



Cardenal's First Fan his clout for entrée to White House

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How heartily did Michelle Obama welcome Jose Cardenal to the White House on Jan. 16?

“Michelle hadn’t seen Jose for five years,” said an amazed Fergie Jenkins. “She hugged him for four, five minutes. He was standing behind the (present-day) players, and she waved him over.

“Everybody started clapping. You could see the emotion in her face.”

The out-going First Lady-Cardenal meeting was the most heartwarming story from the Cubs’ visit to be honored as world champions. The reunion of the wife of American’s first African-American president and the Cubs’ first significant Latin player evoked the special family connections the team engenders.

Michelle Obama was in middle school, adorned with an Afro, in the mid-1970s when she joined father Fraser Robinson III in after-school viewings of Cubs telecasts as the Cuban-born Cardenal cavorted through National League outfields. He became the smart South Side pre-teen’s favorite player.

Cardenal was adorned with Chicago baseball’s biggest Afro himself at the time, drawing young Michelle’s attention. She grew out her own Afro. Somehow, Cardenal kept his cap affixed that massive crop of hair to entertain fans with his special dash and verve – and comedy. He reportedly stashed baseballs in the ivy for retrieval to pitch ground-rule doubles to umpires. And he gained fame (or infamy) for claiming he could not play in a spring training game because a cricket kept him up all night.

Cardenal was even a favorite of doddering Cubs owner Phil Wrigley, ensuring him a measure of job security at Wrigley Field for a time. Pound for pound the Cubs’ best over-



The 1970s middle-school Michelle Obama, then Michelle Robinson, shared an avid fanship of Jose Cardenal with father Fraser Robinson III. Photo credit [U.S. Army IMCOM](#).

all player, the 150-pound Cardenal even won the Chicago Player of the Year Award in 1973 for a .303 average with 33 doubles.

So while the First Lady still had the clout of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue residency and hyper-popular Cubs as her husband's final presidential ceremony, Cardenal got the invite. He really moved up in class, sitting with a trio of Hall of Famers – ex-teammates Jenkins and Billy Williams, and Ryne Sandberg.

“A lot of people took a liking to Jose,” Williams said. “You get a lot with laughs.”

So did Jenkins when Barack Obama was presented a Cubs No. 44 jersey. On TV, it appeared Jenkins shouted directly to the president to don the shirt. That was going too far for White Sox fan Obama, who replied to “Ferg” such a wardrobe slip was not happening.

Somewhere John Holland spun over in his grave at 78 rpm, at one of his players of color directly addressing a sitting president, also of color. The usually-unsuccessful GM of 1956 to 1975 – who made a pretty good trade getting Cardenal late in 1971 – preferred his black players keeping things low key and conservative. But Jenkins claimed he actually urged Theo Epstein, standing behind Obama, to get the Cubs shirt adorned on POTUS No. 44.

Jenkins, birth name Ferguson and popularly known as Fergie since he came to the Cubs in 1966, apparently is known by an even shorter nickname by this glib Sox fan.

Obama called him ‘Ferg’ previously

“The last couple of meetings where I met him, prior to Ernie Banks (getting the presidential Medal of Freedom), he called me ‘Ferg,’” Jenkins said. “He knows who I am.”

Jenkins also was amused by Obama's reference to Joe Maddon as “Mr. Style.” The manager was the only honoree not wearing a suit or sports coat. He came in informal shoes.

Jenkins and Williams definitely knew the significance of Obama presiding over the Cubs ceremony on Martin Luther King's 88th birthday. The Cubs aren't reverting to their pre-Epstein ways and neither is society reversing to the time King led the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955.

Williams and Jenkins took pride in their surroundings at the White House. After enduring aspects of discrimination – Williams especially – and Cubs frustration in their careers, they knew the special meaning of who served as lead speaker and which team was being honored.

“A lot of things would have been inconceivable. But we're in 2017,” Williams said when asked if he'd have dismissed as science fiction 50 years ago a black president honoring a Wrigley Field World Series winner.



Jose Cardenal's luxuriant Afro and dash and verve as a Cub were big attractions to a future First Lady.

“The Cubs won the World Series after 108 years,” he said. “The biggest thing is experiencing in the White House a black president talking about the Cubs winning the World Series. We’re talking 2017, we’re not going back. A lot of people want to go back, but we’re not going back. This is what he was speaking about.

“Here’s a guy smarter than most people. His wife is smarter than most people. He can become president of the United States. In eight years, as many things as people have said about him, he got out with a clean slate. No scandalous talk. His family was just fine.”

Mentions of Obama’s successor was limited. Jenkins said he had met Donald Trump twice on the golf course. Talk of the transition to Trump got a bit heavy. So why not simply continue to glory in a championship that Williams and Jenkins also richly deserved in their time, but got caught up in the baseball gods’ cruel joke played on the Cubs?

Fans want a little bit of that championship feeling to rub off from their Hall of Famers. Williams and Jenkins have been a little busier than usual conversing with Cubs fans in the last 2½ months.

Age-old question no longer needs answer

“People always walked around asking me if the Cubs will win a World Series in their lifetimes,” Williams said. “The great thing is I don’t have to answer that anymore.

“A lot of people tell me, they see the Cubs on TV, everyone is having fun, and they all get along with each other. A lot of people know when a player is giving 100 percent. We did that and that’s why they’ve loved Fergie, Sandberg and myself.”

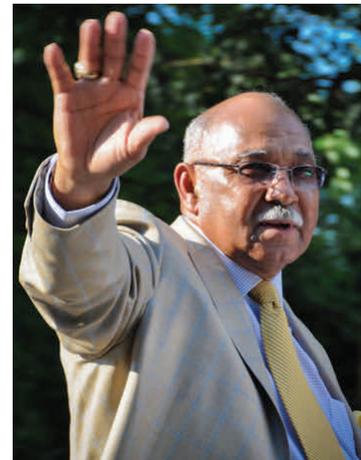
Anthony Rizzo said at the Grant Park victory rally that every player, all-time with the Cubs, had a piece of the title. Jenkins re-emphasized that point when reviewing his own Hall of Fame resume.

“I got a few records as a Cubs pitcher,” he said. “No. 1 thing, I didn’t win them all by myself.”

A title also made Jenkins wistful at old friends that are not here. Banks was a natural. And considering his emotional nature about the Cubs, “it would have been great if Ronnie (Santo) was alive.”

In the end, the Cubs and their Cooperstown enshrinees can’t get stuck that championship season of 2016. They can only go forward to the next World Series opportunity in October.

By then, Williams and Jenkins should have the clout to invite private citizen Obama to attend another Fall Classic with them.



Billy Williams admires how the Obama family came out of the White House without a hint of personal scandal. Photo credit [Chris Evans](#).

Williams, though, reminded the Cubs Universe about the ingrained baseball loyalties of the departing First Family. A pile of Cubs swag is one thing, but active rooting interest is another.

“You’ll have a better chance of getting Michelle to come to a game than him,” Williams concluded.