

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Bill Hands a control pitcher and straight shooter

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Straight shooter.

The description of Bill Hands upon hearing of his sudden death is without embellishment, without flair. Just a direct sketch of a man with whom I have enjoyed baseball conversations, past and present, for 25 years. The only unusual thing about Hands was his nickname “Froggy.”

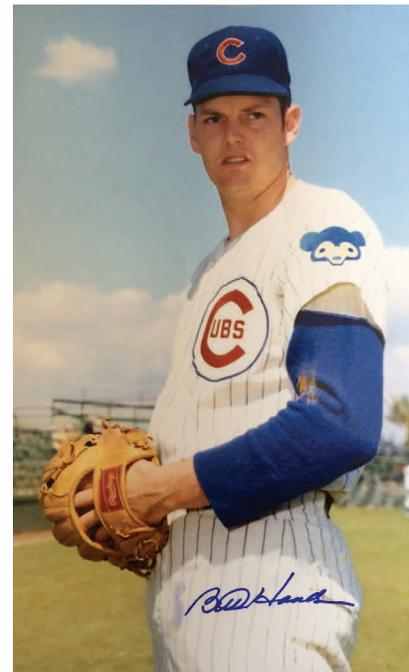
I was thrown off-center by the announcement of former Cubs 20-game-winner Hands’ passing on March 9. I thought the pride of Parsippany, N.J. – you can never forget Jack Brickhouse continually mentioning Hands’ hometown when he pitched – would just go on and on.

After all, when I called his Orient, N.Y. home last summer, his wife Sandy said he still mowed his own lawn at 76. Ah, those 1960s ballplayers wouldn’t pony up \$2 to get a kid from the neighborhood to run the mower. And why not? They had to fight their general managers for a \$5,000 raise each season, so they knew the value of a buck. And many lived middle-class lives away from the field. Your suburban neighbor might be a key Cubs contributor.

I wish I had covered the Cubs in 1969. Sure, I’d have trouble, like any other writer, with Leo Durocher. But Hands would have been a real “go-to” guy in the clubhouse to take the temperature of the team.

All you needed to know about Hands was he pitched his best baseball of the 1969 season down that ill-fated stretch while many of the rest of the Cubs were going to hell. Billy Williams and Jim Hickman held up their ends of the bargain, but talk of other teammates enmeshed in “cliques” or lacking guts dogged the fringes of the ‘69 saga decades later.

Hands ended up winning Chicago Player of the Year honors in 1969 from the local baseball writers for his 20-14 record compiled in an even 300 innings. His 2.49 ERA was fourth-lowest of any Cubs starter since World War II until Jake Arietta undercut everyone with his out-of-body 2015 season.



Bill Hands in his Cubs prime.

Hands' 1969 achievement represented the only season in modern times the Cubs had a pair of 20-game-winners, joining Fergie Jenkins in his third of six consecutive 20-victory campaigns. Hands had shifted back and forth from the rotation in 1966-67, then emerged with a 16-win season in 1968 as a full-time starter. He won 18 in 1970. But at 32, he became expendable in 1972 when homegrown Rick Reuschel and Burt Hooton established themselves in the Cubs rotation.



Three generations of Hands men ran the family auto shop in Orient, N.Y. From left are Bill Hands, son Bill III and grandson Alex.

After his career, Hands went back East. That was home. He was rarely quoted in remembrances of the Leo Durocher-era teams. I finally noticed his whereabouts in Rick Talley's "Cubs of '69" book in 1989. Talley talked of traveling to the far eastern tip of Long Island, where Hands operated his family auto-repair business. The garage, which doubled as a cracker-barrel stop for baseball talk, still occupied Hands' time as a senior citizen in 2016.

'69 reunion attendees are stiffed

Then, in 1992, I ran into Hands at a reunion of the '69 team at McCormick Place. The event – from which '69 Bleacher Bums bugler Mike Murphy did a live broadcast on The Score – apparently went awry with a promoter who reneged on payment to most of the attendees. As I heard it, only Ernie Banks, commanding his usual \$15,000 for an appearance, got paid. I recalled Hands and Ken Holtzman jawboning with the promoter. As I heard it, they collected just their travel expenses. Two other sights at McCormick Place were Don Young, in the only interview I have ever conducted with the private, enigmatic center fielder, and Dick Selma tossing coins at Murphy while the latter was on the air.

Ever since the reunion, I stayed in touch with Hands. Surprisingly, few other Chicago media rang him up. Guess it was easier to just grab a comment from Banks, Williams, Holtzman or Fergie Jenkins when they'd show up at the ballpark.

The conversations with Hands were candid without extra emotion. That was the measure of the man. For a gent who did all he could to help the Cubs win in '69, he was rewarded 46 years later with a World Series victory that netted him congratulations from his Long Island neighbors. Hands expressed his satisfaction over the phone a day later, along with some raised eyebrows over Joe Maddon's Games 6 and 7 managing.

So it seems like in the case of the death of Jim Hickman last year, the CBM living up to its historical mission to be the past, present, and future of Chicago Baseball, had conducted the last two interviews with Bill Hands. Our feature June 22, 2016 story ["Froggy" Hands: Maybe cut down Cubs rotation workload in second half?](#) was an in-

depth interview. The CBM was the only local media outlet to secure Froggy's joy after the Cubs Game 7 win on November 3.

Hands also was a witness to people and events shuffled under by history. A longtime storyline had Cubs owner P.K. Wrigley quietly slipping into his ballpark in the guise of a senior-citizen fan. Wrigley admitted to outfielder Pete La Cock he sat in the bleachers. A hard bench near Murphy was not his only vantage point. Hands said he spotted Wrigley sitting in the grandstands on one late 1960s afternoon.

Hands' passing now shows that the appeal of the '69 Cubs is indeed long-lasting. The gap from live games and drama in 1969 to the present is now 48 years. Immortality is in the team's reputation, but increasingly not its corporeal presence.

16 Cubs from '69 have passed away

Now, the number of departed '69 Cubs has reached 16. In addition to Hands, the necrology includes Banks, Hickman Ron Santo and Willie Smith. Others were pitchers Selma, Alec Distaso, Joe Decker, Joe Niekro, Ken Johnson, Don Nottebart, Ted Abernathy and Hank Aguirre; infielder Charlie Smith, and catchers Randy Bobb and Gene Oliver.

However, the departed's impact is going to outlive them. Rotation mate Holtzman penned a touching remembrance of Hands for the CBM:

"I am very sad to hear about Froggy passing away in Florida. He, more than anyone else, was responsible for any success I had later on in the big leagues. He would spend time with me, alone, and talk about the science and strategy of pitching, not just the mechanical aspects of the position.

"I consider myself to be fortunate that when I was 20-21 years old, I had three teammates that I would purposely sit next to on the bench just to pick their brains and soak up their knowledge: Robin Roberts, Fergie Jenkins and Bill Hands. Froggy was the consummate pro and, although a premiere 20-game winner, wasn't afraid to administer some 'chin music' when it was called for. I've said many times that without his guidance, I would never have earned my championship rings."

Holtzman learned from his teachers the concept of protecting his hitters. Hands was the Cubs' top mound enforcer. He did not need to be told by a "stick it in his ear" Durocher to protect his hitters. A Hall of Famer like Williams appreciated Hands having his back.

"I knew Froggy was a no-nonsense individual on the mound," he said. "If one of us was thrown at, he wasn't afraid to come in."

Williams, who last saw Hands at a memorabilia show in Rosemont, Ill. two years ago, rated Jenkins and Hands a "top one-two punch" in the game. "He was right behind Fergie. He had real good control. And a devastating slider, like Steve Carlton and Bill Singer."

Hands also welcomed raw rookies to the Cubs, such as Roe Skidmore, now 71, living in Decatur, Ill. and doing part-time MLB scouting.

Skidmore was brought up in September 1969 from Triple-A Tacoma. But the first baseman never played as Durocher stuck with his tired regulars including the 38-year-old, sore-kneed Banks.

"I remember Billy Hands as one of the good guys," Skidmore said. "He was very nice to young guys. He really helped (Joe) Decker and (Jim) Colborn as he took them under his wing. Hands and (Don) Kessinger were the nicest veterans to us rookies.

"Billy pitched great in Sept. '69 when everyone else ran out of gas."

Skidmore watched Hands lose 3-2 to Jerry Koosman and the Mets on Sept. 8 during the infamous Black Cat Series in Shea Stadium. Then Skidmore also witnessed Hands break the Cubs' fatal eight-game losing streak with a 5-1 victory over the Cardinals in St. Louis on Sept. 12.

"Billy Hands had an outstanding slider," he said, echoing Williams.

These and countless other stories comprise a hold the '69 Cubs still possess over fans who witnessed the triumphs and tragedies. [My story on Hickman's passing](#) last August holds the record for most page views on the Chicago Baseball Museum's web site.

The same fans should similarly read every post-mortem word on Hands. Who said the late Cubs GM John Holland made only bad trades led by Lou Brock? Landing Hands and Randy Hundley from the Giants for Lindy McDaniel and Don Landrum late in 1965 turned out well. Ditto the following April, when Holland snared Jenkins and Adolfo Phillips from the Phillies for aging starters Larry Jackson and Bob Buhl.

In the same breath, Holland landed good people along with great players. Paraphrasing Jerome Holtzman, whose life work and papers as MLB's first official historian the CBM purchased in 2007, a doff of the chapeau to Bill Hands.