



Snitker 36-year witness on how 'content of character' is byword for Braves' success

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Never is the quality of character in a ballplayer more needed than the trail of tears through the postseason just commencing.

Baseball is the ultimate game of failure, and never are the odds more cruel than in the September stretch leading to the October minefields, tripwires aplenty waiting to blow up proud 100-win teams long before they reach the World Series.

Cynics can lambaste the Atlanta Braves all they want, ripping the achievement of just one World Series victory in the nearly three decades they've ranked as the gold standard of scouting and player development. And yet the fact the Braves have continually replenished themselves from within has kept them almost constantly in contention, which is the object of the game, anyway. You can't be in position to reach, and win, the Fall Classic unless you're also within hailing distance of first place or the wild card. The Braves almost always have had both in sight.

Serving as a model for underachieving Chicago teams seeking to build back their farm systems, the Braves have had just one short dry spell, in the late 2000s. That's a stellar record beginning in the Reagan administration when the likes of Ted Turner, Bobby Cox and Paul Snyder invested money, time, effort and people in out-developing almost every other team.



A 1980s get-together of then-Durham Bulls manager Brian Snitker (left) with Hall of Famer Luke Appling, a Braves minor-league hitting instructor, and Snitker's sister Angela Snitker Jachetta. Photo courtesy of Brian Snitker.

The Braves' secret is to find good "character" in their young players, emphasizing mental discipline and quality personality sometimes even over sheer talent. Conjecture is the Braves might take a player sporting better character but inferior talent compared to a more skilled player, but will use their development skills to get the best out of the high-character player.

The Braves almost followed the guidance of Martin Luther King in his legendary speech at 1963's March on Washington, when he envisioned a day far in the future when people would be judged not on the color of their skin, but on the "content of their character."

The kid from Macon is a Braves lifer

In baseball, as in any walk of life, it takes a character guy to know one. A witness to the entire process since he signed with the Atlanta organization as a 22-year-old outfielder in 1977 is Brian Snitker, now the Braves' third-base coach helping manager Fredi Gonzalez embark on another postseason journey.

Seemingly a lifetime ago, Snitker was the bespectacled right fielder on the legendary Macon (Ill.) Ironmen, a baseball version of the "Hoosiers" Davey vs. Goliath story of a small rural high school that upends the giants from the bigger cities. Snitker and his teammates, playing under avant-garde coach Lynn Sweet, nearly stole the Illinois state high-school baseball title in 1971. Representing their 250-student school 20 minutes south of downstate Decatur, the talented Ironmen upset longtime baseball power Lane Tech of Chicago (5,000 boys in '71) before finally going down in the title game against Waukegan, another diamond giant.

The Macon tale was so appealing Chris Ballard penned a charming book, "One Shot at Forever," chronicling the Ironmen's journey and Sweet's hippie-like character dropped right into close-cropped, Nixonian "Silent Majority" territory. Now Legendary Entertainment has snared the movie rights. The production process is just starting for the silver screen.

You could make a sequel out of the pro-baseball journey of Snitker, who has advanced further in the game than any of his high-school teammates. More than anyone, he has



Brian Snitker as a young minor-league manager. Photo courtesy of Brian Snitker.

been on duty continuously from the dawn of the era when the Braves stocked their team with quality kids in the field and on the mound.

Snitker learned from two huge influences on his life – Sweet and Paul Snyder, perhaps the best scouting director in modern times. Also logging time running the farm system and advising Braves brass, Snyder emphasized character in his players as a reflection of himself. And to demonstrate what the Cubs lost when panicking Tribune Co. execs led by John Madigan broke up Dallas Green-Gordon Goldsberry management team too soon, Snyder had rated their Cubs farm system of the late 1980s equal to that of the Braves.

Snyder the driving force for Braves kids

“He probably had more character and more class than anyone else,” Snitker said of Snyder, who’s voice is still heard around the Braves organization in retirement. “He’s one of the classiest and best gentleman, the most complete human being I’ve ever been around. He’s just an amazing man.

“When he looked for those players, he insisted the guys have character. Those who didn’t have the character and commitment didn’t stay around long.



Bobby Cox (in a familiar pose as Atlanta manager) teamed with Paul Snyder as the masterminds of the Braves' fantastic player development system.

Braves talent in 17 seasons as a minor-league manager, plus three stints as a big-league coach dating back to 1985.

“Paul was around when I was a player. As a minor-league player, they always made you feel like you were always a piece of the puzzle. The door was always open if you had a problem. He would do anything in the world for you. He did everything I had already had done. He managed, did everything. He knew what you were going through. As a young manager, you could always call him, always lean on him.”

Snyder lived near Snitker and wife Ronnie in the Atlanta area. When Ronnie was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1992, Snyder and his wife Petie brought over dinner and toys for the Snitkers.

“They’re all like family,” he said.

Snyder’s influence only added to Snitker’s own character that proved crucial in developing waves of

“He has an ability to negotiate through just about everything baseball can throw at him, and life, and everyone likes him,” said Sweet, like Snyder retired, but still using his First Amendment rights in his old environment. “He has this persona that’s just so pleasant. And yet you know he has to have some hard edge there with these major-league players. Nobody’s said a bad thing about him. That’s not true for me around here.”

Snitker became part of a Braves organization that prided itself on stability. Even if a Snyder or a Bobby Cox retired, their protégés would carry on at different levels.

“The people we had, Paul’s team of scouts, they were all descendants of him,” Snitker said. “They were high-character people, too. Many of the more important people are your minor-league managers and staff. Players come and go, but if you don’t have a solid group of guys who are developing guys and living with them, you won’t get the best of them. I was in spring training six-seven years in a row, it’s the same guys in the room. They moved around into different jobs, but they were Braves guys.”

While the Braves suffered at the big-league level through much of the 1980s, owner Turner allocated generous resources to scouting and player development. Cox as general manager oversaw the program.

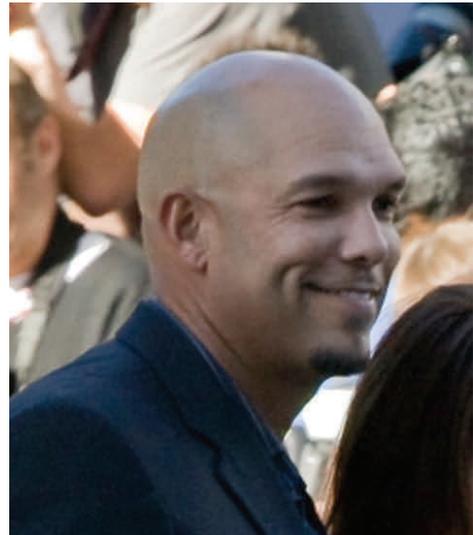
Funding, staffing up to par for scouting, farm system

“Absolutely,” was Snitker’s response when asked if Turner had spent enough to get the process going. And unlike the Cubs under the yoke of the Tribune Co. corporate meddlers, and then team president Andy MacPhail, the Braves were not understaffed in baseball operations. “No, never!” said Snitker.

“We turned from the bottom to the top when Bobby became the GM,” he said. “It was unbelievable. I saw it work. They put that emphasis on the minor-leagues. Bobby was so hands-on. They turned you loose with your team and let you do your job. They trusted you with your staff. You wanted to do good for the organization, you felt a responsibility to give everything you had.”

The Braves, of course, became noted for their home-grown pitching, led by Tom Glavine and Steve Avery. But if the truth be known, their best success was grooming whole mess of run producers who came close, if not exceeded, the 30-homer, 100-RBI mark as Braves.

Starting with Ron Gant in the late 1980s, the Braves’ home-grown strongmen included David Justice, Chipper Jones, Ryan Klesko, Javy Lopez, Jeff Francoeur, Brian McCann and Freddie Freeman. Jason Heyward has the potential to join them. Jermaine Dye



David Justice was second in a long line of Braves home-grown power hitters. Photo credit [Josh Jensen](#).

was an original Brave, but quickly reached the 30-100 level elsewhere, including a productive, World Series-winning stop with the Sox. The Cubs have not produced their own slugger who did 30-100 in Chicago since Billy Williams in 1960.

Most of the sluggers possessed the right character, a topic of which Snitker has even more stories.

“Two guys I think of now, when 19, they graded out to be high-A players, that ended up being anchor of a world championships team were Mark Lemke and Jeff Blauser,” he said. “Huge character guys, makeup guys. You take those guys to develop them and they become winners.

“I had Tom Glavine at 17 years old in the instructional league. He didn’t throw as hard as everyone else. But those guys at a young age, as an adult you can have a conversation with. You could have fun with them. They were mature, character-driven guys.

“I remember those guys at the end of their careers. There weren’t any guys in batting practice having more fun than them, climbing the walls after fly balls and doing their power shagging. I had Mark Lemke in Low-A in Sumter, S.C., it’s 150 degrees, I’m running around the outfield, Lemke’s got a chew and ball and his glove in his hand in the dugout, wondering where everybody was supposed to be at?”

So how do the Braves scouts and managers accurately gauge and define character?

Parents key to character

“How he carries himself (watching) batting practice, how he carries himself during a game,” Snitker said. “Look at the parents. Any kid who I’ve ever had, after talking to the parents, I go home and tell my wife, ‘Now I know why that kid is like, because I met the mom and dad.’ There’s a lot of kids you have to hang with – not fortunate enough to have a man in the house. Those are the development kids. Those are the ones as minor-league manager you have to teach how to be a professional, how to develop themselves.

“There’s a lot of guys who you have over the course of a career, if that kid had (a star’s) talent, he’d be unbelievable. That character guy ends up playing longer than the guy without it. Some guys, you can help them through it. Give them every ounce of your being to try to get him there.”

More recently, both the Braves field staff and players had to dig deep down in their character to survive disappointments.

In 2011, the Braves coughed up a seemingly comfortable wild-card lead as the near-Cinderella Cardinals sneaked past them in the end. Then the Cardinals took advantage of a questionable infield-fly call to beat the Braves in the wild-card play-in game in 2012.

“How important every game in 162-game schedule is,” was Snitker’s take on the lessons the Braves learned the past two seasons. “How hard it is in September to win games, it’s a grind. You’re never guaranteed to win games. I don’t think anybody took anything

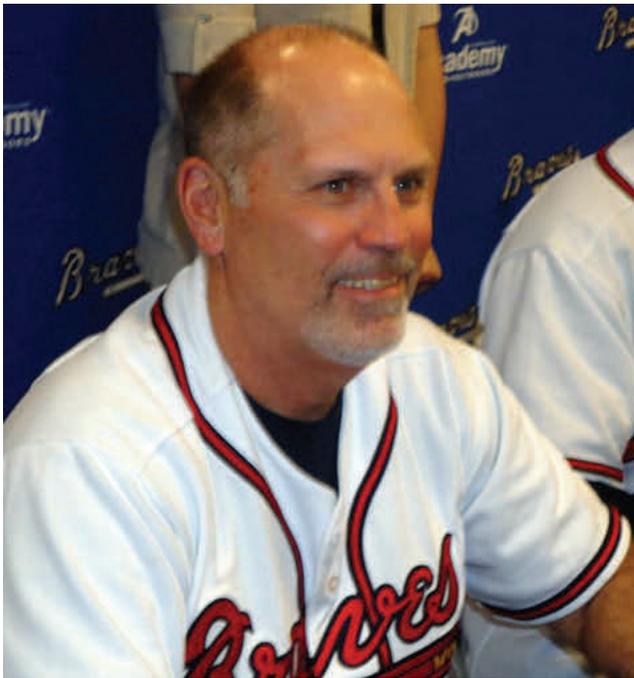
for granted in '11 when we lost that lead. It was a group of guys going through a new situation. It's baseball, and it didn't work out.

"You can't let off the pedal. You got to stay full speed-ahead. Every one you win in May, June and July is one you don't win in September."

Lou Piniella admitted something similar to Snitker's analysis of proper attitude under pressure after the 2008 Cubs' three-and-out playoff flop.

Playing 'footloose and fancy-free'

"You can't will yourself to win a baseball game," he said. "You have to go out and play it. You've got to play footloose and fancy-free, and play your game. Let the chips fall where they may. The harder you try to play a baseball game, the less productive you're going to be. You've got to go out and play, it's just a game. Nobody's going to take your first-born if you're not going to win it. You just don't perform like that in this industry."



Brian Snitker signs autographs for fans in 2012.
Photo credit [Bbqsauce13](#).

Snitker is on one of the Braves' hot seats as third-base coach. Every man in that position will have an inevitable disaster, waving a runner into an embarrassing out at the plate.

"I try and stay aggressive," Snitker said. "Bobby Dews said years ago you have to have a mentality of a closer – a short memory."

He is watching at least two people when he sends a runner.

"I'm trying to slow the thing down as much as I can," Snitker said. "Let everything develop, you got more time than you think you do. Watch the reaction of the baserunner to see what kind of jump he has and watch the fielder if he's charging hard, if he bobbles the ball."

Once mentioned as a possible successor to Bobby Cox as Braves manager, Snitker now puts such aspirations on the side to be a stalwart right-hand man of Fredi Gonzalez.

"I'm getting to age where I really like what I'm doing," he said. "I really love working for Fredi, who just like an extension of Bobby. Fredi got a great mentality for the job."

Snitker, Gonzalez and their players will need that great mentality – and all their good character – on another postseason journey, this time against the Dodgers. No matter what the result, the expectation is the Braves will play the game right.