

Houston fans need lesson in team loyalty

Houston has to be one of the great sports mysteries in the world. Although the city has seen many quality teams come and go over the past 40 years, the support that those teams have received is less than what most avid sports fans call acceptable.

This year's Houston Astros are a prime example of why there is a general feeling amongst sports fans that Houstonians don't support their

teams. The Astros, who are in the midst of a pennant drive and a red-hot second half, have yet to gather any real support from their fans. In what may have been the most important game of the season last Wednesday night against the St. Louis Cardinals, only 28,000 fans bothered to show up. Daryl Kile, the most dominant pitcher in the National League, was on the mound, and the Astros had a chance to run their lead to seven games over the most unlikely team to catch them — no offense to the Pirates. But where were the fans?

The stadium issue, the perceived gun to the head tactics of Drayton McLane and the 1994 Major League strike, may have kept some fans away, but in the end this team is a hard-working unit and deserves better fan support. The bottom line is that the Astros have been an above average team for the last six years, yet the fan support just has not been there.

The Oilers may have been the exception to the rule in Houston, as they consistently saw good fan support year in and year out, until the most hated man in Houston, Bud Adams, finalized plans to move the team to the country music capital of the world, Nashville. The city would likely have given Bud his stadium, except Houston had dishied out millions only a few years earlier to improve the Astrodome. That soon proved to be unacceptable, once Bud saw everyone else getting shiny, brand new stadiums. The fans of the Oilers were consistent, even after the debacle in Buffalo and many playoff disappointments.

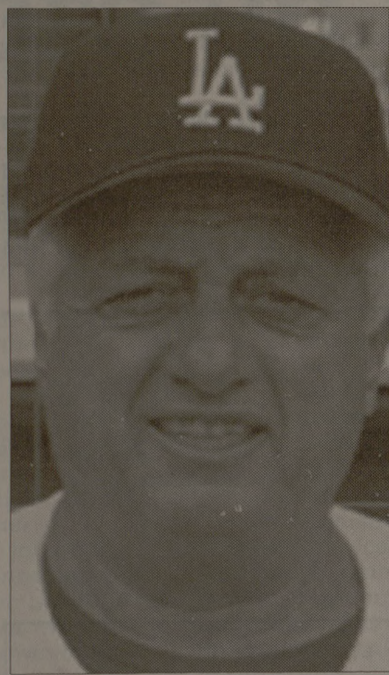
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Sportswriter



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Senior history major

Niekro, Lasorda, Fox, Wells join Hall of Fame



Tommy Lasorda

COOPERSTOWN, N.Y. (AP) — The first time Tommy Lasorda saw Phil Niekro on the mound, he thought of an old baseball adage.

"They say you don't want to have a knuckleballer pitching for you or against you," Lasorda said.

That was Niekro's problem, too. It was the one pitch he had mastered from his father, growing up in the coal mine country of eastern Ohio. And not a lot of baseball people liked it very much.

On Sunday, when he and Lasorda went into the Hall of Fame together, the pitcher they called "Knucksie" recalled how close he came to being cut because of the gimmick pitch that got him his first contract for \$500.

"They have those organizational meetings every winter when they decide who to keep and who to let go," Niekro said. "Five hundred bucks. You can afford to write that off. I know a couple of times, Birdie Tebbets was the man in the Braves organization who raised his hand

and said 'Keep the man.'"

So Niekro stayed around, eventually for 24 years, winning 318 games and gaining election to the Hall of Fame. Also inducted Sunday in the tiny hamlet celebrated as the birthplace of baseball were infielders Nellie Fox and Willie Wells, increasing membership in the shrine to 232. Longtime baseball writer Charley Feeney and broadcaster Jimmy Dudley received media awards.

The single traffic light in downtown Cooperstown worked overtime as thousands of visitors jammed the town to honor Lasorda, the longtime Dodgers manager, and Niekro. Many fans wore shirts and hats in tribute to Fox, the scrappy second baseman, and Wells, the 14th Negro League player inducted. Joanne Fox accepted for her late husband and Stella Wells accepted for her father.

Fox, a 12-time All-Star, played 19 major league seasons and was the American League's MVP in 1959

when he led the Chicago White Sox to their first pennant in 40 years. He won three Gold Gloves and his 798 consecutive games played at second base remains a major league record. He joins his old double play partner, Luis Aparicio, in the Hall of Fame.

Fox and Aparicio are the fourth double play combination in Cooperstown, joining Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Joe Cronin and Bobby Dorr of the Boston Red Sox, and Joe Tinker and Johnny Evers of the Chicago Cubs.

Wells batted .331 in 20 years of Negro League ball. He had 123 career home runs including 27 in just 88 games to set a Negro League record in 1929 and led the league with a .403 batting average the next year.

Lasorda, whose Dodgers teams won 1,599 games in 20 seasons, recalled a conversation with Reese about the 1955 Dodgers, Brooklyn's lone world championship team.

"I said, 'PeeWee, if I told you one

of the 25 guys on that team that year would manage the Dodgers to a world championship in 1981, you'd put me at No. 25.'"

Reese disagreed, telling Lasorda he would be No. 24.

"Who's 25th, then?" Lasorda wondered.

"Amoros," Reese said, referring to Cuban outfielder Sandy Amoros. "He couldn't speak English."

Lasorda's voice broke once when he talked about longtime Dodgers executive Al Campanis, who is ailing. He called Campanis, "My mentor, who taught so much about the game of baseball and life."

Niekro's emotional moment came when he spoke of his family, including his brother, Joe, who also pitched in the major leagues.

"We faced each other nine times," he said. "He won five and I won four. That's the way it should be. He's the baby. He got one hit off me. He hit one home run in the big leagues and it was off me. Won a game, too."

Astros slide by New York, 3-2

HOUSTON (AP) — Greg McMichael's 0-2 pitch hit Luis Gonzalez with the bases loaded and two outs in the bottom of the ninth to force home the winning run and give the Houston Astros a 3-2 victory over the New York Mets on Sunday.

With two outs in the ninth, Craig Biggio singled to center and stole second before McMichael (7-9) walked pinch-hitter Thomas Howard and Jeff Bagwell to load the bases.

McMichael hit the left-handed hitting Gonzalez on the right leg on an 0-2 count to bring in Biggio with the winning run.

Tom Martin (4-2) pitched two innings of one-hit ball for the victory.

Biggio homered and had three hits for the Astros, who have won 20 of 25 games and haven't lost a series after dropping two of three to Cleveland at the Astrodome from June 30-July 2. Houston has won or split nine series since.

The Mets have won 10 of 16 games, but finished their road trip at 5-6.

The Astros tied the game 2-2 in the seventh. Pinch-hitter Bill Spiers doubled to left and scored one out lat-

er when Biggio hit the first pitch from reliever Juan Acevedo over the center-field fence for his 16th homer of the season.

New York starter Brian Bohanon allowed three hits and one walk over 5 1-3 innings, striking out four.

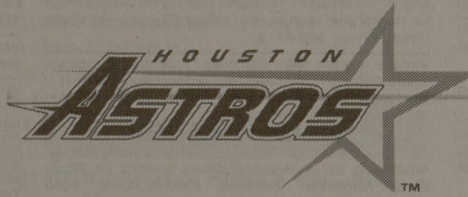
Todd Hundley's 23rd home run of the season, a shot over the right-field wall, scored Jason Hardtke for a 2-0 first-inning lead. Hardtke hit a one-out single to left before Hundley connected on a 2-2 fastball from Shane Reynolds one out later.

Reynolds pitched five innings, giving up two runs on three hits and two walks, with six strikeouts.

Houston's Sean Berry missed a home run leading off the fifth when his long drive

left hit a speaker hanging from the Astrodome ceiling in left field. The ball bounced back towards the infield and Berry reached second with a double. Bohanon then retired the side to strand Berry.

Berry is the second player to hit an Astrodome speaker. Mike Schmidt hit one in center field on June 10, 1974. Schmidt was held to a single as his blast struck the speaker and bounced back to short center.



Johnson struggles in 400-meter semis

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Michael Johnson's defense of his 400-meter title at the world championships got off to a shaky start Sunday. He finished fourth in his second-round heat and barely advanced to the semifinals.

The reigning Olympic and world champion at both 200 and 400 meters eased up too much at the end of the race and was edged at the line by Senegal's Ibrahima Wade.

"I was sure I had a firm grip on my position. I just didn't see (Wade)," Johnson said in a statement released by track and field's governing body. "It surprised me that he was suddenly beside me."

The top three from each heat plus those with the four next fastest

times advance, and Johnson's time of 45.39 seconds gave him the next-to-last qualifying spot. He made it into the semifinals by five-hundredths of a second.

With 50 meters left, Johnson was second behind eventual heat winner Jamie Baulch of Britain. But as the defending champion coasted to the finish, he was passed by Uganda's Davis Kamoga and outleaned by the hard-charging Wade.

Baulch and Nigeria's Clement Chukwu, both at 45.06, turned in the top heat times, while Americans Antonio Pettigrew, the 1991 world champion, Jerome Young and Tyree Washington also reached Monday's semifinals.

Johnson walked away from the

interview area in silence, trailed by about 50 reporters.

Johnson, who hopes to eventually break Butch Reynolds' world record and bring it under 43 seconds, had to run two 400 heats on the same day for the first time.

He has not had an easy season.

In his 150-meter showdown with 100-meter record-holder Donovan Bailey on June 1 in Toronto, Johnson, who holds the mark for 200 meters, pulled up with a leg injury that sidelined him for more than a month.

"I'm not surprised that he's running this slow," Young, who took his heat in 44.87, said of Johnson. "It's a rough struggle to come back from injury."

NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE PRESEASON AT A GLANCE

AMERICAN CONFERENCE

East	W	L	T	Pct.	PF	PA
Indianapolis	1	0	0	1.000	20	16
N.Y. Jets	1	0	0	1.000	31	17
Miami	0	1	0	.000	00	20
New England	0	1	0	.000	3	7
Buffalo	0	2	0	.000	27	51
Central						
Pittsburgh	2	0	0	1.000	58	31
Jacksonville	0	0	0	.000	00	00
Baltimore	0	1	0	.000	20	21
Cincinnati	0	1	0	.000	16	20
Tennessee	0	1	0	.000	12	21
West						
Denver	1	0	0	1.000	31	10
San Diego	1	0	0	1.000	20	13
Seattle	1	1	0	.500	60	34
Oakland	0	0	0	.000	00	00
Kansas City	0	1	0	.000	14	28

NATIONAL CONFERENCE

East	W	L	T	Pct.	PF	PA
N.Y. Giants	1	0	0	1.000	21	20
Washington	1	0	0	1.000	20	8
Arizona	0	1	0	.000	6	34
Dallas	0	0	0	.000	00	00
Philadelphia	0	1	0	.000	17	31
Central						
Green Bay	2	0	0	1.000	27	3
Minnesota	2	0	0	1.000	52	32
Detroit	1	0	0	1.000	20	17
Chicago	1	1	0	.500	37	47
Tampa Bay	0	1	0	.000	08	20
West						
New Orleans	1	0	0	1.000	21	12
Carolina	0	0	0	.000	00	00
Atlanta	0	1	0	.000	17	20
St. Louis	0	1	0	.000	6	24
San Francisco	0	1	0	.000	13	20

Saturday's Games

Washington 20, Tampa Bay 8
Minnesota 24, St. Louis 6
New Orleans 21, Tennessee 12
N.Y. Jets 31, Philadelphia 17
N.Y. Giants 21, Baltimore 20
Pittsburgh 28, Kansas City 14
Chicago 20, Buffalo 17, OT
San Diego 20, San Francisco 13
Seattle 34, Arizona 6

Monday's Game

Denver vs. Miami at Mexico City, 8 p.m.

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