

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Like '69 Cubs, new Durocher book has crucial hole

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Paul Dickson's "Leo Durocher: Baseball's Prodigal Son" (Bloomsbury) was built like the 1969 Cubs, loaded with star power, glitz and glamour.

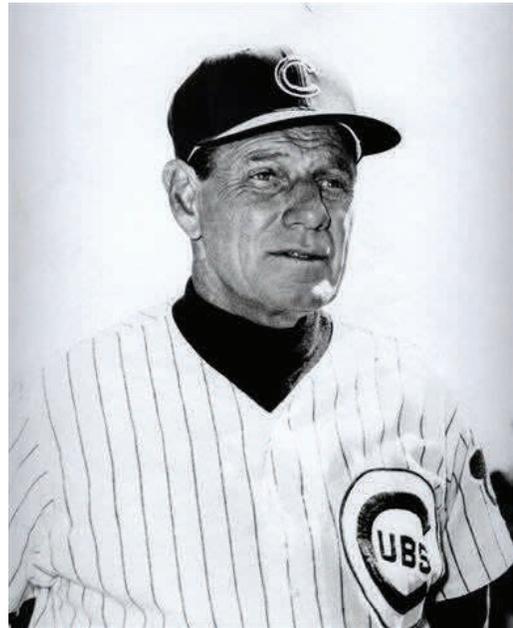
Unfortunately, Dickson's otherwise elaborately-researched biography of possibly the most amoral manager in baseball history — officially to be released on March 23 — has a huge hole down the middle, also just like the '69 Cubs' revolving door of nine different players in center field.

This historian writes such an angle after Dickson employed excerpts of my "Million To One Team" book, a 2000 narrative about Cubs management and ownership, with my enthusiastic blessing. I sincerely appreciate those excerpts' usage, which Dickson diligently footnoted. But like GM John Holland with the '69 outfield, the author left an uncompleted roster.

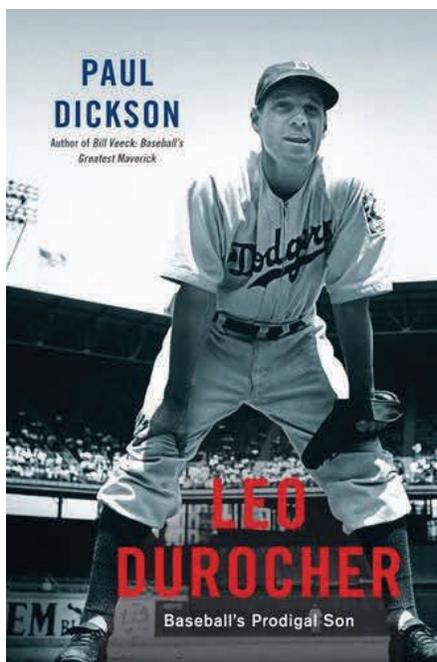
We've had a long history with Dickson, a prolific baseball author. His 2012 book, "Bill Veeck: Baseball's Greatest Maverick," was a winner of the Chicago Baseball Museum's Jerome Holtzman Chicago Baseball History award in 2013. Dickson was able to get interviews from many contemporaries of Veeck that added perspective and understanding to Veeck, who left an indelible mark on Chicago baseball on both sides of town.

In an advance copy available for review furnished by publisher Bloomsbury, Dickson took the reader through Durocher's long career before offering a good play-by-play of his 6½ Cubs seasons, still the longest continuous North Side managerial tenure since Frank Chance. But he never answers "why" Durocher froze at the switch, pulling off the biggest managerial botch job in Chicago baseball history and possibly in all of big-league annals.

How could a manager known for dash and daring with the 1940s Dodgers, and the 1951 and 1954 Giants run a postseason-bound team with four Hall of Famers into the ground like he did? Durocher wasted a championship window like no other manager in



"Baseball's Prodigal Son" is an extensive biography of Leo Durocher's long career. But in a number of ways the Chicago sections fall short of the entire story.



"Baseball's Prodigal Son" is coming out this month.

station baseball, the '70 Cubs actually finished 84-78, five behind the NL East champ Pirates.

The late WGN baseball major domo Jack Brickhouse, constantly warring with Durocher at the latter's instigation, said Leo the Lip "once was a sharp son of a bitch. Now he's just an old son of a bitch." But the Durocher screw-ups still beg for more explanation than simply a manager who lost his baseball mind to advancing years.

Both Durocher and Maddon were same age

Remember, the '69 Durocher and the '17 Joe Maddon are the same age, 63. No one calls Maddon senile or past his prime. And yet the two managers shared a haunting link. Their moves stood to mess up a great thing, Durocher's over the second half of '69 and much of '70, and Maddon's in Games 6 and 7 of the World Series.

When Maddon pitched closer Aroldis Chapman until he lost the extra zip on his fastball, hot flashes recalled the worst of Durocher. Pulling Jake Arietta and Kyle Hendricks early in the final pair of Fall Classic contests was a riff on Durocher leaving his starters in too long. A world-weary baseball historian brought up Durocher's name to his Millennial daughter, fortunately spared personal witness to The Lip, as Maddon madly moved his chess pieces.

The difference is the present-day Cubs won in spite of Maddon. Fortunately, up to Games 6 and 7, Maddon was the anti-Durocher in temperament and strategy, having stoked season-long camaraderie and resting his regulars just enough in the second half.

So how could a Durocher so savvy in handling pennant winters in previous decades pitched closer Phil Regan multiple innings almost every day, infrequently barred

Chicago history.

"He'd probably have won in '69 if he had managed the way he did in '51 and '54," said Dickson.

The '69 Cubs were 10 games ahead of the Mets on Aug. 13. They were 84-52 on Sept. 2, then crashed straight down, falling out of first on Sept. 10. The Cubs finished 8-18 as the 100-win Mets won the NL East by eight games. The collapse haunted Cubs fans of a certain age right down to the last out in the early morning of Nov. 3, Eastern time, in Cleveland. Despite that wee-hours triumph, the tragedy of '69 won't ever fade completely from those fans' emotional archives.

Meanwhile, the 1970 Cubs, supposedly strengthened, were 35-25 in first place in mid-June, then lost 12 in a row and did not fully recover. The '70 Cubs outscored opponents 806 to 679. As a result of this massive run differential, the team's Pythagorean record was computed at 94-68. But beset by Durocher's stodgy managing, a bad bullpen and station-to-

Randy Hundley from catching doubleheaders, started sore-kneed Ernie Banks, 38, in 153 games and rarely spelled the slick double play combo of lanky Don Kessinger and Glenn Beckert with .312-hitting Paul Popovich?

Why?

“I don’t know the answer to it,” Dickson said.

A minute later: “It’s an enigma.”

Then an attempt at an explanation.

“There’s such a complexity here,” Dickson said. “There was a self-destructive thing in him that was fighting to get out. When he transferred from the Dodgers to the Giants (in 1948), there was a memo about his gambling and he bragged about it to Mrs. (Branch) Rickey. He did destructive things.”

Dickson also offered that he is a reporter, not a psychologist. But an author has the word count and editorial latitude to offer his own opinion and those of others.

Geography and author background obviously play a factor in “Leo Durocher: Baseball’s Prodigal Son.”

East Coast orientation prevents right perspective

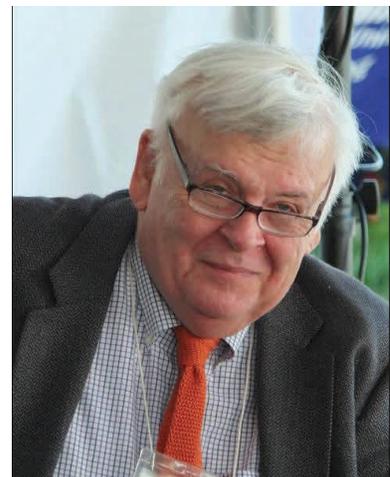
Dickson, 77, is an East Coast guy, who watched Durocher manage in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. He now lives in suburban Maryland. He did not experience the Durocher Cubs first-hand. But he could have gotten answers from the slew of players and Cubs officials still alive.

Sixteen players, all but one coach and all the broadcasters from ‘69 have passed on. But...

Regan managed in the Florida State League in 2016. Hundley, pioneering fantasy camps 35 years ago, is always around the Cubs. Billy Williams and Fergie Jenkins are easily reachable. Kessinger, Beckert, Popovich, and no-hit pitcher Ken Holtzman can be tracked down. Lefty Rich Nye has long been a prominent veterinarian in Chicago — and recalled the existence of “cliques” on the ‘69 Cubs. First-base prospect Roe Skidmore, residing in downstate Decatur, was called up in Sept. ‘69 and did not record one at-bat.

First-base coach Joey Amalfitano, a Durocher acolyte, is associated with the Giants and still has his wits about him at 83. So does Jack Rosenberg, 90, Brickhouse’s right-hand man, who somehow carried Durocher’s favor back in the day. ‘69 Cubs media relations director Chuck Shriver and former Chicago Tribune beat writer George Langford are still around.

Yet with all the potential sources available, not one is quoted to answer “why.” Writers Bill Christine and Bill Hageman appear to be the only fresh quotes in a chapter and a



Author Paul Dickson has profiled Leo Durocher and Bill Veeck.

half put together with other source material, including an informative newspaper morgue clip file to which Dickson had access. He apparently continued the research style from earlier chapters, which cover a time period from which no sources are still alive.

“I tried to get all the people I could get,” Dickson said. “Some didn’t want to talk. You can only call so many times.”

I interviewed Lynne Walker Goldblatt Durocher, the manager’s fourth wife whom he married in 1969, about that season and the ensuing investigation of Durocher by commissioner Bowie Kuhn and the Chicago Tribune. Her interview was published in “The Million To One” team and excerpted in “Baseball’s Prodigal Son.”

Picking up where previous commissioners left off with Durocher, Kuhn worried about Durocher’s gambling. The wildest report had The Lip making negative moves in the infamous Black Cat Series in Shea Stadium Sept. 9-10, 1969 to satisfy a \$50,000 gambling debt. If proved true, the incident would have been the second Black Sox Scandal in Chicago baseball history. Chicago Today columnist Rick Talley heard of Kuhn’s investigation, but was asked to sit on the story (and Talley did just that in a different journalism era) for the good of the game.

In trying to answer “why,” and asking if her former husband had been influenced by gambling in his game moves, Lynne Durocher said he only trusted his starting lineup and core pitchers. As a result, bench players like Popovich and Willie Smith, and relievers Ted Abernathy and Hank Aguirre were virtually ignored down the stretch. That recollection is only the start of the “why,” but even that does not come out clearly in “Baseball’s Prodigal Son.”

Dickson’s personal unfamiliarity with the ‘69 team makeup also shows in this passage: “Reporters and fans had been asking for weeks and now began to ask more frequently and more pointedly whether Durocher was making a mistake by not relieving his starters earlier in games; they were showing signs of fatigue and age.”

Fatigue, yes. Age, definitely not. Oldest starter was Hands, 29, who finished strong in ‘69, and was later named Chicago Player of the Year for 1969. Jenkins was 26, Holtzman 23 and fourth starter Dick Selma 25.

Durocher lionized in Chicago media early on

Dickson also sets up Durocher’s fractious relationship with Chicago writers in the passage about his 1965 hiring as manager. Accurately, the author penned about The Lip’s lifelong distrust of and conflicts with writers, even as he proved an engaging interview when he chose such a stance.

But the anger at the usually soft Chicago beat writers from the get-go doesn’t all add up, giving grist to yet another unanswered “why” in the book. In reality, according to the remembrance of the late columnist Bill Gleason, Durocher joined the writers after games in his first season in 1966 at The Pink Poodle, the old Wrigley Field press lounge that served hard liquor after games. Durocher had never played in Chicago, was unfamiliar with most of the people in town and was just trying to fit in.

And as the Cubs suddenly revived in 1967, Durocher was lionized in the media. The only misbehavior on the part of reporters was WMAQ-TV 's Johnny Erp talking to Durocher with a hidden mic down by the Cubs bullpen while a cameraman shot the exchange with a long lens from near home plate. Durocher rightfully was angered at the serious breach of ethics. But, overall, the beat writers of the day typically penned a play-by-play of the game without a serious analysis of manager strategy. The good feelings - including slavishly positive publicity about Durocher - the newly-winning Cubs engendered leading up to '69 should not have made the manager more combative. At one point he practically challenged the Sun-Times' Jerome Holtzman to take a punch at him.

Holtzman's own personal file on Durocher and the 1969 season, now in the Chicago Baseball Museum's archives, was offered to Dickson, but was not used.

Included in the Holtzman archives is the book chapter written in 1998 by Harvey Wineberg, a key source as Leo's accountant and executor of his estate. In "Leo the Lip" that appeared in "Thanks for Your Trust: Memories of an Untamed Accountant" Wineberg fills in for Chicago baseball fans the real story behind Camp Ojibwa - Durocher's infamous AWOL episode in late July 1969 - and how he negotiated Leo's contact with the Cubs.

With clients besides Durocher like former President Barack Obama, hockey great Bobby Hull, Chicago Bulls sharpshooter John Paxson and jazz pianist Ramsey Lewis, among others, Wineberg's career has been anything but common. He was a key source that Dickson failed to tap to add much needed dimension to Durocher's Cubs years and his later life, including not being elected to the Hall of Fame during his lifetime.

By the time Durocher was pushed out the door by Phil Wrigley during the 1972 All-Star break, the media, fans and city as a whole had largely turned against him.

If you are a baseball generalist, "Baseball's Prodigal Son" is an engaging read. Durocher did lead a colorful, often stormy life through his playing and managing days in which he rubbed shoulders with Babe Ruth and Jackie Robinson, and was buddies with Frank Sinatra and George Raft.

The entertainment industry loved Durocher, a frequent guest on network radio shows like Jack Benny's in the 1940s. Durocher later earned a \$65,000 annual salary - huge for the 1950s -- for a variety of NBC-TV assignments. Such a payout and other lucrative compensation for broadcast gigs may have explained why Durocher had an immediate conflict with Brickhouse in 1966. Then, the manager demanded his \$22,500 annual WGN pay, in full, for the "Durocher in the Dugout" pre-game radio show and other programs before he did a single minute on the air.

Amazingly, Maddon's brief managing meltdown wasn't the only 2016 flashback to Durocher. When President Trump's 2005 comment about contact with women's private parts was replayed, that immediately brought to mind a strikingly similar crude Durocher statement about how he picked up dates made to writer Roger Kahn in 1954. Cleaning up Durocher's language a bit, The Lip told Kahn his first move would be to put his hand on the date's privates. If she knocked his hand away, well, Durocher figured he had plenty of time to find another woman for the evening. If not, he was in like Flynn - and Durocher bragged plenty of famous women let him proceed.

My recommendation is to buy “Leo Durocher: Baseball’s Prodigal Son” with the caveat that the book does not answer the nagging question about an alternately triumph-and-tragedy ‘69 Cubs season that will stay alive as long as its remaining players and fans.