

Hard-nosed Ron Santo: Modern Gashouser

(Former Cubs great Ron Santo will be inducted into the Hall of Fame on July 22 in Cooperstown, N.Y. In tribute to the late third baseman, the Chicago Baseball Museum will publish historical accounts of his career in the weeks ahead. This story appeared in The Sporting News in its Sept. 6, 1969 issue.)

By Edgar Munzel

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In any analysis of the rise of the Chicago Cubs to championship caliber, Manager Leo Durocher must be given the biggest share of the credit. His dynamic leadership instilled the drive and confidence in the Cubs that made them a winner.

But Leo's work is done behind the scenes – in the clubhouse and in the dugout. Once the Cubs take the field, the inspiration comes more directly from other sources, such as Ron Santo, Glenn Beckert and Randy Hundley. Of the three, the most vigorous is captain Santo.

And Durocher couldn't be more fortunate, because this is a young man in his own image. In fact, Santo is the perfect projection of the Durocher personality – an aggressive, hard-driving holler guy.

Santo is a throwback to an earlier era when players were rough and tough and asked no quarter. He'd fit in beautifully with the Gashouse Gang, even down to his uniform that gets muddy and dirty almost as soon as the game gets underway.

And Durocher knows all about that. He was a member of that rolling, hell-for-leather St. Louis outfit 35 years ago. Santo is his kind of ball player and Leo the Lion comes on stronger than ever when he talks about Ron.

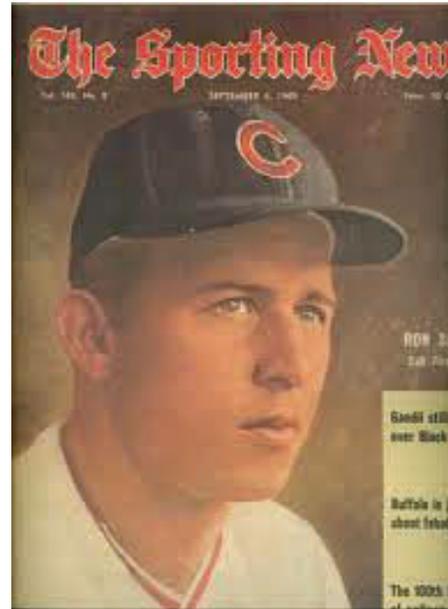
Leo is too cagey to make a choice among his stars for the Most Valuable Player award. But he doesn't shrink from rating Santo among the all-time third basemen.

“Santo is just the best all-around third basemen I've ever seen,” said Durocher. And that takes in a lot of territory, because Leo broke in with the Yankees back in 1928.

“When I say all-around third baseman, I mean doing everything. He's like a cat in the field, he has a great arm, he can hit, he packs a lot of power and he drives in those runs.

Cox Best With Glove

“If I were just picking somebody who could snatch the ball, I'd probably take Billy Cox, the fellow I had at Brooklyn. Still, Santo is just a hair behind him in the field and, of course, Billy didn't have Ron's bat.



The Sporting News featured Ron Santo on its Sept. 6, 1969 cover.

“Would I take Ron over Pie Traynor as the all-time third baseman? Right now, Pie belongs on it because he played longer than Santo has. But, yes, if I had a choice on my ball club, I'd take Ron, although it's probably a hairline decision.

“They're about the same fielding the ball, both have great hands. Santo has a stronger arm than Pie had and has a lot more power than Traynor had. But Pie hit for a better average and was a little faster afoot.

“Ron is more the Brooks Robinson type. Neither of them runs well, but they have lightning reflexes that make them brilliant third basemen.

“Incidentally, I hear a lot about the magician Robby is supposed to be around third base. But I've seen him play and I believe Ron is every bit as good defensively. Offensively, there can't be any argument.

“Ron hits more homers, he drives in more runs and he hits for a better average. What other measurement is there?

“And if Ron were just a step faster, he'd hit about 20 points more each year, because he frequently gets thrown out at first base on those eyelash bang-bang plays.

“There are three other things that are important about Santo. First of all, he's consistent. Secondly, he's a rugged guy who plays every day. Thirdly, he's a team man.

Consistent – Just Like Camilli

“Insofar, as consistency is concerned, Santo reminds me a lot of Dolph Camilli, the first sacker I had with the Dodgers. When Dolph came to spring camp, you knew exactly what he would do during the season – he hit around .260, collect about 25 homers and drive in around 100 runs.

“Santo is the same way, except his figures will show a batting average around .300, 30 homers and 100 RBIs. That's the way he delivers year after year. He's solid. And what a blessing that is for a ball club.”

Santo, as a matter of fact, has exactly those figures as his goal every season. And if consistency is a jewel, then Ron should have more gems than Tiffany's.

For the last six years, Santo's homer totals have been 25-30-33-30-31-26. His RBI totals have been 99-114-101-94-98-98 and his batting averages have been .297, .313, .285, .312, .300 and .246.

And he'll be right there and, perhaps, even better this season. With 40 games still to go, Ron was averaging .299 with 25 homers and 99 RBIs.

Insofar as durability is concerned, Santo probably ranks second in the league only to Billy Williams, who holds the National League record for consecutive games played. The muscular third sacker has missed only one game this season and a total of only ten for the last eight years.

Seven of those games he missed in 1966 when he suffered a fractured cheek-bone that probably would have kept anybody else out of the lineup a month.

Santo's cheekbone was broken when he was hit in the face by one of Jack Fisher's fast balls. It happened on a Sunday. The next day, he was operated on. He left the hospital

on Friday, worked out Saturday and Sunday and the following Monday was back in the lineup.

His only protection was a flap on the safety helmet covering the fracture area. When Ron was knocked out of the lineup, he had hit in 26 consecutive games, just one short of Hack Wilson's club record.

The Monday Santo returned, the Cubs were playing a double-header with the Pirates. Vern Law was the pitcher in the opener and the first time up Santo singled, which is testimony enough to his moxie. And he followed that with a homer and double.

Now he had tied the record, but he stayed in for the second game. Don Cardwell was the pitcher this time and he retired Ron the first three times up.

Darkness was closing in and it was obvious the umpires were going to call the game at the end of the seventh. Santo came up once more and he singled to set a club record of 28 straight games. In fact, he did more than that. His hit drove in the winning run.

Rugged, indeed. But emotional, too. He was even happier about Ken Holtzman's no-hitter than Ken himself, being close to tears when the young lefty achieved a goal that had escaped him twice before.

And he won't let the Bleachers Bums down. He does his Nijinsky routine after every home victory, leaping in the air and clicking his heels together, because he did it once and they were ecstatic about it.

But he's all hard-nosed seriousness on the field. Nobody works any harder. The fact that he has won a Gold Glove six straight times for being named third baseman of The Sporting News N.L. All-Star fielding teams and holds all kinds of fielding records is the result of constant practice.

"I owe Grady Hatton the most for making me a good-fielding third baseman," said Santo. "After I had been signed out of Franklin High in Seattle, my first club in professional baseball was San Antonio, managed by Hatton.

"Grady was a third baseman himself and he immediately took me in hand. I fielded the ball pretty well, but my throwing was awful. I was having a terrible time the first month. I believe I was hitting only .150 and already had 15 errors.

"The writers were saying I was too young and inexperienced and ought to be sent down to a lower minor league club.

"It was close to cutdown time and I went to Grady and hold him I was sure I could play for San Antonio, now that that I was getting over my nervousness. Well, he said he'd keep me. And he didn't regret it, because I hit four homers that first week and finished the season batting .327 and driving in 87 runs."

Ron knows only one way to play the game. And that's to give it everything he has.

He's naturally aggressive, but he learned about drive and hustle when he still was a youngster in Seattle. And the one he credits most for instilling him with the right attitude is the late Fred Hutchinson.

"Hutch was the manager at Seattle when I was ballboy there in 1955," recounted Santo.

“Just having ability isn't enough,' Hutch told me. 'You have to have the desire to go along with it.'

“It left quite an impression on me,” said Santo. “And I've played that way all my life.”