A fighter all the way.” Elston compared Doran to 2B Joe Morgan by saying that Doran was the *de facto* team leader of that ’86 team in the same way that Morgan had become with the ’80 club.

The Astros announced during this year’s Fan Fest, that longtime team play-by-play broadcaster and Houston SABR chapter member Bill Brown (“Brownie”) and Bill Doran had been elected into the Astros Hall of Fame. Well done Astros. Another great Hall of Fame class.

Winter Recap continued from page 2

show on the History of Statistics and the impact stats have on baseball. Interestingly, she concluded that perhaps statistics have had too great an impact on the game, and people should appreciate the skills needed to play and just the beauty of the game.

Mike Bryan, known for his feature writing, spoke about his relationships with Keith Hernandez, Cal Ripken, Jr., and Kirby Puckett. Bryan and Hernandez continue to be friends following the business relationship starting with his interviews of Hernandez.

Our lunch break was unique as we enjoyed baseball concession fare including hot dogs and Cracker Jacks. Four additional presentations were made following lunch. First, we heard from Nancy Finley, the niece

of Charles O. Finley. She is the author of a book about Charles O. and her father, Carl. The book is titled, “Finley Ball: How Two Baseball Outsiders Turned the Oakland A’s into a Dynasty and Changed the Game Forever”. The most interesting point she made was how Charlie really did not want to leave Kansas City, and that was a primary motivation for her authoring the book.

Tim Jackson, general manager of the Round Rock Express, spoke on the previous season and the upcoming season. He reflected on the talent that was lost to the Texas Rangers during the season, but the team still prevailed to win the division in the Pacific Coast League.

Mike Capps, who previously has spoken to the Houston Dierker chapter continued discussing the Express and changes to baseball in general.

Capps has become a member of the Hornsby Chapter. The final Zoom presentation was made by David Vaught about his recent book about the life of Gaylord Perry. Vaught recently spoke to the Dierker Chapter, and his presentation contained much of the same content.

Overall, the meeting was extremely well run and quite enjoyable. Many thanks to Gilbert Martinez and the rest of the leadership team of the Hornsby chapter.

Trivia Answers

1. Mike Marshall
2. Johnny Bench
3. Dusty Baker
4. J. R. Richard
5. Lake Shores