

Senor Al was brains behind pitch-rich White Sox

By Maxwell Kates

He was equally adept at coordinating pitchers and throwing out base-runners as he was as leader and strategist in the dugout. However, Alfonso Ramon Lopez chose to credit his accomplishments to those around him. Much like his mentor Casey Stengel, Lopez knew that he could not have won the American League pennants in 1954 or 1959 without his players. Although disappointed that he never played for or managed a world champion, he received countless honors from his peers on the diamond, his community, the Baseball Hall of Fame, and fans spanning four generations.

Lopez was the son of Spanish immigrants. His father, Modesto, was attracted to employment offers in the cigar trade in Cuba. After persuading his bride to abandon their Castilian roots, they spent “eight or nine years” in Cuba; they migrated yet again to the United States in 1906, settling in the Ybor City section of Tampa, Florida. The Lopez family settled in a modest four-bedroom house that lacked running water. It was here that their seventh of nine children, Alfonso, was born on August 20, 1908. At the time, Ybor City was hardly the popular nightclub district that it is today. Lopez encapsulated his neighborhood’s living conditions with the following anecdote told to Tom McEwen:

“Tough place, Ybor City was, once. I went to work one day and had to step around a couple of guys who had been murdered in the streets.” Among Lopez’s earliest memories was the stench of his father’s cigar-stained clothing upon returning from the factory where he worked as a tobacco selector. Alfonso vowed to work diligently to avoid having to follow in his father’s footsteps.

In the days before the ubiquity of the automobile, Lopez remembered no traffic in the unpaved streets of Ybor City. The beach was a source of leisure for him and his friends for crabbing, fishing, and swimming. It was an older brother who introduced him to a second childhood pastime, baseball. Throughout his youth, Lopez played the game with friends on weekends at local sandlots. Dominoes and gin rummy were two additional lifelong hobbies. A Catholic, Lopez attended the Jesuit High School of Tampa, but dropped out after his freshman year to support his family.

Lopez accepted a job working for La Joven Francesca Bakery. Nearly nine decades later, he still remembered delivering bread by horse and buggy for the factory workers: “We would hang it in a paper bag, on a nail, by their front door!”

Of course, Lopez's introduction to professional baseball was nothing short of unorthodox. In 1925, still five years short of the age of majority, he was hired by the Washington Senators to catch batting practice in spring training.

"For some reason," he told Bill Madden, "they didn't want to use their regular catchers, Muddy Ruel and Pinky Hargrave, and I was playing sandlot ball when they called and offered me \$45 a week. Heck, I'd have done it for nothing, but that was my start in professional baseball." The young catcher impressed a veteran right-hander fresh from recording six shutouts among 23 victories for the defending World Series champions. After practice had concluded, Walter Johnson congratulated Lopez, offering, "Nice game, kid. You're going to be a great catcher someday." Lopez never forgot the experience of catching the Big Train: "Johnson threw hard, maybe the hardest of all, but he was easy to catch because he was always around the plate."

Lopez took his experience catching the Washington Senators to a tryout with the Tampa Smokers of the Class D Florida State League. He made the team, adding an extra \$150 every month toward his family's budget throughout the 1925 season. After another season with Tampa, Lopez was promoted to Jacksonville in the Class B Southeastern League, and on August 26, 1927, his contract was purchased by the Brooklyn Robins for \$10,000. He spent most of the 1928 season playing for Macon, where he earned a spot on the South Atlantic Association All-Star team. Brooklyn manager Wilbert Robinson was sufficiently impressed with reports on his catching prospect to recall him to "the Show" in September. Lopez made his debut at Ebbets Field against the Pittsburgh Pirates in the first game of a doubleheader on September 27, 1928.

The first pitcher Lopez faced in the majors was the legendary spitball artist Burleigh Grimes. Although the pull-hitting rookie made contact with Grimes, none of the balls he hit evaded the glovework of third baseman Pie Traynor or shortstop Glen Wright. The Robins beat the Pirates 7-6 in an extra-inning victory for Jesse Petty. Although Lopez failed to hit safely in a dozen official at-bats during his National League initiation, he remembered the experience as "my greatest thrill as a player."

After another year of seasoning, with Atlanta in the Southern Association, Lopez returned to Brooklyn in 1930. He established an offensive personal best for himself as a rookie, batting .309 and driving in 57 runs; meanwhile, his fielding average was .983 in 126 games behind the plate. Compared with other catchers around the league, Lopez was considered small, standing 5 feet 11 and weighing a mere 180 pounds. As Arthur Daley chronicled in the *New York Times*, "what he lacked in bulk, he compensated for in agility, speed, intelligence, and class." As a rookie, Lopez was responsible for a change in the rulebook. A fly ball he hit out of Bob

Meusel's reach bounced over the Cincinnati outfielder's head and into the stands and was ruled a home run. After the season, this type of play was reclassified as a ground-rule double.

After five consecutive sixth-place finishes, the Robins leapt to challenge the St. Louis Cardinals and the New York Giants for the National League pennant in 1930. Although the Robins fell to fourth place by September, they won 86 games and set a franchise attendance record by drawing over a million for the first time. As one of the catalysts in the Robins' turnaround, Lopez was offered a raise, no questions asked. The man Daley called "Happy Hidalgo" enhanced his reputation as a dependable catcher, fielding .977 in 1931 and .976 a year later for the rechristened Brooklyn Dodgers.

As a young player, Lopez carried a reputation of an umpire baiter. On one instance, he found himself ejected from a game at Baker Bowl in Philadelphia. En route to the visitors' clubhouse in center field, Lopez paused at the pitcher's mound to drop his glove, mask, and chest protector. Infuriated, the umpire ordered him to leave the field. Lopez ignored him, continuing his mock burlesque act by removing one shinguard, then another, and tossing them gingerly beside him. At that point, he collected his belongings and moved toward center field slower than a Studebaker with a flat tire.

In 1933, Lopez tested the patience of another authority figure, Dodgers general manager Robert Quinn. When training camp opened, Lopez was nowhere to be found – he was holding out for a better contract. Manager Max Carey called him, urging him to reconsider, as his job was threatened by "a young catcher who looks pretty good." That "young catcher" was actually a year older than Lopez, but the two backstops would emerge as lifelong friends. Ray Berres later served as Lopez's pitching coach for more than a decade with the Chicago White Sox. Meanwhile, in 1932, the Dodgers acquired another of Lopez's future coaches, shortstop Tony Cuccinello.

On the heels of batting .301, Lopez was chosen to represent the Dodgers at the 1934 All-Star Game at the Polo Grounds. Among the thousands of spectators who "happened to be at that game" was Evelyn Kearney. Known to all as Connie, the Broadway chorus girl met Lopez after the game. Five years later, on October 7, 1939, they were wed. They welcomed a son, Al Jr., in 1942. Over the years, the Lopez family expanded to include three grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

The 1934 season also introduced Lopez to new Brooklyn manager Casey Stengel. Despite his later successes with the Yankees, Stengel led the Dodgers to pedestrian records of 71-81 in 1934 and 70-83 in 1935. Rumors began to circulate that several

star players would soon be traded. Stengel attempted to ease any apprehension Lopez might have by assuring him that “it’s going to be to a good club.” Instead, on December 12, Lopez and Cuccinello were traded to the Boston Braves. Lopez was understandably offended at Stengel’s false reassurance. In 1935, the Braves had won 38 and lost 115, establishing themselves as the worst team in baseball. As Lopez recalled, “Then [in 1938], he comes over to Boston to manage and trades me to Pittsburgh.”

Lopez played for the Pirates through the 1946 season, when he was traded to Cleveland for outfielder Gene Woodling on December 7. He was well-respected enough in the latter stages of his career that even superstars from opposing teams asked him for advice. In March 1939, when legendary Yankee Lou Gehrig suddenly stopped hitting with authority, he turned to Lopez for advice on his swing.

“So I told him, ‘The only thing I can think is that you’re not slapping the ball, you’re pushing at it.’” At the time, Gehrig’s diagnosis of ALS was undetected.

Lopez’s arrival in Cleveland coincided with the inception of the Indians’ golden age. Bill Veeck was the owner, Lou Boudreau the manager, Bob Feller and Bob Lemon anchored the rotation, and on July 5, 1947, the trailblazing Indians integrated the American League with the emergence of Larry Doby. Lopez caught for one season for the Indians as Jim Hegan’s backup and then retired. Nineteen seasons in the major leagues yielded 1,547 hits, 206 doubles, 43 triples, 51 home runs, 652 runs batted in, and a lifetime average of .261. Catching 1,918 games, a major-league record until 1987, he produced a sterling .985 fielding percentage. In 1941, he caught 114 games with the Pirates without as much as a passed ball. Lopez knew his career as a catcher would not last forever; while playing in Boston, he invested in Texas land options prior to a real-estate boom. Lopez enjoyed the financial freedom to concentrate on his career ambition, managing in the major leagues.

“I always wanted to manage when my playing career was finished, but if that was part of Veeck’s plan when he got me, he never told me about it.” Not offered a position with the Indians, Lopez was assigned in 1948 to manage the Indianapolis Indians of the American Association. The baby Indians flourished under Lopez’s tutelage, winning 12 of their first 15. Led by Les Fleming’s .323 batting average and Bob Malloy’s record of 21-7, the team finished 100-54. Lopez even caught in 42 games. They finished ahead of the Milwaukee Brewers by 11 games to garner the American Association pennant. Was this a sign of big-league accomplishments for Lopez?

After two more years at Indianapolis, Lopez was hired on November 10, 1950, to manage the Cleveland Indians. One of the keys to his success in Cleveland was his rapport with chief operating officer Hank Greenberg.

“We worked well together. Hank picked up some good players, guys who were especially important to us in 1954 when we had a lot of injuries. The club in those days didn’t spend a lot of money ... but Hank was able to do some things that didn’t cost a lot because we did so well.”

The Indians were consistent if not spectacular under Lopez, winning 91 games in 1951, 93 in 1952, and 92 in 1953. Yet it was not enough to unseat the New York Yankees from the apex of the American League. Managed by Lopez’s nemesis Casey Stengel, the Bronx Bombers were completing their sweep of five successive World Series titles. Without the financial wealth or the farm system resources of the Yankees, the Indians left their fans frustrated. Lopez retained a personal respect for Stengel, describing him as “a great guy and a fine manager [who] loved to teach.” He added, “I learned a lot from Stengel – but apparently not enough.”

Fate was kinder to the Cleveland Indians in 1954. Although the Yankees won 103 games, their highest total under Stengel, they were relegated to listening to the World Series on the radio. The Indians, meanwhile, played evenly against the Yankees and the White Sox while posting a torrid 89-21 record against the other five clubs. Posting an overall record of 111-43, the Tribe vaulted to the American League pennant. As Lopez later told sportswriter Russell Schneider, the Indians “had a lot of leaders, which is one of the reasons we did so well. I’ve got to say that (Al) Rosen was the number one guy. I had great respect for the way he played the game and the way he demanded that others play the game.”

The Indians were leaders on the mound. Bob Lemon and Early Wynn earned league titles with 23 wins apiece, while the club got 19 victories from Mike Garcia, 15 from Art Houtteman, and 13 from Bob Feller. Lopez described his pitching staff as “the greatest ever assembled.”

The Indians were leaders at the plate as well. Second baseman Bobby Avila captured a batting crown hitting .341, while Larry Doby led the American League with 32 home runs and 126 runs batted in. The Indians were tops in the American League with 156 dingers.

Lopez credited the Indians’ bench and bullpen as integral components in the team’s success. Without contributions from midseason acquisitions Sam Dente, Hank Majeski, Vic Wertz, and Wally Westlake, he maintained, the Tribe “probably could not have won.” Credit should also be given for converting pitchers Don Mossi and Ray Narleski into relievers – “a big factor in beating the Yankees.”

Although the Indians never lost more than two consecutive games during the regular season, they fell into a slump against the New York Giants during the World Series. In the eighth inning of Game One, Vic Wertz hit a line drive that traveled 460 feet deep into the Polo Grounds outfield before landing in Willie Mays' glove. After Dusty Rhodes delivered a pinch home run for a 10th-inning Giants' victory, momentum remained on their side. The Giants swept the Indians in four straight. Lopez insisted that the Indians would have fared better had they opened the series at Municipal Stadium, where Wertz's line drive would have been a home run.

Losing the 1954 World Series did not prevent the City of Tampa from dedicating its new spring training facility in Lopez's honor. For better than three decades, Al Lopez Field was the winter home of the Cincinnati Reds. It did not take long for Lopez to make history in "his" stadium. On the very first play of the 1955 spring opener, he argued the call with umpire John Stevens. The arbiter warned the manager that "one more word and you're gone." Lopez protested: "You can't throw me out of this ballpark. This is my ballpark – Al Lopez Field." Stevens said, "Get out of here." Years later, Lopez reflected with perplexity that anyone would throw him "out of [his] own ballpark." Lopez also had the distinction of outliving the use of his stadium, which was razed in 1989.

After two more second-place finishes in Cleveland, Lopez resigned as the Indians manager in 1956. Chronic stomach ailments brought forth by years of anxiety suggested it was time for a change in scenery. He took his managerial acumen to Chicago, where he replaced Marty Marion as the manager of the White Sox. Though he assumed control of a talented roster, the White Sox were notorious for their "June swoon" and as "hitless wonders." Marion advised Lopez that "he better bring his pitchers with him."

Playing in spacious Comiskey Park, the White Sox under Lopez's stewardship focused their game around pitching, speed, and defense. Importing his philosophy from another cavernous ballpark, Cleveland, Lopez stressed the stolen base, the hit-and-run, and run manufacturing to get ahead of the opposition. A player and coach for Lopez in Indianapolis, Don Gutteridge was the Señor's second in command for better than a decade in Chicago. Gutteridge remembered: "As an organization, the White Sox were trying everything they could to win." He also recalled Lopez advising his players, "If you don't let them score that run and you score that run – you win." Lopez inherited an outfield of Minnie Minoso, Larry Doby, and Jim Rivera. His middle infielders, Nellie Fox and Luis Aparicio, were both defensive stalwarts destined for Cooperstown. Doby was not the only Cleveland personality with whom Lopez reunited in Chicago. In December of

1957, the Sox made a trade with the Indians for Early Wynn, while Bill Veeck and Hank Greenberg joined the club as executives in 1959.

The White Sox opened the 1957 season by winning 11 of their first 13 games. On June 8, they enjoyed a six-game lead in the junior circuit, their largest advantage since Buck Weaver was permitted to play third base. But when the dust cleared on 1957, Lopez found his White Sox in a familiar position: in second place behind the Yankees. However, true to his word, Lopez relied upon pitching, speed, and defense to win 90 games. The Sox led the American League with 109 stolen bases. On the mound, Billy Pierce (20-12, 3.26) and Dick Donovan (16-6, 2.77) led the rotation, which was coordinated by veteran receiver Sherm Lollar. Observed Don Gutteridge from his view in the dugout: "Of course, Al Lopez was excellent with pitchers, too. He was a great catcher for so many years that he really knew what was going on with his pitchers. Between Lopez and Berres, they really knew pitching and always got the most out of our staff."

The city and the uniform had changed for Lopez, but his club still finished second to the New York Yankees. The 1958 season marked the seventh year out of eight that a Lopez club played bridesmaid to the Bronx Bombers. Although the White Sox won 90 games in 1957 and 82 in 1958, it was not enough to stop Casey Stengel's juggernaut from adding to their surplus of American League titles. Lopez's critics, particularly those in the New York media, accused him of being anti-Yankee. Defending himself, he argued, "I'm anti any club that wins all the time."

Jim Rivera has fond memories of playing for Al Lopez. The outfielder described his manager as "very fair," adding, "If you did something good, he would compliment you. If you struck out or made an error, he wouldn't say a word as long as you hustled and worked hard." However, broadcaster Milo Hamilton insisted that Lopez was a disciplinarian as the situation warranted. If a player made a mental mistake, he reprimanded the poor soul behind closed doors rather than before his teammates or the media. Hamilton also remembered Lopez for his sense of fashion. Always dressed in a suit and tie when not in uniform, the manager "had a presence you couldn't forget." Hamilton added that when Lopez traveled, "he just looked the part of somebody *important*."

And important he was. In 1959, Al Lopez accomplished something no White Sox manager had in done four decades. He led his club to an American League pennant. Despite hitting only 97 home runs, fewest of any team, the "Go-Go Sox" led the American League with 113 stolen bases, 46 triples, and a 3.29 earned run average. Early Wynn won 22 games and the Cy Young Award, while Nellie Fox batted .306 as the league's Most Valuable Player. Fastest on the basepaths was Aparicio, who led the league with 56 steals. The Sox won 35 of 50 one-run

decisions, winning their first season series over the Yankees since 1925 by posting a 13-9 record against New York.

White Sox fans knew that 1959 would be an unusual season on April 22, when they scored 11 runs in one inning on 10 walks, a hit batsman, three errors, and only one hit. The White Sox battled the Indians for control of first place for weeks until, in July, Chicago raced ahead by winning 11 games of a 12-game homestand. Although Cleveland recovered to within a game in the standings by late August, the White Sox reaffirmed their dominance over the Indians with a four-game sweep at Cleveland's Municipal Stadium. When the White Sox clinched the pennant on September 22, Mayor Richard J. Daley activated air raid sirens throughout Chicago. A White Sox fan, Hizzoner had no idea of the extent of the terror he instilled in his citizenry. As Harold Rosenthal reported, "everyone wanted to know how far up Michigan Avenue the Russians had advanced."

Contrary to the 1954 World Series, the White Sox opened the 1959 fall classic with an 11-0 victory at home. Early Wynn threw seven scoreless innings against the Los Angeles Dodgers as Ted Kluszewski drove in five runs on two homers and a single. Although they led 2-1 in the sixth inning of Game Two, the Sox lost the game and ultimately the Series, four games to two.

Although the White Sox remained competitive in the early 1960s, they did not return to the World Series under Lopez's tutelage. Managing pennant races for 15 consecutive summers took their toll on his well-being. Managing was no longer fun for a man in his 50s who spent many late nights pacing the clubhouse floor due to an insomniac condition. Not even Lopez's gin rummy marathons with broadcaster Bob Elson were enough to lift his spirits. As was reported in *Time*, the insecurity of having never won a World Series "kept him melancholy." Few were aware of his stomach condition, let alone its severity, which prevented him from digesting fruit or vegetables and forced him to drink milk – a beverage he detested. After leading the White Sox to a 95-67 record in 1965, good for another second-place finish, Lopez was forced by his illness to step down as manager in favor of Eddie Stanky.

While the White Sox prospered initially under Stanky, they floundered in 1968. Mired in eighth place on July 11, the Sox fired Stanky; as Lopez was healthy enough to return to work, he was hired to his second tour of duty with the team. Although the Pale Hose won 21 and lost 26 under Lopez, it was not enough to salvage the season. The 1968 Chicago White Sox went 67-95, finishing 36 games behind Detroit tied for eighth place.

The White Sox began the 1969 season with promise as Carlos May belted two home runs in a 5-2 victory in the home opener against the expansion Kansas City

Royals. However, the early season heroics were a false hope. A respectable record of 8-9 through May 2 was not enough to prevent Lopez's insomnia from returning. As he told Hal Bodley decades later, "That's when I knew it was time to get out." Announcing his retirement to coaches Berres, Gutteridge, Kerby Farrell, and Johnny Cooney, Lopez wanted "one of you four to take over from me." Gutteridge reluctantly accepted. Dressed in one of his trademark suits, Lopez returned to Comiskey Park in 1970 to watch an Opening Day loss to Minnesota before departing the Chicago sports scene for good.

Lopez returned to Tampa, where he enjoyed his retirement. He played cards regularly with lifelong friends, watched *The Price is Right* religiously, and golfed his age well into his 70s. In 1977, he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. His baseball interest peaked during the 1990 World Series between clubs managed by Tony La Russa and Lou Piniella, both Tampa natives.

Even in his 90s, Lopez showed few signs of slowing down. He was one of four Hall of Famers invited to throw the ceremonial first pitch to welcome the Tampa Bay Devil Rays into the American League on March 31, 1998. At his 95th birthday party, a gala event at Tampa's Columbia Restaurant, Lopez was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of South Florida. Then on October 26, 2005, he "stayed up past his bedtime" to watch the Chicago White Sox finally win the World Series.

"They have a darn good ballclub," he told sportswriter Hal Bodley. "I was so happy to see it. Chicago's a real fine city, and that manager [Ozzie Guillen] is doing a great job."

Four days after watching the White Sox sweep the Houston Astros for the 2005 World Championship, Al Lopez was gone. Hospitalized after suffering a massive heart attack, Lopez died on October 30, at the age of 97. He was buried beside his wife, Connie, who had died in 1983. As Tom McEwen wrote in his obituary of El Señor, his heart "would have to be massive" because "he had given so much of his heart away."

Lopez may have been a humble man in life, but after his death he continued to receive honors and accolades. In 2006, he was enshrined in the Cleveland Indians Hall of Fame. The Devil Rays now offer the Al Lopez Award to the organization's top rookie in spring training. Meanwhile, the Rays invited his son, grandson, and great-grandson to throw the ceremonial first pitch in 2006 – each of them named Alfonso Ramon Lopez.

As a catcher and as a manager, Al Lopez was undoubtedly a baseball legend. He earned the respect and acclaim of teammates and adversaries alike, and became an inspiration to thousands of athletes and spectators in Tampa. Lopez returned to his

hometown each winter, watching his community expand over the course of the 20th century. Though modest about his accomplishments, he left an indelible mark in the minds of fans from Ybor City to Brooklyn, from Cleveland to Chicago, and all points in between.