

Blast From The Past: Frank Robinson's Historic Season As Tribe Manager

Written by {ga=googleeph2}

Wednesday, August 31 2011 12:00 AM - Last Updated Wednesday, August 31 2011 6:16 PM



The wheels of history were turning in September of 1974. All-time hitting great Frank Robinson was purchased from the California Angels by Cleveland Indians General Manager Phil Seghi. Publicly, Seghi claimed to have made the deal simply to add a right-handed power bat. Many observers speculated that “Robbie” was already penciled in as the 1975 manager of the team. This would make him the first black major league manager, on the team that had signed the first black American League player, decades earlier, in Larry Doby.

There was controversy both within and outside the team from the day the deal was announced. Robinson indeed was named manager of the 1975 Indians, and the moves made by the fiercely competitive player-manager variously aligned and clashed with umpires, reporters, fans, and his players.

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A fine account of Robinson's first season as manager is lifelong Indians writer Russell Schneider's *Frank Robinson: The Making of a Manager* (Coward, McCann & Geohegan, Inc., 1976). Here are thumbnails on most of the principals:

Frank Robinson - Perhaps the most underrated baseball superstar of all time. MVP in both the NL and the AL; Traded by the Cincinnati Reds at the age of an "old thirty" after the 1965 season. Perhaps precipitated by a racially charged incident involving a dispute at a local diner. Immediately became the AL Triple Crown winner in 1966 with the Baltimore Orioles. Helped the Orioles win the pennant in 1969, 1970 and 1971. Beat the Reds in the World Series in 1970. Played briefly with the Los Angeles Dodgers and the California Angels before being acquired by the Cleveland Indians in September, 1974. Would finish his career on the all-time lists among several offensive categories, including placing fourth on the all-time home run list (586) behind Aaron, Ruth and Mays.

NON-PLAYERS

Phil Seghi - Cleveland Indians GM. Described as having the air of a sophisticated businessman. An old-school baseball man who expected that players act as the pawns he considered them to be. A pipe smoker who was proud of his baseball moves- and who also was highly defensive about them. Publicly denies the obvious fact that the Indians remain on the brink of bankruptcy.

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Bowie Kuhn, Lee MacPhail - Commissioner of Baseball, and President of the American League. Present at the presser for Robinson's hiring as manager. Kuhn appears later, as well-second-guessing the Indians during the season. This infuriates Seghi.

Rachel Robinson - Quietly proud, stately widow of civil rights pioneer Jackie Robinson. Makes an appearance and lends class to the historic presser, and at least once more during the season.

Jesse Jackson - Injects more racial tension into the early part of the season, which Robinson attempts to diffuse.

Ken Aspromonte - Indians manager who'd been hired by Gabe Paul in 1972. Struggled with relationships with his players and the press. By late 1974, the situation had dramatically improved, to the point that some advocated that Aspromonte remain as Tribe manager. His contract is not renewed. Replacement candidates include Frank Lucchesi and Dave Bristol, both of whom had worked with Seghi before. Also, former Indians pitcher Bob Lemon. And Larry Doby, Jim Gilliam, Maury Wills, and Frank Robinson, each of whom would be the first black major league manager in history.

Umpires - Robinson has a clear view of how his team should relate to umpires. They should not be seen as crybabies, since he is certain that umpires compare notes on the teams. Burning bridges with umpires is one of the few major faults Robinson attributes to old Oriole manager

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Earl Weaver. While noble, the goal of not complaining over calls proves unachievable for Frank Robinson in 1975.

Robinson is fined and suspended- which prompts the team to unanimously offer to go on strike while their leader is out. Robinson asks them to play, and finds gratification in his team's reaching his goal of team unity.

At one point, Robinson publicly states who the "good" umpires are. This further complicates his relationship with many umps.

Reporters - Local and national reporters flock to Cleveland for the press conference announcing that Frank Robinson would become the first black major league manager. They also pack the Stadium on Opening Day in 1975. Throughout the season, Robinson shows some savvy in relating with the press. He also exposes his inexperience- at one point, he asks local reporters to not ask pitchers if they should have been removed from games. The request is denied: not reasonable, and would not be honored by all reporters.

VETERAN PLAYERS

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Gaylord Perry - The alpha male of the Cleveland Indians clubhouse, pre-Robinson. Averaged over 20 wins per season over several years, pre-1975. When Robbie is signed, he is given a locker two away from Perry's. Perry had been quoted in the papers as wanting "a dollar more" in salary than the \$173,500 Robinson was making. The two are engaged in a shouting match during a rain delay when manager Ken Aspromonte approaches. After separating the players, Aspromonte addresses the team: he'd just been informed he is not going to be re-signed as Tribe manager. Some fans side with Aspromonte, against Robinson- with boos and derogatory signs at the stadium.

At the outset of Spring Training in 1975, Perry complains about Robinson's expectations for conditioning. He doesn't want to run from foul line to foul line. He wants only to run sprints. He doesn't want to run backwards. Also: in modern parlance, Gaylord Perry throws Frank Robinson under the bus on a regular basis when speaking with sportswriters (eg.: claiming Eckersley's development is too rushed. Also, casting aspersions on Robinson's choices as team captains).

Perry, still throwing his legendary doctored pitches, suffers from a poor season. He is dealt to Texas, mid-year. The Kansas City Royals are said to have offered a better player package for Perry. However, the Indians take the Texas deal. It includes more cash.

Rangers manager Billy Martin: "I realize now how wrong I was in accusing Gaylord of cheating."

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Joe Lis - Outfielder whose locker is in between Gaylord Perry's and Frank Robinson's in 1974. During their heated exchange when Robinson first arrived, Lis chides both players. He believes this damages his relationship with Robinson, and caused him to kept in the minor leagues out of personal ill will.

George Hendrick - Known by some as "Joggin' George." Loads of natural ability- but is moody and appears not to give 100% effort. Tribe brass had hired a team psychologist - mostly for George- but Hendrick didn't attend the sessions. Had publicly supported Robinson as manager; had played for Robinson in the off-season in Puerto Rico. Aspromonte could not get him to perform at maximum potential. Could the new manager? Robinson tries- in part by naming Hendrick as a team captain, along with...

Frank Duffy - Good-glove/ weak-hit Tribe shortstop. Quiet demeanor. Is it by design there is a black captain and a white captain? Robinson tries to foster togetherness but some say moves such as this potentially weaken the chances for that.

Buddy Bell - Third baseman. Son of former Cincinnati Red Gus Bell, Buddy had seen Robinson break into the big leagues while hanging out in the Reds clubhouse as a child. Is awestruck over his manager's ability to perform in the clutch.

John Ellis - Another player situation Robinson has difficulty in solving. Bristles at the manager's second-guessing (later describes finding himself in the middle of a situation where the Perry

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brothers' pitch preferences differ vs. what Robinson expects Ellis to call). Wants to play first base, but mostly sees action at catcher. Inevitably loses what appears to be a power struggle. Is fined exorbitant amounts of money while he notes other players are not fined. Nearly comes to blows with his manager in the Tribe dugout, which is covered nationally. Is exiled to the bench for an extended period. Players and fans note that Seghi backs up Robinson regarding Ellis, while he did not back up Aspromonte regarding George Hendrick.

Boog Powell - Large man; first baseman. Had previously starred as a teammate of Robinson's in Baltimore. His ability had been doubted in recent seasons. Enjoying the security of knowing he'll play every day under Robinson. Doesn't mind Robinson's tough approach.

Charlie Spikes - Promising young slugger. Had been acquired in one of the Tribe's seemingly annual trades with the Yankees. The Indians would send future all-stars to New York, and would mostly receive scrubs and much-needed cash in return. Spikes is ridden constantly and severely by Robinson, who once told a reporter that he'd have handled a young Frank Robinson in a fatherly fashion. Spikes loses confidence and slumps horribly.

Jim Perry - Older brother of Gaylord. Generally agrees with his brother's criticisms of Robinson. Is comparatively quiet about it - until around mid-season. Is dealt.

Blue Moon Odom - Acquired from Charlie O. Finley's Oakland A's in the Jim Perry trade. Is outspoken: expects to get a pay raise. Seghi refuses, and offers Odom the chance to arrange

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his own trade to another club. Odom seethes as he accuses Seghi of not moving him to teams who say they want him. Eventually is traded to the Atlanta Braves... who do not renegotiate Odom's contract, either.

Oscar Gamble – Ineffective as a hitter in 1975, although a valuable clubhouse presence. As “Kangaroo Court” judge, assesses a fine of \$1 to Frank Robinson for taking batting practice time, but not playing in the game later that day.

Rico Carty – Veteran hitter. Clutch at times. Doesn't make waves... in 1975. That would wait until 1976, when the Beeg Mon will accept the Indians Man of the Year award. There, he will publicly question the leadership ability of Frank Robinson.

YOUNG PLAYERS

Dennis Eckersley - Brash, supremely confident rookie starting pitcher. Breaks camp with the big league team. Shows promise both as a starter and as a reliever.

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Rick Manning - Rookie center fielder. Style and aggressiveness is compared to Pete Rose. Brought up to the major leagues in mid season. Fan favorite.

Duane Kuiper - Slick-fielding rookie second baseman. Elevated to the majors when Indians regular Jack Brohamer injures his hip and develops nerve damage.

Jim Kern, Eric Raich - Starting pitchers who become a factor as the veterans begin to be traded away.

Alan Ashby - Young catcher who begins to play every day when John Ellis falls into Frank Robinson's doghouse (which Robinson insists does not exist).

Frank Robinson breaks camp after much internal wrestling over the final roster. His compassion for the players who must be cut makes the process more difficult than he expected. He begins the season with lenient rules. For example, he decides players could police themselves, and he would not need to impose a curfew. He later clamps down and lays down the law. The veterans on the team balk at such treatment.

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Before the Opening Day game at the Stadium, Robinson is privately asked by Seghi to hit a home run. Both men know that is almost too much to ask. But in his first time at the plate, under a national microscope, the player-manager smacks a homer to left. The 54,000-plus erupt in a frenzy. Gaylord Perry jumps out of the dugout to congratulate him. Robinson comes close to hitting one out in his second at-bat, as well. The Tribe wins, 5-3.

After starting the season in competitive fashion under the white hot spotlight of national attention, the Indians fade in the standings. A holdover from the old Gabe Paul regime is the grim tone of the franchise. Player dissension is a factor, but also is the ever-looming specter of financial default of the franchise. Robinson, a stickler for sound fundamentals, is stunned by the poor execution of his team. Eventually, along with Phil Seghi, he decides to play the young, up-and-coming players. The team rebounds down the stretch to finish within shouting distance of .500.

Toward the end of the 1975 season, a reflective Frank Robinson admits that the toughest part of managing has not been dealing with the press, as he had expected. The toughest part has been dealing with players and their personal problems. His biggest regret is not going with the 'kids' out of camp.

Robinson is signed to return, at his request as manager only, for the 1976 season.

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Thank you for reading. Next week: Blast From The Past: Satchel Paige

