



Gamboa finishes well in career after 2002 on-field assault cost him KC job

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Thursday, April 6, 2017*

As another baseball season starts, Tom Gamboa can do the unaccustomed – kick back, relax and watch the baseball world led by the Cubs go by.

Any effort spent on personal redemption has been thankfully retired along with a distinguished career. The way Gamboa has wrapped up his summer-game journey, a 15-year-old incident that unfairly brought him notoriety can be put in its proper place, showing that good things eventually happen to good people, even though it doesn't seem that way at the time.

The 69-year-old baseball lifer has finished well in the game. He completed his final pro season in 2016 managing the Class-A Brooklyn Cyclones, then was a key contributor as third-base coach to Team Israel's Cinderella-style success in the recent World Baseball Classic.

Now Gamboa can simply be a spectator, rooting for the man who holds his old Cubs third-base coaching job. A year ago, he told Gary Jones — whom he called a “protégé” from their San Diego Padres days — the Cubs were a comer.

“I said, ‘Jonesy, you’ve got to keep a diary, because the Cubs are going to win it all this year,’” Gamboa recalled.

Now with a World Series title under their belts, Gamboa believes the Cubs will be the class of baseball for the foreseeable future.

“It’s obviously tough to repeat, he said. “Over 162, I don’t think anyone questions the Cubs will be there for the playoffs. If there’s any chink in their armor from a year ago, it might be the bullpen.



Tom Gamboa was doing another of his many jobs in baseball in Kansas City when fate, via father-and-son punches, engulfed him.

“Oh, yeah, I think they’ll win it again. They’re going to be the team to beat. Now that I’m retired, I can certainly be a Cubs fan again. I’m no longer working for the New York Mets.”



Tony Pena (left) and Allard Baird simply did not stick with loyal coach Tom Gamboa, who was bombarded with unwanted publicity the small-market Royals could not handle. Pena photo credit [Keith Allison](#).

Gamboa was third-base coach for the wild-card playoff Cubs in 1998 and then the 95-loss team of 1999 that included a historically-worst 6-24 August after a 32-23 start. All along, Gamboa shook Sammy Sosa’s hand as he trotted home on all 129 of his homers the two seasons.

He still gnashes his teeth at two young pitchers he believed the Cubs simply let get away. He labels a “good point” about the analysis Cubs boss Andy MacPhail over-emphasized pitching while failing to develop home-grown position players. That strategy delayed the 2016 World Series run at least a decade long-

er than it had to go. Prior to his third-base job at Wrigley Field, he was the Cubs’ director of instruction, with a good bead on the talent at hand.

“The one thing you can’t forget two pitchers we (drafted) that turned out to be very productive in their careers that we just (bleepin’) gave away were Jon Garland and Kyle Lohse. They were mistakes,” he said.

“Garland was a No. 1 pick who had a nice career. We traded him to the Sox for Matt Karchner when we needed a setup man for (Rod) Beck. Although he physically fit the role, the difference of pitching for a bottom team with the Sox and coming into the pennant race with 38,000 at Wrigley, he just had a tough time for it. Lohse had a real nice career. Every time we faced Lohse (traded in 1999 for aging closer Rick Aguilera) with Kansas City, I’m thinking this son-of-a-gun should be wearing a Cubs uniform.”

Cubs ‘best job’ among Gamboa’s 11 teams

Despite the singular 1998 up and the inevitable downs of wildly fluctuating seasons and bad trades/development under MacPhail, Gamboa would not have traded his five seasons in the Cubs organization for the world.

“Of the 11 teams I worked for in my 40-year career, that was the best job and the most fun environment in which I ever worked,” he said.

Gamboa cannot say the same about the Kansas City Royals franchise for which he coached from 2001-03. Nothing to do with his fellow field staff and players. His positive wrapup of a stellar coaching and managing career represents the ultimate comeback from being victimized twice – first by a crazed father-and-son duo who attacked him at U.S. Cellular Field, then by small-minded Royals management that was tired of the negative attention Gamboa received.

He truly was the character from an old Hitchcock movie – the wrong man. He had a similar outcome, though, as Hitch gave his characters a chance to redeem themselves and prove their innocence. In Gamboa’s case, there was really nothing to prove. He was



Tom Gamboa as Brooklyn Cyclones manager, his final full-season pro baseball job.

a good man caught in a situation out of his control, both during the attack at the first-base coaching box and the swarms of media covering the aftermath over a year’s period.

Gamboa was wronged by the Royals. Fortunately, there were fellow good baseball lifers, led by Roland Hemond, who allowed him to get back on his (coaching) feet in due course. Two sets of justice had to be meted out – to the off-kilter assault mastermind William Ligue, then to Gamboa to get him back to where he belonged as a beloved, admired teacher of the game.

Allard Baird and Tony Pena may have been good baseball men. But the Royals’ general manager and manager, respectively, turned out to be spineless when it came to backing Gamboa after he was hit from a bolt out of the blue, and everyone wanted to know everything about their veteran coach. He was demoted from first-base coach to bullpen coach after

the 2002 season. A year later, Gamboa was the only one of Pena’s coaches not retained after a surprise contending season at Kauffman Stadium.

Given the course of events and a continuing physical disability as a result of the Ligue attack, Gamboa never lost faith he’d have continued in a baseball career for another 13 years after the Royals let him go.

“I had hoped that I would,” he said. “I never consider baseball work. I’ve just always loved what I did and to me, I was doing my job at the right place at the wrong time when the two guys came out of the stands and jumped me.

“Unfortunately, I lost part of the hearing in my right ear. But people have been through a lot worse things than I did. I was naive enough to think this whole thing was going to go away the next day. Obviously, it didn’t.”

William Ligue a troubled man going to game

South suburban Alsip resident William Ligue, Jr. took several family members, including 15-year-old son William III, to the White Sox-Royals game on Sept. 19, 2002. The outing was branded as a way to get away from a host of troubles the elder Ligue had experienced that year.

During the game, the bare-shirted, tattooed, wild-haired senior Ligue led his similarly shirtless son on the attack. They charged Gamboa, knocked him to the ground and began pummeling him. The Ligues struck so quickly, so shockingly that nearby umpires and players did not instantaneously come to Gamboa’s aid. When both security and al-

most the entire Royals bench converged on the attackers, the damage to Gamboa had been done. A knife also was found near the melee.

Ending up at the bottom of the pile, Gamboa was fortunate he was not more severely injured. His face “was swollen like a balloon.” But he was able to return to work the next day, even with the after-effects on his hearing.

“I have permanent tinnitus,” he said. “I’ve lost a portion of my hearing, but thank God it hasn’t gotten worse. It’s not like I need a hearing aid or something.”

William Ligue got off easy for his crazed action. He was sentenced to probation. But both he and his son were damaged characters. In 2006, the elder Ligue was sentenced to nearly five years in prison for violating that probation. In 2004, he was arrested for burglary after stealing a radio from a car.

Meanwhile, William Ligue III was warped by obviously bad parenting. He posted a photo of the Gamboa attack on his MySpace page in 2009. A year later, he was sent to prison on a drug charge, serving time until April 2011.

The Ligues did not pay the proportionate price endured by innocent victim Gamboa.

‘Unfortunate attention’ for something not his fault

“The toughest thing for me, personally, was the unfortunate attention for something that I didn’t do,” he said. “That was the unfortunate repercussion. In my era growing up, there was no ESPN and Fox Sports. I was naive enough to think that the next day when we got back to Kansas City that life would be normal again.

“I can still remember seeing our media guy coming on the field during batting practice in Kansas City as we were getting done. I could tell he was coming up to me, and I had no idea what for. He said, ‘Hey, we had to set up a separate room for me.’ I was like, ‘A room for what?’ He said, ‘Are you kidding? We have media people here from all over the country. You have to come with me now and address them.’”

Gamboa the well-liked baseball man was now a national celebrity, and he was going to have more than the 15 minutes of fame endemic in the 21st century.

“I knew all our beat writers from Kansas City, but I literally walked into a room where there had to be a hundred people in there,” he said. “As I walked from the back to the front, I saw people that I recognized from (watching) TV. You could feel the tension in the room.

“When I got to the podium, with my sense of humor, I just said, ‘Well, I guess I’m the new Kato Kaelin on the block.’ That’s just what happened. Everybody laughed, and so



Tom Gamboa in a familiar, age-old stance, chatting up fellow uniformed folks on Team Israel at the World Baseball Classic.

the tension immediately went away. It was as though they were afraid to ask what they wanted to ask because they didn't know how it was going to be taken by me.

“When I made a joke out of it...that's my sense of humor. I've always told my teams when we've gone through adversity and lost seven, or eight, or nine in a row – I've had people say, ‘How do you stay so positive?’”

Gamboa had a hard time maintaining that attitude the rest of his Royals tenure. Amid a string of 100-loss seasons interrupted only by an 83-win outlier in 2003, the ineptly-run, budget-starved small-market Royals labored in virtual obscurity. Now any update in the Ligue-Gamboa case brought media swarms to either Kansas City or road stops.

Gamboa paid for the unwanted attention with his job. If there was a kind of “cheater's justice,” the Gamboa-less Royals dropped 104 games in 2004. Pena lost his job the next year, and Baird the following season. The franchise did not get straightened out until the 2010s that included the fruits of a productive farm system built by Baird successor Dayton Moore.

Hemond steps up for idled coach

Used to managing or coaching at some high level, Gamboa twiddled around much of 2004 until ageless baseball man Hemond, a longtime supporter of the Chicago Baseball Museum, tipped him off to a job in the Mexican League the latter had so expertly scouted over the decades.

“I actually thank Roland Hemond,” he said. “I had just moved to Palm Springs, and I was financially in good position. I used ‘04 mentally to just focus on my new house and the country club I had joined and played a lot of golf.

“I didn't drink or become a hermit. I just thought, gosh, how ironic. I've dedicated my whole life to baseball and through no fault of my own, I became such a distraction I wasn't offered a job anywhere. Roland Hemond called me in July of 2004 and said, ‘Hey, Tom, I want you to know that the people at Hermosillo, Mexico are going to be contacting you about managing winter ball.’”

The rest was history. Soon Gamboa got back into the pro ball in the Padres and Angels organization. He briefly retired, then was lured back by the Mets to manage their New York-Penn League affiliate in Brooklyn. That job in turn led to his third-base coaching position for Team Israel manager Jerry Weinstein, an old friend, and his baseball valedictory.

In the ultimate game of failure, of unfair firings and politics that makes Chicago City Hall seem like Amateur Hour, merit won out for Gamboa.