



## ***Baylor's Cubs managerial days leave several still-unexplained threads***

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Don Baylor comes off as almost a footnote in Cubs history.

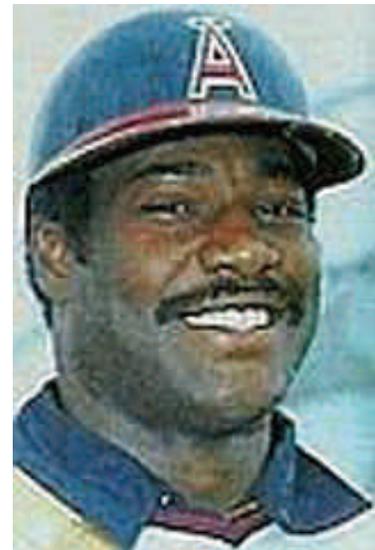
When news of his death at 68 from cancer broke Monday morning, Aug. 7, the sports-talk flow concentrated on Jay Cutler giving up easy TV work to get beaten up again as a Miami Dolphins quarterback. Some asides on the present-day, up-and-down Cubs were thrown in. But Baylor's status as the team's first African-American manager in 2000 was not considered a hot topic for chatter.

If anything, Baylor takes a back seat to Dusty Baker, his permanent successor in the Cubs dugout, who had a tumultuous four-year run from 2003-06. Yet Baker was five outs from a World Series amid a truth-is-stranger-than-fiction detour. Baylor's 2001 Cubs made it into August in first place, then fell back, sandwiched between two seasons of 90 or more losses – the latter of which included a quick July hook on Baylor from Cubs president Andy MacPhail.

Baylor presided over clubhouse turmoil, just like Baker. Only this time, the dissension was largely confined to newspaper accounts instead of open warfare with Cubs TV announcers Chip Caray and Steve Stone, under Baker.

Baylor came to the Cubs as a sea-change appointment in personality from the gentlemanly Jim Riggleman, his tough-guy resume as a player and hitting-coach talents his main selling points. He had been the American League MVP with the Los Angeles Angels in 1979 and an all-time magnet for hit by pitches. He had led the expansion Colorado Rockies to a wild-card playoff berth in only their third season in 1995.

Taking a secondary role to other sports events was Baylor's fate from the get-go in Chicago. His introductory press conference in 1999 was staged on the same day as Walter Payton's premature death from liver disease at 45. But one change in how business was done, at least from a social standpoint, at Wrigley Field was noted at that presser. Baylor's race seemed secondary to his leadership and toughness qualities. Wife Becky, who is white, was also introduced. Thirty years earlier, a black Cub's relationship with a



**Don Baylor's tough-guy player image did not translate into Cubs managerial success with few home-grown reinforcements coming up to the parent club.**

white woman would get him traded, as what took place with Oscar Gamble, a player contemporary of Baylor's.

Baylor was fated to have an uphill battle from the start. Under MacPhail, the Cubs were not producing or acquiring young position players in the manner that has boosted the franchise into World Series contention under Theo Epstein. After five years under MacPhail when Baylor was hired, the Cubs farm system was still sub-standard. MacPhail admitted in late 1999 his player development spending was "middle of the pack." He and GM Ed Lynch kept patching via trades and some free-agent signees.

The pitching really suffered, cratering at a 5.27 ERA in 1999 with the team losing 40 of 50 in the second half. No pitching guru, Baylor was beset by the same problems in his first season. In fact, the Cubs lost two more games (97 in 2000) than in 1999 with the ERA just .02 percentage points lower.

Baylor had another problem: Sammy Sosa. Likely in the middle of a PED-assisted power surge, Sosa also had become bigger than the franchise itself. "Wrigley Field is my house," he'd often proclaim. Baylor could not easily mandate adjustments for his gate attraction. And he had a new contract coming due. Conflict inevitably ensued.

### **Manager seemed media-averse**

Covering Baylor for the Times of Northwest Indiana, my Diamond Gems radio show, a variety of other media and my books, I noticed one characteristic that set Baylor apart. He was not a media politician. In fact, he did not appear to enjoy the banter with reporters as most managers did.

In one pre-game session, I asked all three questions, and then Baylor exited stage right. In another post-game interview, then conducted at the bottom of a clubhouse stairway



**Kerry Wood threatened to not make his final start of the 2001 season after pitching coach Oscar Acosta, clashing with manager Don Baylor, was fired.**

to the manager's and coaches' rooms, I arrived first and inquired about why lefty reliever Daniel Garibay practically walked the ballpark to lose a game late. Out of professional courtesy, I then shut up and waited for a follow-up question from the several young staffers or interns accompanying TV camera crews. None came from the genre of kids who relied on writers or veteran radio reporters to ask the questions, generating their sound bites. Baylor was about to turn around and walk back to his office when several other writers arrived like the cavalry to continue the post-game de-briefing.

In 2001, with Kerry Wood's health again in question, nothing was mentioned about his status in a post-game press conference, by then moved to the dungeon-like weather room adjoining the dugout. In mid-conference, I asked if consideration was being given to Wood going on the disabled list. Baylor then announced that indeed Kid K would be officially sidelined for 15 days.

Curious about this trend of poor communication, I got into Baylor's office for a moment pre-game and asked why. He responded he once played for a manager – likely Dave Garcia with the Angels – who preferred to spend more time schmoozing with the media than talking with his players.

Accusations about clubhouse verbal discourse, including players learning of their status from reporters instead of the manager, would later undercut Baylor's own relationship with his Cubs. But that downer was well-hidden, at least in the beginning, as the 2001 Cubs played surprisingly well. Wood and Jon Lieber threw back-to-back one-hitters at one juncture. Shorn of power beyond Sosa's outsized baseball physical and emotional persona, the Cubs played gutty, opportunistic baseball.

The 2001 clubhouse was one of the most fun of any collection of Cubs to cover in all my years on the beat. Cutups like well-traveled Canadian Matt Stairs and native Chicagoan Ron Coomer kept things loose. MacPhail, who had demoted Lynch as GM in mid-2000 and took over his job, actively pursued the Tampa Bay Rays' Fred McGriff around the trade deadline to fill the hole at first base. After hemming and hawing due to his no-trade clause, the Crime Dog finally agreed to the deal. MacPhail also picked up the veterans like Michael Tucker and Delino DeShields in an attempt to add depth to the lineup.

On July 31, 2001, the Cubs reached a season high point of 62-43 with a 4 1/2 game lead. They did not play poorly from that point forward. But the Cardinals and Astros got hot and passed up the Cubs. By the time the 9/11 terrorist attacks interrupted the season, the Cubs were hanging on in the race and fell short.

In that solemn September of 2001, the cracks in Baylor's regime became apparent.

In spring training, he had recruited Mack Newton, a longtime friend and unconventional workout guru, to improve the players' conditioning. But Newton backfired on two levels. His routines were too strenuous for the daily grind and sensibilities of players. Newton also comported himself around like he was a celebrity in his own right, exulting in the fact he wore a Cubs uniform. Eventually the players rebelled and forced Baylor to send away Newton.

### **Wood almost strikes over Acosta firing**

Meanwhile, Baylor and pitching coach Oscar Acosta, an outwardly acerbic type who was popular with his pitchers, increasingly clashed. Near season's end, Acosta was fired. Wood threatened to not make his final start, requiring then-GM-in-training Jim Hendry to rush to the clubhouse to talk him out of his personal strike. Lieber uttered a profanity on WGN-Radio when asked about the firing. Baylor never adequately explained his conflict with Acosta. To cap off the season's sour end, longtime beloved WGN-TV baseball director Arne Harris suddenly dropped dead waiting for a restaurant table with Chip Caray.

The Cubs never recovered in 2002. Prized free-agent signee Moises Alou was hurt part of the time and underperformed. For the second year in a row, Todd Hundley



**Oscar Acosta**

proved you could not go home again, amid personal problems. Curiously, Baylor had said he had to watch Hundley's physical condition due to dehydration while catching. After 83 games, MacPhail fired Baylor, appointed Triple-A manager Bruce Kimm his interim replacement, stepped down from the GM position and promoted Hendry for a nine-year run on the job.

Baylor went on to several hitting coaches' jobs in ensuing years. But he was apparently so put off by how his Wrigley Field tenure ended he'd never comment publicly about his Cubs days. To his death, we still did not get his side of the story in contrast with that of Baker, who suffered through increasingly frustrating, injury-and-conflict-ridden final three seasons.

For a man who was so accomplished, so talented and did so many positive things in the game, Baylor's 2½ years at the Cubs' helm remain the hole in his biography. We hardly knew ye, Don. At least, society and baseball had advanced enough that Baylor's race was never the story during his tenure in Chicago.