

O'Neil Turns 100, but His Story Cannot Be Forgotten

By Paul Ladewski

KANSAS CITY – Buck O'Neil turned 100 years old last weekend, and the birthday celebration staged by the Negro League Museum was just the way he would have wanted it. There were so many good baseball stories that even the statues had to listen, enough smiles to light up the room for days at a time.

And every so often, there was talk about what might have been.

O'Neil was never afforded the opportunity to play in the major leagues, but as their first African-American coach, he was in position to break another barrier, that of the first black manager. If the Cubs had asked O'Neil to assume the reins as part of their so-called College of Coaches five decades ago, how well would he have done? And what if any effect would he have had on baseball history?

“Buck had everything you would want in a manager,” said ex-Cubs outfielder Joe Carter, whom O'Neil scouted and signed to his first professional contract. “He knew the game and had an eye for talent. He was a great teacher and loved to be around people. Not only would he tell where you needed to improve, but he did it in a way that made you want to do it. He had a way to get the most out of you.”

Former Cubs outfielder George Altman witnessed what O'Neil was capable of first hand. He played briefly under O'Neil with the Kansas City Monarchs on his way to the big leagues.

“I was in awe of him,” Altman recalled their first encounter to the Chicago Baseball Museum. “I had heard so much about the league, and after watching him play a little bit, I said, 'Hey, this guy must have been a Hall of Fame player in his day.' He was almost 50 years old, but he still could hit and field. And he was a great manager.”

In December, 1960, not long after the Cubs had finished in second division for the 14th consecutive time, team owner P.K. Wrigley announced that a committee of coaches would lead the team, not one manager. They would rotate at the minor and major league levels. Vedio Himsl, Harry Craft, Elvin Tappe and Lou Klein would be at the head of the line. Among them, only Craft had been a major league manager previously and without much success.

When the Cubs opened the 1961 season with nine victories in their first 17 games, there was cause for cautious optimism. But the team dropped 18 of its next 21 starts and quickly settled into last place.

In May, 1962, O'Neil was promoted from scout to coach. Immediately there was talk that, as one of the college of coaches, he would become the first black manager in the major leagues in effect. After all, in seven seasons as Monarchs manager, his teams had won a pair of championships albeit at a time when the Negro Leagues had fewer teams and less competition.

What's more, Altman, first baseman Ernie Banks and outfielders Lou Brock and Billy Williams formed the nucleus of the offense at the time, and O'Neil had played a major role in their development along the way.

Brock recounted a time that he fouled off pitch after pitch in front of scouts who had come to watch him play. Finally, O'Neil called time-out and approached him in the batting cage.

“Kid, you've got great eyes -- I mean great eyes,” O'Neil assured him. Then he added with a smile, “Now open them!”

“Buck was like a father figure to us,” Altman said. “He had a lot of enthusiasm. Of course, he had that big, booming voice, and that made you take notice right away. You could

tell that he had conviction in his words, and with his experience, he was a guy you wanted to listen to. If you had any talent at all, he would get it out of you.”

O'Neil never did become more than an instructor, however, and the 1962 season would go down as the worst in Cubs history at the time. They finished in ninth place with a 59-103 record, behind the expansion Houston Colt .45s and ahead of only the expansion New York Mets.

“I was kind of upset about the situation in Chicago because I had played for him,” Altman said. “The other coaches got their chances to manage except Buck, and I thought he was the best of the lot. He had more experience than all those guys put together. He started along that path, so why not let him finish?”

“On top of that, Buck knew how to build a team. According to him, he was considered for the general manager job. He thought the reason that he didn't get a shot was because he didn't have a college degree.”

Certainly, it would have been a lot to ask of O'Neil to turn around a team that lacked depth especially on the mound. At the same time, he couldn't have done much worse than the five coaches who were at the controls. (Charlie Metro finished the 1962 season.) None won even as many games as he lost before Bob Kennedy was named head coach on a permanent basis.

Said Altman, “I'll say this: If anybody could have done it, then Buck was the one. Definitely.”

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