



Ex-Cub Lester Lancaster craves managing/coaching full time in Mexico

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It's safe to say while Lester Lancaster spun 30 1/3 shutout innings in relief for Don Zimmer's 1989 Cubs, the then-third-year pitcher was not thinking about managing after he ended his career.

In those days, you're pitching for your life each and every day. Bloated five-year contracts weren't available to non-superstar pitchers. And Zimmer, never a gifted handler of pitchers, was a couple of bad performances away and the corresponding scowling visits to the mound in casting the unfortunate hurler to purgatory, or Iowa, or wherever.

"I used to be somebody – at one time," native Texan Lancaster said in his mild drawl.

But soon after his big-league career ended in 1993 with the St. Louis Cardinals, Lancaster got bit with managerial/coaching aspirations. He was a player-coach in 1996, when he went 12-2 with a 3.03 ERA with the Pine Bluff (Ark.) Locomotives of the independent Big South League, for which he was MVP. Moving across the big river, Lancaster was 8-2 with a 2.90 ERA for the league's Tupelo (Miss.) Tornado in 1997.

Finally, at 37, he retired his rubber right arm (41-28 lifetime big-league record, nine-tenths of games as a reliever) and managed the independent Adirondack (N.Y.) Lumberjacks. A year later, he won the Northern League championship, earning Baseball America's manager of the year honors.

He went on to manage in Lincoln (Neb.), Mesa, Sioux City and Reno. But throughout 2017, he needed a passport to manage and coach. He was pitching coach under Tim Johnson at Triple-A level Pericos de Puebla, which lost in the recent championship of the Mexican League. And he spent Thanksgiving thankful for near-year round employ-



Candice and Lester Lancaster, who have enjoyed a long season in Mexican pro baseball.

ment as pitching coach/manager of Cajeteros de Ceyala of the Mexican development league.

“I like working with the kids,” said Lancaster. “I’m very fortunate being in a different country. Last year I was in Taiwan. It’s nice to be home (Dothan, Ala.), but my wife (Candice) and I enjoy our time down here.

“My Spanish is good enough to get by on the field. Off the field, it’s harder to understand.”

But there’s a universal language in coaching and handling players. The Boys of Zimmer in ’89 had a nice group of alums who went into managing and coaching.

’89 Cubs alumni club in managing/coaching

Most distinguished was rookie catcher Joe Girardi, who won the World Series managing the Yankees 20 years later. Thirty-homer second baseman Ryne Sandberg skippered a much-less successful Phillies franchise a few years back, after fully paying his apprenticeship dues in the Cubs’ farm system. Third baseman Vance Law is an instructor in the White Sox farm system. First baseman Mark Grace worked as a Diamond-backs hitting coach. Rick Sutcliffe has instructed in Cubs spring training for years.



Les Lancaster with Dan Firova, his fall-league manager.

And, of course, ace Greg Maddux was a pitching coach without portfolio, calling pitches through Girardi via a secret set of signs for his fellow Cubs starters in 1992 before working as a consultant to the Cubs and other teams post-career.

Maddux rubbed off on Lancaster during their Cubs days. They were road roommates.

“Maddux and I talked all the time,” he said in an understatement. And he agreed Maddux never intended to go anywhere but Wrigley Field during his career, a desire derailed by corporate contract bungling.

“He loved Chicago,” Lancaster said. “It’s unfortunate it didn’t work out.”

Lancaster also credited Cubs pitching coaches Dick Pole and Jim Wright for simple explanations of mechanics that he passes down to often teen-age pupils.

And, yes, the mercurial Zimmer had a positive role in the Lancaster of today.

“I liked Zim,” he said. “We got along. When I was working with Phillies in the minors, he scouted for Yankees, and we sat and talked.

Lancaster probably worked 20 years too late to become a Roland Hemond acolyte. The former Sox GM probably had the best relationship of any American baseball executive

in Mexican pro baseball. Now, Mexican League players still get plucked by pro organizations. Lancaster said six were sold to big-league farm systems last year. But they don't get the publicity more gilded prospects from the Dominican Republic or Venezuela typically receive.

Amateur free agent to lockdown reliever



Lester Lancaster was a lockdown reliever for the 1989 Cubs.

He can counsel his charges about being somewhat overlooked. Although drafted twice, Lancaster did not sign. Eventually he linked up with the Cubs as an amateur free agent in 1985. His Cubs managers could not get enough of him, sometimes putting him in the rotation for a few weeks at a time before moving him back to the bullpen. His 1989 scoreless streak remains a highlight in Cubs annals. So does his 1.36 ERA that season, then lowest among all relievers.

“It’s something I’m definitely proud of,” Lancaster said. “I had good defensive plays behind me. It wasn’t just me, it was a team effort. When I was first up, I was a fastball-curveball-slider pitcher. In ‘89, I went fastball-slider, and had control of it.”

Despite his durable arm, Lancaster was cast out of Cubdom by new management in the spring of 1992, nearly ready for his next chapter.

“You learn how long your starters stay in, how to get out of jams,” he said. “Never have your pitcher talk you out of taking him out of the game. They’re on emotion then. Keep your relievers fresh and sharp. As a manager, develop your own style.”

As long as Lancaster doesn’t work too much on hunches like Zimmer in ‘89, he’ll be fine. That was a once-in-a generation dugout performance by Popeye that would not play with sabermetrics now.

Zimmer was surely helped by an automatic pitcher in Lancaster who did not sent hearts aflutter like bullpen mate Mitch “Wild Thing” Williams. Nothing like being a perfect reliever for much of the second half of ‘89 to nicely move your career along.