

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Hemond still valuable marking 65 years in game

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The true measure of Roland Hemond was not in the trades he made, the free agents he signed or the sleep he lost working for Bill Veeck with the White Sox.

On a June day in 2014, this eternal baseball man spoke at the Green Diamond Gallery, a spiffy-looking private baseball museum on the northern outskirts of Cincinnati. Knowing he would do his stand-up routine in the evening, Hemond took a power nap on a bench near the entrance, undisturbed by people coming in or out.

Once Hemond got going, he had no brakes at 84. He gave his talk to the gallery members, taking them on a time-trip through his personal history. After the speech, as the gathering dived into the accompanying buffet, Hemond kept working the crowd, talking to one or two at a time. The clock steadily ticked away. Suddenly, 11 p.m. was approaching, and a gallery worker realized Hemond hadn't had a bite to eat. A plate of food was hastily assembled. Hemond still did more talking than noshing. Midnight passed and the group finally left the museum.

Hemond is the ultimate people person in baseball, demonstrating it during his own special "hunger games" in Cincy. He knows everybody and has seen everything in baseball. And he's fortunate to still draw a paycheck in the game as he marks his 65th anniversary working in pro baseball this year, having started in 1951 out of the Coast Guard. Working for the minor-league Hartford (Ct.) Chiefs, he was not too proud to sweep the stands or answer the phones to break into the game he loved.

You can't hold a good man back. Within a few years he was a key official in the powerful Milwaukee Braves' farm system, where he met wife Margo, daughter of Braves GM John Quinn. Typically, Hemond combined scouting with honeymoon activities in 1958 in the



**When Roland Hemond speaks, you should listen.
You won't forget his baseball stories.**

Caribbean. Margo knew what kind of man she married and what life she had chosen, and is still along for the ride. Hemond would move on to run the Los Angeles Angels' minor leaguers before being summoned in 1970 to the job where he gained his most fame – personnel director (later GM) of the Sox.

And now Hemond's come full circle. In cooperation with then-owner Veeck, he promoted Tony La Russa – many said then prematurely – to his first job as a big-league manager at 34. Now he is a special assistant with the Diamondbacks, able to relay his wisdom to team president La Russa, a fellow senior citizen.

The Diamondbacks said the Hemond family planned a special present for their patriarch. Not knowing the identity of the gift, I'd say an old-fashioned rotary phone, likely colored black, would have been appropriate. Hemond got so much done twirling that dial, connecting with people. The same concept applies tapping the flat surface (not my favorite activity) of an iPhone.

I have my own vintage Hemond artifact: a tape from the Sox radio post-game show, hosted by Roger Wallenstein, creeping up on the trade deadline of June 15, 1971. Hemond told Wallenstein he might have to bail out if he got an incoming call from a GM. No caller waiting or multiple simultaneous calls in those days. But as a period piece, the conversation is fascinating. Hemond kept the listener interested, but revealed little about the specific talent he was seeking.

That was the Hemond style. He'd give the reporter just enough to stock a story – again, a Veeck trait – without giving away the guts of his talent search. Afterward, he'd break down every minute detail of the trade. As a prime example, there was no advance media warning at the 1971 winter meetings Hemond was on the trail of Dick Allen in a deal for Tommy John with the Los Angeles Dodgers. Post-deal, Hemond can tell the fascinating back story, including the admonition from Sox manager Chuck Tanner – who knew Allen – about “what are you waiting for?”

Allen was the signature move of Hemond's career. The enigmatic slugger, probably the best overall big-league player in the early 1970s, helped revive the Sox and put them on the Chicago map after a half-decade of decline. Allen was the consensus MVP in 1972. Appropriately, Hemond won the Major League Executive of the Year Award for '72, having lifted the Sox from 106-loss stumblebums in 1970 to pennant contenders.

Roland worked for 3 different Sox ownerships

Hemond's people skills extended into his ability to get along with three different Chicago ownerships. John Allyn, underrated for his work in saving the Sox for the city, hired him and Tanner. Hemond smoothly transitioned to Veeck. The only drawbacks were a limited budget after Veeck barely got ahold of the team, and being forced to hang out until the middle of the night while the Baseball Barnum held court. Hemond could not sleep in. Following Veeck's lead, he had to be at his desk at old Comiskey Park by 9 a.m.

Hemond was retained by the Jerry Reinsdorf-Eddie Einhorn ownership in 1981. He was key in building back the Sox to the 99-victory “Winning Ugly” season in 1983. When the Sox failed to repeat the next two seasons, the owners got a bad brainstorm,

pushing Hemond aside and appointing Hawk Harrelson as GM. Combined with Harrelson's firing of La Russa, the moves were a franchise-numbing disaster.

But Hemond never bad-mouthed the Sox. Sure enough, decades later he returned as a special assistant under Reinsdorf, after working in his final GM job with the Orioles. The Baltimore experience may have been the only time Hemond came away with a negative view of his employer.

In the last decade, Hemond has been able to look back on the mark he made in the game. The 2006 World Series between the Cardinals and Tigers was stocked with his proteges and long-ago hires. Opposing managers were La Russa with St. Louis and early 1980s Sox coach Jim Leyland with Detroit. Former Sox assistant Dave Dombrowski was Tigers GM, while Hemond's old Triple-A GM Walt Jocketty held down that job with the Cards.

In 2011, Hemond's lifetime achievements netted him the second Buck O'Neil Award.

We're fortunate octogenarian Hemond does not have to perform heavy-duty front-office work anymore. He'll file his opinions about players and managers, for sure. Mostly, his old-school persona and institutional memory are valuable today. Keep on shaking hands and telling stories, Roland, you're priceless.