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Baseball's Other Expansion Team of 1962

Fifty Years of Frustration in the National League Ends for Houston

RON BRILEY

While the attention of the baseball world was drawn to the San Francisco Giants' 2012 World Series triumph and speculation about what roster changes the New York Yankees would make following their disappointing performance in the American League Championship Series, another baseball milestone received scant attention. After fifty years of futility in the National League, the Houston Astros switched their affiliation to the American League (AL) West. Ostensibly, the Houston club will now be able to foster a natural rivalry with the AL West Texas Rangers, increasing interest for the sport in the Lone Star State. During its fifty-year tenure in the National League, the Houston franchise won six division titles and made two playoff appearances as a wild card entry. In 2005, Houston won its only National League pennant and played the Chicago White Sox in the World Series. The White Sox swept the Series in four games, still leaving the Houston ball club without a World Series victory. Since that World Series appearance, the club has suffered a steady decline. The Houston Astros achieved the dubious distinction of having the worst record in Major League Baseball their last two National League seasons, losing 106 games in 2011 and 107 contests in 2012.

But baseball in Houston seemed much more promising in 1962. Responding to Congressional antimonopoly concerns and efforts by Branch Rickey and others to form a third major league, Major League Baseball placed expansion National League franchises in Houston and New York City. The two new franchises, however, failed to receive equal attention from the nation's media. Houston, fielding a competent expansion entry, was overlooked by sports-writers and fans in favor of a New York Mets team which established modern records for futility.

Of course, there were reasons for the national attention to focus on the New York Mets. They resided in the nation's media center and were able to attract chroniclers such as Jimmy Breslin. The Mets were also represented by

General Manager George Weiss and Manager Casey Stengel, who recalled the glory days of the New York Yankees in the 1950s. Having to compete with the popular Yankees for the New York market, Weiss decided that the Mets would draft well-established veterans to fill the expansion roster. Players such as Gil Hodges, Don Zimmer, Gus Bell, Charlie Neal, and Richie Ashburn adorned the roster, providing the Mets with older hands who were household names to baseball fans in New York and throughout the country. While the team was old and short on pitching, Stengel remained quotable, and the nation became infatuated with such loveable losers as former Yankee "Marvelous" Marv Throneberry. Indeed, the Mets proved to be so bad that they did restore some of the interest in baseball which many in the game feared was being lost to professional football.

Meanwhile, ignored in the national hoopla over Stengel and the Mets, a solid first-year expansion franchise was taking shape in Houston. Appealing to the frontier images still associated with Texas and its largest city, the initial name for the Houston team was the Colt .45s, often shortened to Colts, a symbol of the gun which was considered to have played a leading role in the winning of the West. In 1961, the Houston electorate approved \$22 million in general obligation bonds for the Harris County domed stadium. However, the Astrodome, as the stadium was eventually called, was not ready for the inaugural 1962 campaign. The Colt .45s would have to compete against the Mets without the publicity of the world's first indoor baseball park. Instead, the Colt .45s played in a temporary structure, Colt Stadium, which had a seating capacity of thirty-two thousand and was located on the same lot as the projected domed stadium.

Unlike the Mets who emphasized name players in the draft, Houston selected younger athletes, many of them out of the talented Los Angeles Dodger system. Among the players assembled by Houston were Dodger products Norm Larker, Bob Lillis, and Bob Aspromonte; Boston Red Sox short-stop Don Buddin; and outfielder Al Spangler from the Milwaukee Braves. For pitching help the Colts selected such players as veteran Dick Farrell from the Dodgers, Bob Bruce from the Tigers, and knuckleballer Ken Johnson of the Cincinnati Reds. To guide this group of young players, Houston management pegged former Baltimore Orioles manager Paul Richards as general manager, and former journeyman outfielder, and skipper of the Kansas City Athletics, Harry Craft as manager.

Craft tried to lower expectations for the young club, but the Colts created considerable excitement by starting the season in Houston with a three-game sweep of the Chicago Cubs. On opening day, thirty-year-old, five-foot-seven Bobby Schantz went the distance for the Colts, holding the Cubs to just

five hits in an 11–2 victory. Offensive punch was provided by former Pirate Roman Mejias who blasted a pair of three-run home runs. Houston continued its mastery on April 11 and 12 by tossing consecutive shutouts at the overwhelmed Cubs. Hal Woodeschick and Dick Farrell combined for a 2–0 victory, followed by veteran left-hander Dean Stone's three-hitter.

The expansion team was quickly brought back to reality by teams such as the Dodgers and San Francisco Giants. Nevertheless, the Colts, predicted to finish in last place in the ten-team league, attained eighth place, completing the year with a record of 64–96. While finishing thirty-six games out of first and sixteen out of seventh, the Colts completed the season six games ahead of ninth-place Chicago and twenty-four ahead of the Mets, who compiled a record of just 40–120. The Colts' surprising finish was primarily due to a fine pitching staff which achieved a 3.80 ERA, while amassing 1,039 strikeouts and only issuing 467 walks. The hitting star of the franchise was outfielder Roman Mejias with a .286 batting average, 24 home runs, and 76 RBI. However, during the off season the Colts traded their popular Latino ballplayer to the Boston Red Sox for American League batting champion, and Houston native, Pete Runnels. The team also did well at the box office, ending up sixth in National League attendance. Team owner Roy Hofheinz concluded, "We made great progress in a year, and we look forward to continued hard work and progress. No one in the Houston organization will be satisfied until Houston has a world's champion."

But the championship predicted by Hofheinz has eluded the Houston franchise. In 1965, the team sought to change its image from the old West to the modern space age with the Houston Astros and the Astrodome. While enjoying some success and playing through the 1970s in rainbow-colored uniforms, the Astros never attained a National League pennant, nor played in a World Series game during their tenure in the Astrodome. In 2000, the club moved into a new downtown park, Enron Field. The corrupt Enron energy corporation went bankrupt, and in 2002 the Minute Maid orange juice company purchased the naming rights for the park. These changes in venue and corporate sponsorship have not produced a championship.

And there seems little chance that the shift to the American League West will soon improve things. Under the ownership of Houston businessman Jim Crane, who purchased the team in 2011, the club has jettisoned veteran players while focusing upon the development of younger talent which seems years away from competing for any type of championship. Meanwhile, the American League West—with strong clubs in the Oakland A's, Texas Rangers, Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, and Seattle Mariners—will be a tougher division for Houston than the National League Central, where the Astros could at

least compete with the Cubs (including three shutouts at the end of the 2012 season, reminiscent of the club's start against the Cubs in 1962). Additionally, no player has entered the Baseball Hall of Fame as an Astro. Nolan Ryan pitched for the Astros, but the no-hit and strikeout king opted to enter Cooperstown as a member of the Texas Rangers. This may change when Craig Biggio, who played his entire career with Houston while compiling over 3,000 hits, becomes eligible for the Hall in 2013. So after fifty years, the prospects of a championship season in Houston remain slim. And some of us who have followed the team for fifty years despair that we may not see a World Series victory in our lifetime. Nevertheless, I will stick by the team. As a young man laboring in the cotton fields of West Texas in the early 1960s, the Astros were a lifeline to a world beyond the back-breaking labor and heat of the Texas Panhandle. They kept me going then, and the least I can do now is to continue to stand with them as the possibility of another one hundred-loss season looms. But hope springs eternal in baseball, and once more I'll have to say, "Wait till next year."