

BOSTON BRAVES HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
Newsletter

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Praise Rains Down on Sain
Braves Ace and "Greatest" Coach
By Saul Wisnia

JOHN FRANKLIN "JOHNNY" SAIN

*Boston NL, 1942, 1946-51;
New York AL, 1951-55; Kansas City AL, 1955;
Pitching Coach: Kansas City, New York,
Minnesota, Detroit, Chicago AL, Atlanta NL.*

Proclaimed the "greatest pitching coach of all time" by his pupils, Sain helped many hurlers reach 20-win plateau for first time while guiding others to their best seasons. His sage advice and calm reassurance were keys to pennant-winning staffs in New York, Minnesota, and Detroit, and his thoughts on conditioning and mechanics were trendsetting. Right-handed ace of Boston Braves in his playing days, he won 20 games four times and paced 1948 club to NL title with 24-15 slate. He and great lefty Warren Spahn anchored Boston's rotation for several years, prompting cry of "Spahn and Sain and Pray for Rain." Later, as starter and reliever with Yankees, he played significant role on World Series winners in 1951-52-53. One of the few major leaguers to notch 20 wins and 20 saves in different years, he was also a dangerous batter who hit .346 in '48. Reached nine World Series as player or coach.

There is no plaque in Cooperstown bearing such an inscription – at least not yet – but the man described above is a Hall of Famer in the eyes of many who saw him or his students perform. When **Johnny Sain** died on November 7 at age 89, he left behind a legacy of unparalleled success as a pitching coach for six major league teams. This in itself should warrant his selection to the Hall if coaches are ever inducted, but in his case it only tells half the story. Long before he was helping other hurlers and franchises reach the top, this tough competitor was providing thrills for fans at Braves Field as the ace of Boston's last National League champions.

An inductee into the Boston Braves Historical Association Hall of Fame in 1994 along with (appropriately) his comrade in pitching and prose, **Warren Spahn**, Sain was a reunion attendee that year and on several other occasions – including a 50th anniversary appearance with Spahn and their '48 World Series rival Bob Feller in October 1998 that garnered the annual event some of its biggest crowds and best press coverage to date. As Sain described in interviews with this correspondent and others that weekend, his was an unlikely major league career that began with six years of Class D ball during which the 6-foot-2 Arkansas native was released four times. After the '41 season his manager told him "Son, you'll never make it to the big leagues" and urged him to "bring a first baseman's mitt to spring training." Johnny

instead beat the odds to make the Boston Braves in '42 (manager **Casey Stengel** liked him), but after a 4-7 record compiled mostly in relief, he joined the Naval Air Corps as a test pilot.

Finishing what he started

Although Stengel was gone by the time Sain returned in 1946, new Braves skipper **Billy Southworth** also liked what he saw and put Johnny into his starting rotation. Sain responded with a 20-14 season highlighted by a glittering 2.21 ERA, and followed this up with a 21-12 mark in '47 – when Spahn joined him in the 20-win ranks. Strong control, an excellent curveball, and the ability to change his motion and speed to suit the moment were Sain's biggest assets, and all were in top form the next summer. His 24 victories, 315 innings, and 28 complete games led the majors in 1948, and earned him "Pitcher of the Year" status from *The Sporting News* in the pre-Cy Young Award days. He was runner-up to Stan Musial in the National League MVP race as well, and proved his most valuable in September – going 7-2 during a 29-day stretch in which he and Spahn started nine games apiece to earn their poetic fame. (Sain's losses were by 2-1 and 1-0 scores.) Only a 5-inning World Series tune-up in his final regular-season start stopped Johnny's incredible stretch of complete games in each of his first 68 major league wins. He even batted .346 and led the NL in sacrifice hits (16).

Game One of the '48 World Series at Braves Field was the highlight of Sain's Boston tenure. Indians starter Feller (who Sain called "my hero") threw a 2-hitter, but lost 1-0 thanks to a clutch eighth-inning single from **Tommy Holmes** that plated **Phil Masi** and a 4-hit, 0-walk shutout by the Braves ace. Johnny lost his second Series start to Steve Gromek, 2-1, but hurled another complete game gem in which he allowed just 5 hits and (again) no walks. Had the Braves been able to pull out Game Six, Sain was ready for a third start; had he made it, there are many who believe the home team may have been celebrating on Gaffney Street at Series' end.

The 1949 season was a bust for most of the Braves including Sain, who fell to 10-17 thanks to a sore arm that he kept secret from Southworth and owner Lou Perini all season. He bounced back to go 20-13 in 1950, but his ERA was a high 3.94; when he slumped to 5-13 by late in the '51 season, management figured the 33-year-old's best days were done and sent him to the Yankees on August 20 for \$50,000 and a young right-hander named **Lew Burdette**. Burdette developed into a top winner, but the Yanks didn't get a lemon either – as Sain's 33-20 record and 40 saves (including an AL-best 22 in 1954) over parts of five years will attest. He finished

his final season of '55 in AL Siberia (Kansas City), but by then he had already earned three World Series rings during his second go-around with manager Stengel. His final major league record of 139-116 was helped by his 140 complete games in 245 starts, an impressive ratio attained in large part due to his skills as one of the best hitting pitchers of his era. In addition to batting .245 lifetime, he had just 20 strikeouts and 101 RBI in 774 career at-bats – production along the lines of an 80 RBI season for a position player. Apparently he had been listening when Red Sox legend **Ted Williams** talked hitting back in Navy flight school.

Teach your hurlers well

Sain's knowledge of pitching and hitting were of course essential to his success as a pitching coach, but his keen mind and warm, supportive manner played an equally important role. He once said that he developed an analytical side to his personality from his father, a semipro ballplayer and an auto mechanic. Writer Jim Thielman has stated that Sain "thought like an engineer and taught like a psychologist," and the combination worked like a charm in five American League cities. The list of pitchers who thrived under Sain's tutelage reads like an All-Star staff, including a role call of first-time 20-game winners that includes Whitey Ford, Jim Bouton, Jim Kaat, Jim "Mudcat" Grant, Mickey Lolich, Earl Wilson, and Wilbur Wood. Denny McLain had already won 20 before Johnny joined the Tigers, but under Sain he shot up to 31 – a total nobody has approached in nearly 40 years since. And although he was a southerner raised in the Jim Crow era, Sain worked his magic equally with white and black athletes. Everybody heard from his self-help tapes and books, and everybody listened.

Impact still felt

Championships and controversy followed Sain wherever he coached. His 1961-62-63 Yankees staffs won three American League pennants and two World Series titles; after he clashed with general manager Ralph Houk and was let go, he got his revenge by stopping New York's title string with a pennant for the Twins in 1965. Feuds with then-coach Billy Martin got him axed again, so it was on to Detroit and another world championship in '68. Here too he clashed with management, and after yet another firing, it was on to the White Sox. Chicago never broke through for a title during his tenure, but he helped transform general manager **Roland Hemond's** team from 100-game losers into contenders.

Four of the men Johnny coached for (Houk, Sam Mele in Minnesota, Detroit's Mayo Smith, and old Brave **Chuck Tanner** in Chicago) won Manager of the Year honors, which is certainly no coincidence. His last coaching stint in Atlanta did not prove as fruitful for his skipper, but he did impart his wisdom on the team's young minor league pitching coordinator **Leo Mazzone**. After Mazzone took over the Braves' major league staff, he built it into one of the best

ever. Paramount among Sain's advice to his protégé was a reminder that "You can work hard all you want. But if you don't work hard, it won't do you any good."

Not surprisingly, Sain's death prompted praise from many of his former pitching pupils. Jim Kaat, who won 20 for Sain with the Twins and White Sox, told the *Chicago Tribune* that, "Johnny Sain knew more about the touch, feel, and the mental side of pitching than anybody I've encountered in my 50 years of professional baseball. If there is a spot for a coach in the Hall of Fame, please put him in there." We agree.

Toasts for Sibby, Laughs for All As BBHA Marks 15th Reunion

By Saul Wisnia

The tone for the day was set early on at this fall's 15th annual reunion of the Boston Braves Historical Association (BBHA), when **Father Gerald Bierne** of Rhode Island took the podium for his traditional convocation. Moments after delivering a touching eulogy to **Sebastian "Sibby" Sisti**, the great Braves utilityman and BBHA stalwart who passed away April 24, Bierne broke a moment of silence for Sisti and Negro League great Buck O'Neill by asking guests to "Say thank you for the Detroit Tigers." The crowd, which had been somberly reflecting on Sibby's absence, broke into huge applause and laughter at mention of the team that had knocked the hated Yankees out of the American League playoffs the previous night.

So it went. While the October 8th event at the Brookline Holiday Inn served as an occasion for remembering Sisti and other departed friends, it was also a time for hearing new and old stories from reunion regulars and a couple impressive rookie recruits: former Braves pitcher and broadcaster **Ernie Johnson** and former Tribe outfielder and manager **Chuck Tanner**. After dining on another excellent banquet meal of stuffed chicken or grilled salmon, attendees heard from these legendary baseball men and several familiar faces. This correspondent was again accorded the honor of serving as warm-up act for fellow MC **Joe Morgan**, and used the occasion to offer another toast to Sisti: "Sports Illustrated just came out this week with its all-time baseball team. **Hank Aaron** and **Warren Spahn** are both on the roster, but you have to believe if they had a utility role open on that team, we know who would get it. I hope wherever you are, Sibby, you're still getting those royalty checks from "The Natural," playing doubleheaders ever Sunday, and enjoying yourself to the fullest."

Familiar Faces

Next came a call out to those dignitaries who would not be addressing the crowd. Three familiar ladies on hand to take a bow included **Adacie Fox Allen**, the Brookline resident who in the 1940s spent her summers at almost every Braves home game as a member of superfan **Lolly Hopkins'** all-female contingent – known as "Lolly's Girls"; **Midge Landry**, niece of 1940s Braves infielder "**Skippy**" **Roberge**; and

Dr. Anna Shaw, granddaughter of former Tribe first baseman and '48 World Series hero **Earl Torgeson**. In a dinner-time discussion with Ernie Johnson and others, Dr. Shaw revealed that her granddad's memorabilia from his playing days once included a ball signed by the 1961 Yankees – his last big league team. Mantle, Maris, Berra, and Co. met a dreadful end, however, when a dog with a big appetite destroyed the ball. The sphere might not have met such a fate had it been under the watchful eyes of 1948 Braves batboys **Tommie Ferguson** and **Charlie Chronopoulos**, who were once again on hand to reflect on their grand adventures as teenagers with the best jobs in the universe.

Returning for their 15th straight BBHA affair were two local boys who suited up for their hometown team: 1940-42 Braves lefty pitcher **Art Johnson** and 1938 Bees outfielder **Ralph McLeod**, who have assumed their honorable place as the senior Braves-in-residence at each fall's gathering. Back after a five-year absence was **Robert "Ducky" Detweiler**, a third baseman from Trumbauersville, PA who had brief stays with the club in 1942 and '46 and had such a great time at his first reunion in 2001 that he brought his entire family this time. Members of Boston's "other" major league team enjoying the festivities included a pair of Red Sox Hall of Famers – Gold Glove third baseman **Frank Malzone** of the 1957-65 Sox and Medford's own **Bill Monbouquette**, who had a no-hitter, a 17-strikeout game, and a 20-win season pitching for dreadful Boston teams in the early 1960s.

First to take the microphone among the playing ranks was **Mary Pratt**, the longtime schoolteacher from North Quincy who was an ace pitcher for the Rockford Peaches in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League during World War II and has been a powerful advocate for women's sports ever since. "For years I looked up to you men, because you always let me play," Pratt said. "The great Patty Berg, who died just a few weeks ago, once told us, 'What I did for golf, and what Billie Jean King did for tennis, you did for baseball.' Every year I believe it more as we continue going around the country trying to give back to sports what they have given to us. We've come a long way, but change comes slow. Girls have much to contribute, and there is no turning us back now."

Now a Hall of Famer, still Walpole Joe

Joining yours truly at the podium next was Morgan, the former Boston College baseball/hockey standout from Walpole who signed with the Boston Braves in 1952 and later played with the club in Milwaukee. Morgan never had much success as a major league infielder with four teams, but after a long apprenticeship as a minor league manager and Red Sox coach he made the most of a big opportunity when it came his way during the 1988 season. Hired as "interim" manager after the All-Star break to replace the fired John McNamara, he won his first 12 games, 19 of his first 20 (both records), and the '88 AL East title. Two years later he took another Eastern crown,

and while his clubs couldn't get past the powerful Oakland A's in the ALCS, his no-nonsense approach and folksy manner (remember "six, two, and even?") forever endeared him to New England fans and resulted in his selection to the Red Sox Hall of Fame earlier this year.

Asked for his annual year-end assessment of the Sox, Morgan quipped: "Well, I wasn't too astute, because back in June I thought we'd win the division easy. We had [Curt] Schilling and [Josh] Beckett, so we weren't going to lose too many in a row. We had a great infield with a shortstop [Alex Gonzalez] who was the best we've ever had here. But I've never seen a ballclub have so many injuries. A lot of people don't want to look at it that way, but they were decimated." Did manager Terry Francona do an admirable job? "Sure. If you don't have the players, you can't win. I don't care who you are."

Big Papi Tops Double X

After revealing that Hall of Fame first baseman Jimmie Foxx had been his favorite Red Sox player as a boy growing up in the late 1930s, Morgan disclosed that "I was rooting against David Ortiz hitting 51 home runs and breaking Foxx's team record. I wouldn't lie to you." Pushed further, however, Morgan had to admit that when it came to clutch hitting, Big Papi was in a class by himself – better than Foxx or even a couple guys he coached named Jim Rice and Carl Yastrzemski. "Ortiz is the best we've ever had. He hits a ton of home runs, but he also gets a lot of singles to win ballgames. It's just unbelievable what the guy has done."

On other matters, Walpole Joe said the Red Sox needed to "make a 20 percent overhaul" during the winter, but that the pitching should be stronger with Jonathan Papelbon in the starting rotation – "he's too young for the bullpen" – and Beckett hurling with a full AL season under his belt. "He's got a chance to win 20 easy." [This, of course, was before the apparent signing of Japanese ace Daisuke Matsuzaka.] Finally, asked if he'd trade troublesome slugger Manny Ramirez, Morgan replied "If you can, maybe, but you have to get an awful lot for him." Then, smiling, he added: "Hey, you've got to put up with guys like that!"

Memories from Merullo

Poking fun at himself and the entire aging Boston Braves family, Morgan joked before starting his player interviews that "You should pay attention to these stories, because we don't know how long this is going to go on." This wisecrack was a perfect introduction for Joe's first guest, East Boston native **Lennie Merullo**. Eighty-nine years young, Merullo was a shortstop with the Cubs for seven seasons (including on the '45 NL champs) and scouted for Chicago from 1950-72 and for the Major League Scouting Bureau from 1973-2003.

"I tell you, growing up as a Braves fan, I never left the house if there was a game on the radio," Merullo told the crowd. "I don't care if it was

110 degrees, 115 degrees out. I'd be in the living room listening to Fred Hoey and the ballgames. Whether it was the Red Sox or the Braves, we didn't care. I was one of 12, nine boys and three girls, and my mother would be saying, 'Out of the house, out of the house, you can't stay inside when it's this hot out!' But we had to stay there and listen to the ballgame. We could tell you pitch-by-pitch everything that was going on. That's the way we were raised. Then we'd go out onto Byron St. in East Boston, up there toward the Heights, and we'd emulate our favorite ballplayers. We even tried to dress like them. Everything they did, that's what we'd try to do ourselves. I couldn't have had a better life, and I hope to continue being a part of baseball."

From Brattleboro to the Bigs

The first of two celebrity newcomers to take the stage with Morgan was Brattleboro, Vermont native **Ernie Johnson**, who two generations of fans (this correspondent included) remember as the folksy and knowledgeable "Voice of the Braves," first in the South and later nationwide over the TBS Superstation. Johnson's broadcasting skills have earned him election to the Atlanta Braves Hall of Fame, but before his decades-long stint over the airwaves Ernie toiled as a pitcher for the Tribe in both Boston and Milwaukee. The right-handed sidearm compiled a solid 36-22 mark with a 3.74 ERA for the club between 1950-58, primarily as a reliever, and was a key performer for the 1957 World Champions with a 7-3 record and 4 saves during the regular season and a 1.29 ERA in the World Series triumph over the dreaded Yankees. In between his successful playing and broadcasting careers, Johnson even worked in public relations for the club – giving him nearly a half-century of service to the Braves divided between the three cities they've called home.

"I came down here to Boston in 1942, when I was still just 17," he recalled. My high school coach got me a tryout with the Red Sox, but they told me, 'Well, you're pretty skinny' – I was 6-foot-4 and 175 pounds – 'You ought to go back and play semipro ball.' There was no semipro ball near Brattleboro, so my coach said, 'What the heck, I'll get you a tryout with the Braves.' And he did. I was there about a week and signed a contract for \$125 a month to play at Hartford, plus a \$100 bonus. Now I was really loaded!"

"After they signed me, they took me on a two-week major league roadtrip," Johnson continued. "I could get the ball over, so they said, 'Kid, what we want you to do is pitch batting practice. You can't sit on the bench because you're not on the roster, so after that you can go up in the stands and have a hot dog and coke.' Well, I'd grown up 100 miles from Fenway Park, but had never seen a major league game before. This was fantastic."

"So here I was, pitching to [Hall of Famers] **Paul Waner** and **Ernie Lombardi** in batting practice. Lombardi scared me to death. He had that interlocking grip, and the shortstop played in left field when he came up. He couldn't run a lick. But one thing about Lombardi, he had a big

nose. They called him 'Schnozz,' and they had a good reason to do so. When we got on the train they said, 'OK, kid. This is your compartment. Your roommate is Ernie Lombardi.' I slept above, he slept below, and about midway through the evening, boy, he started snoring. I have never heard anybody snore like that. It was like Niagara Falls! When the morning finally came, I opened the door to go down to breakfast, and every Braves player who walked by said, 'How'd ya sleep, kid?'"

Johnson's big league apprenticeship was delayed by a stint in the Marines from 1943-45. "When I got out of the service, I went back to Brattleboro and met this blond who was still in high school," he said of his first encounter with Lois, his wife of 59 years. "She said, 'What do you do?' and I said 'I play baseball.' Then she said, 'Well, what do you do for a living?' And after she saw my first contract at Hartford, she said, 'I'm asking you again...'"

"Go See What Those Guys Want"

Self-deprecating in the same hilarious manner made famous by another Braves player turned broadcaster – catcher **Bob Uecker** – Johnson drew waves of laughter from the crowd as he described his career in modest, entertaining terms. "I played nine years, and was a middle relief pitcher. I couldn't start, and I couldn't finish, so I pitched in the middle. I never became a star, and there were a few reasons that I didn't. Number one happened right here in Boston. I was pitching against **Ted Williams** and the Red Sox in the City Series. It was the bottom of the eighth, and I tried to slip a curveball over. Too bad! Ted hit it up into the right-field bleachers, and the game was over. I was a rookie, and as I'm walking down the runway manager **Billy Southworth** comes up and puts his arm around me and says, 'Don't worry, kid. He's hit them off better pitchers than you.'"

"Then there was the time I was outside Ebbets Field with **Eddie Mathews** and **Hank Aaron**, and all these little kids were running up wanting their autographs. I was just standing there beside them, watching them sign everything left and right, when Mathews finally says to a kid, 'Why don't you ask Ernie for his autograph? He'll be a star someday.' And the kid said, 'I'll wait.' It's a true story!"

"In '52 I started a game before the biggest crowd of the year at Braves Field – about 16,000. There just weren't many people in Braves Field, and when they made noise you could hear them. One time three or four of my friends came down from Brattleboro, and they wanted me to pitch. They were sitting over by the dugout, kind of looking in. All of a sudden they start saying, 'We want Johnson! We want Johnson!' So Billy Southworth says to me, 'Ernie, go see what those guys want, will ya?'"

"And here's a true story about when I knew it was time to quit. I was with the Cleveland Indians in spring training of 1960, warming up in the bullpen. With a regular catcher, you just had to make a motion with your hand and show him the ball to let him know what was coming –

fastball, slider, curve, and a wiggle of the glove for a change-up. Well this bullpen catcher had gotten a big bonus, but he had never played. I threw my fastball, and now I'm motioning to him what I'm going to throw next. He's just looking at me, not moving his head, so I keep motioning. Finally he gets up from his crouch and says, 'Don't worry, dad. You just throw anything you want. I'll figure it out on the way down.' This kid was going to catch me, and he didn't even know what was coming! I'm out there yelling, 'You so-and-so. I was in the '57 World Series!' But that's when I knew."

Heaping praise on his old teammates Aaron, Mathews, and **Warren Spahn**, Johnson was quick to defend the pre-expansion era. "Baseball is different today, and you all know it. My first salary was \$5,000, which was the minimum. Today it's \$300,000. We used to get \$8 meal money; today they get \$85 a day. We beat the Yankees to win the '57 World Series, and we got \$8,200 apiece for doing it. Today it's close to \$300,000 to the winner of the World Series. But I'm still glad I played when I did. I was just talking to [Chuck] Tanner about it. We didn't make the big money, but there was a closeness between the players of yesteryear that comes forth. It's one of those things where you're all in this together. Nobody made any money, and everybody had to get a job when the season ended or you'd starve to death."

"It's like Lois said to me one day: 'You've never had a real job. You were a baseball player and a broadcaster.' She's right, but I've enjoyed it, and I enjoy coming to functions like this. You fans make it all possible. Please keep up the interest here in Boston – and **John [Logan]**, you're doing a great job in Milwaukee with the Braves alumni association there. I've talked too long, I'm sure, but I've had a good time and hope you did too."

Tenacious Tales From Tanner

The next speaker never played for the Boston Braves despite a long spell in their farm system, but **Chuck Tanner** quickly made a name for himself when he finally reached the big-league club in Milwaukee after nine years in the minors. Pinch-hitting for Warren Spahn on Opening Day in 1955, he hit the first pitch he ever saw in the majors for a home run off Cincinnati's Gerry Staley. The outfielder's major league playing career didn't live up to this auspicious start – he hit .261 with just 21 homers for four teams over eight seasons – but as a manager Tanner had far more success. Teaming up with GM and former Boston Braves minor league employee **Roland Hemond**, he quickly turned a dreadful White Sox team into a contender in the early 1970s, then won a World Series title with the "We Are Family" Pirates of 1979. He had less luck skipping the Braves for parts of three years from 1986-88 (in his defense, he had little to work with), but he never lost his tremendous love and enthusiasm for the game.

As he shared with the gathering, Tanner's determination was forged from humble beginnings. "I came from the little town of New Castle, Pennsylvania. We didn't have any

running water, electricity, or bathroom. We had an outhouse, and we were pretty well off – we had a two-holer. My grandfather and grandmother came from Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, and we shoveled out our own fields where we planted tomatoes and corn. There was a little playground down below our place, and I'd go through the corn and play ball all day. I was 10 or 11 years old. The first guys who got there were the ones who played. These other guys were 17 or 18. Somebody might say, 'Hey, get that kid out of here!' but the rest would say, 'No, he was here first. He stays.' I'd stay there all day and get 200-300 at-bats, and in a couple years I was as good as they were.

The Braves came along to scout me after the war [in 1946]. I worked out at Richmond, and then I went down to Indianapolis. I was 17, and I went out there and was hitting the ball pretty good. There was a guy named Sibby Sisti on the team, and I thought, 'Boy, he's a superstar.' There was Skippy Roberge playing second base, and he could hit. I thought, 'Man, these are big leaguers.' [Both had, in fact, already played in the majors.] I agreed to sign, and then I called my mother. She told me, 'The Giants scout is here. Don't you sign with the Braves. You come home, and he says he'll give you double whatever bonus they offered you.' I told her 'Well, they offered me \$3,000 and I said OK.' So she said, 'Well, if you gave them your word, that's as good as a contract. You have to sign with the Braves.' If it wasn't for my mother, and if I had come home to sign with the Giants, who knows where that path would have taken me.

The Braves sent me to Evansville, then on to Owensboro, Kentucky. The next year I went to spring training. We all flew into Evansville, and there were 400 of us in camp – from Bluefield, Richmond, and Owensboro. They gave us numbers, and we played for a couple days. Then they cut 200 guys and put up a list, and I was one of the lucky ones still on there. So now I decided to really show off. We had an exhibition game, and I was on third base. It was two outs, bases loaded, three-and-two on the hitter, and I decide to show them how I can steal home. Well, the pitch came in, the hitter saw me coming, and he just took it for strike three. If he had swung, he would have killed me! The manager said, 'What are you doing? You can't do that in that situation!' But he still picked me for the Owensboro Oilers." [As Morgan later pointed out, Tanner was the only one of the 400 original players in that camp to make the big leagues in the era of 16 teams.]

Learning Not to Jump

Tanner survived a bout with bleeding ulcers that season to hit well over .300, and the next season was sent to Eau Claire. "I thought I was doing pretty good. Then one night I was playing right field, and two balls went between my legs and we lost. We played on a peninsula, and as I was walking across the bridge that night I said, 'Well, I may as well jump in and kill myself. I made two errors.' Andy Cohen was our manager, and he was great. The next day he gave us a blackboard talk. He said, 'I don't care if you hit

four home runs yesterday. Just rub it out. You made four errors? Rub it out.' I knew he was talking to me. Well, that night I hit two home runs and drove in six, and I was walking across the bridge I said, 'I can't wait until I get to the big leagues now!'"

Tanner's minor league odyssey eventually took him to Atlanta, where he had a memorable exhibition game against the Brooklyn Dodgers in which he had three hits and six RBI against Don Newcombe and Dan Bankhead. It was still several more years before Chuck made the majors, however, and the tale of how he got there provided one of the day's funniest tales.

It was spring training of 1955, and Tanner was working out with the big-league club. "We were playing Kansas City in Bradenton, and they were pitching this big kid with thick coke bottle glasses. It was Ryne Duren [later an ace closer for the Yankees]. Well, he had trouble seeing, and he could throw 100 miles per hour. Aaron and Mathews said 'Well, I think we'll take extra hitting today,' so the coaches said, 'OK, Chuck, you're playing.' Well, I'll never forget it. I was the on-deck hitter, and Duren's glasses fell off. He gave them to the trainer and wanted to start pitching without them, but I said, 'That's OK, we can wait. Get him some new glasses!' Well, they got his glasses back on, and I got three hits off of him that day. Manager **Charlie Grimm** must have thought, 'If he can hit this guy, we may as well take him north with us.' And that's how I made the big leagues."

Conley Fields a Few

The crowd had a chance to get into the act when long **Gene Conley** approached the dais after Tanner and fielded a series of audience questions. A 6-foot-9 pitcher for both the Braves and Red Sox who spent several winters backing up Bill Russell on the Boston Celtics, the Washington State native was the first man to win World Championship rings in baseball (with the '57 Braves) and basketball (with the Celtics of '59, '60, and '61).

Asked if he'd rather play basketball or baseball, Conley replied: "Well, my wife told me I had to get a job in the [baseball] off-season, and I was trying to think of the easiest job I could do. So I just held on to my jockstrap and went into basketball. Really, I think I enjoyed them both equally well. I played them both in high school and college, and then playing with so many great clubs with Milwaukee and the Celtics, there was no way I could turn it lose and quit playing. But I think mostly my wife liked that paycheck every two weeks."

The recipient of a knee replacement six months before the reunion, Conley was next asked how he was feeling. "That was a tough one. The doc said he had to use a size 10 metal rod in there, and I said, 'What kind?' He said, 'Titanium.' So I was coming up here from Florida, where I live now, and when I went through security the dog-darn buzzer kept going off. It took me a long time to realize I had a note in my pocket from my doctor that I could show him. I was

almost ready to show him my scar." When asked what kind of coach Red Auerbach was to play for, Conley told of the time he was on the bench seated next to Celtics strongman Bob Brannum when Celtics star Bob Cousy was knocked down in the lane by Paul Hoffman of the Baltimore Bullets. Auerbach came over to Brannum, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "Hey, that guy Hoffman is roughing out Bob. Why don't you go in there and take care of him?" Brannum did as asked, and Hoffman was soon lying on the ground in need of smelling salts. "When he finally got up, he started towards our bench yelling, 'Auerbach, you SOB! You had him do that to me!'" said Conley. "Brannum came out of the ballgame, and everything was real quiet for about two minutes. Then Auerbach came down and tapped him on the shoulder again. I'm thinking, 'Oh boy, are we going to go through this again?' But he just says, 'Good job.' That was Red." [Ironically, Auerbach would die three weeks after the reunion.]

Logan Remembers a Roomate

Fittingly, the day ended with former Braves All-Star shortstop **Johnny Logan** on stage. And, as expected, his thoughts were on his old friend, Sibby Sisti. "The chicken dinner was excellent, George, but today we are honoring one of the finest gentlemen and teammates, my friend and roommate Sibby Sisti. And he would rather have meatballs and spaghetti!

"Every night in our room, he'd be reading a western magazine and smoking a big long Italian cigar," Logan continued. "He'd do this every night when he fell asleep. So from about 10 until 2 in the morning, I'd be in bed worrying about which pitcher I'd be batting against the next day. Then around 2 I'd get up and get the ashtray and head for the lavatory. I'd dump the ashtray into the toilet, flush it, and go back and get my four hours of sleep.

"He was a baseball man, and I was his student. When I was a rookie, he loved my ability. I asked him, 'Sibby, can you give me some tips?' He said, 'John, remember, if you're a shortstop, just play natural. Don't try and copy anybody. Just play your natural game, and get to know your third baseman and your first baseman. If you're playing short you usually get seven to 10 ground balls, and your first baseman is your help if you don't hit him chest-high.' I had a great guy named Joe Adcock at first. He was about 6-foot-4, and he was my roommate after Sibby. Every time he made an error on my throw, he got hell that night!

"In short, Sibby Sisti was one of the finest guys I ever knew. So George, please, for Sibby's sake, let's have a little Italian dinner next year."

Thanks to Those Behind the Scenes

As always, BBHA executive committee members worked to help put the reunion together. **Mort Bloomberg**, ace newsletter editor **Bob Brady**, **Jonathan Fine**, **Dave Goodwin**, **Gary Mastas**, and yours truly (**Saul Wisnia**) all helped, but the All-Star of the crew was, of course, **George "Mr. Team" Altison**, who has kept the Association going strong for 15 years. Thanks also to **Ralph Evans** for giving another of his excellent

tours of Braves Field, and to **Mark Waitkus** for painting the wonderful picture of Sibby Sisti that graced the cover of this year's reunion program. **NOTE:** eyeglasses left at the dinner were turned in to us. Please call George Altison at (508) 485-1423 to retrieve them.

We still have a few copies of *One of A Kind: The Gene Conley Story*, autographed by Gene and his wife left from the reunion. They are priced at \$30 each postpaid. Contact George quickly to reserve your copy.

Winners

We thank all of our reunion attendees that participated in our raffle and to those that donated the prizes. The proceeds were used to defray reunion expenses and to replenish our treasury to support future activities, including the printing and mailing of this newsletter. Congratulations to our winners: **Jim Walker** of Woodsville, NH who won the Cooperstown Classic Santa in 1930's team attire and the commemorative autographed reunion bat; **Loren Goldstein** of Bradford, MA who picked up a framed Opening Day at Braves Field photographed autographed by Sibby Sisti and Gene Conley; and **Richard Willey** of Gorham, ME who received a copy of the Sibby Sisti portrait signed by artist Ronnie Joyner. That excellent representation appeared in our last newsletter.

Going Hollywood

While Chuck Connors and John Berardino may be the best known ballplayer/thespians, a former Boston Braves farmhand also traded in his bat and glove for Hollywood fame and fortune. **Michael Dante** swapped the baseball diamond for a forty year career as an actor, appearing in thirty films and 150 television shows.

As a 17-year-old schoolboy star shortstop in Stamford, CT, Dante (then going by his real name, **Ralph Vitti**) attracted the attention of famed Braves chief New England scout, Jeff Jones. On September 7, 1949, he signed a Tribe contract that included a \$6,000 bonus. The youngster promptly used his largesse to buy a four-door Buick with gleaming whitewalls.

With the Owensboro Oilers of the Kitty League in 1950, Dante got into 42 games and batted .231. He ranked near the bottom of league shortstops with a .883 fielding average. One of Dante's teammates would make it to the big leagues and experience some success as a reliever. Don McMahon won twenty games that season and broke in with the Milwaukee version of the Braves in 1957. He would pitch for 18 years in the majors and appear in eight games in three Fall Classics. Dante, however, bounced around the low minors and finished up in the Senators' chain. His one brush with the big time occurred in 1955 when he worked out with the Nats as a non-roster invitee during spring training.

Dante enrolled in acting classes at the University of Miami while in Florida with Washington.

Later, when a shoulder injury sidelined him, Dante headed off to Hollywood. A screen test with MGM led to an uncredited appearance as "Shorty" in the 1956 Paul Newman flick, *Somebody Up There Likes Me*. After signing with Warner Brothers, studio head Jack Warner suggested a name change. Dante, a family name, was selected for its marquee appeal. Over the course of his work in the movies, Dante has appeared with such luminaries as Edward G. Robinson, Randolph Scott, Elvis Presley and Virginia Mayo. A highlight of his extensive TV portfolio occurred when he was selected to play the role of "Maab" alongside Julie Newmar in the 1967 *Star Trek* episode, "Friday's Child."

A veteran of many movie and television westerns (e.g., *Bonanza*, *Death Valley Days*, *The Big Valley*, *Maverick*, *Lawman*, *Cheyenne* and *Sugarfoot*), Dante has been honored with the Silver Spur and Golden Boot Awards, the cowboy equivalent of the Golden Globe and the Oscar.

Most recently, Dante has hosted a weekly radio celebrity talk show. He maintains his own website, www.michaeldante.com.

Braves Family Aid

An important role of the Boston Braves Historical Association is to preserve the memory of our favorite team and its players. We've recently come to the aid of two families seeking photographs and information on Tribe relatives. You may be able to help too!

Matt Dahlgren, grandson of the late **Ellsworth "Babe" Dahlgren**, is seeking copies of any materials relating to the late first baseman. The Babe's time with the Braves was brief – 44 games during the first part of the 1941 season. Breaking in with the Red Sox as its regular first sacker in 1935, he lost his job to future HOFer Jimmie Foxx the following season. His claim to baseball immortality occurred on May 2, 1939 when he replaced Lou Gehrig in the Yankees lineup, ending The Iron Horse's consecutive game streak at 2,130. During twelve seasons in the majors, Babe also played for the Cubs, Phillies, Dodgers, Pirates and Browns. If you can be of help, please contact Matt at 633 Estancia, Irvine, CA 92602.

The son, daughter and daughter-in-law of right-handed pitcher **Johnny Hutchings** are also seeking mementos of the latter's career. They hope to share such memories with his 92-year-old widow. At 6'2" and 250 pounds, Hutchings possessed a commanding presence on the mound. He debuted with the Reds in 1940 and hurled two innings of relief for Cincinnati during their successful quest for the championship against the Tigers in the World Series. Johnny's son had and lost his father's World Series ring and wonders where it might be today. Hutchings was traded to the Braves for Lloyd Waner in June of the following season. He played for the Tribe in 1941-42 and 1944-46. In 1945, Hutchings appeared in 57 games. His post major league days found him pitching, coaching and

managing in Indianapolis through 1960. He passed away in 1963. The family would appreciate any assistance. Their point of contact is: Jackie Hutchings, 419 Westmount Court, Indianapolis, IN 46234.

In Memoriam

We were saddened to learn of the loss of **Eddie Pellagrini** on October 11. The former infielder for the Red Sox, Browns, Phillies, Reds and Pirates passed away at age 88. Pellagrini had been an honored guest at our reunions. He homered in his first big league at bat in 1946 while with the Red Sox. This past Opening Day, the Bosox celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of the American League pennant winners by having Pellagrini and other surviving members Johnny Pesky, Bobby Doerr, Dave Ferriss, Don Gutteridge and Charlie Wagner throw out the season inaugural's ceremonial first pitch. For thirty-one years, Pellagrini was the head baseball coach at Boston College, winning 359 games. The school's baseball diamond is named after him.

On November 7th, **John "Buddy" Kerr** died. He was 84. Kerr performed at shortstop for the Braves in 1950-51. He was part of the infamous Braves-Giants deal that saw him accompany Sid Gordon, Willard Marshall and Red Webb to the Hub in exchange for Al Dark and Eddie Stanky. A native New Yorker, Kerr signed with the Giants and played for his hometown team from 1943-49. In his first time up in the majors, he also belted a round-tripper. However, Kerr's claim to fame would be his fielding. In 1946, he led Senior Circuit shortstops in fielding and broke Leo Durocher's record of 51 straight errorless games. That string continued into 1947, finishing up at 68 consecutive contests. Bad blood between him and Giants manager, Leo the Lip, purportedly led to his departure from his hometown. The existence of similar strained relations with management in Boston has been offered for the exiting of Dark and Stanky. Over the course of nine big league seasons, Kerr performed in 1,067 games and batted .249. His anemic batting in Boston (.227 in 1950 and .186 in 1951) opened the door for Johnny Logan to assume the anchor position in the infield. Kerr managed in the Giants system for many years and more recently served as a special scout for the Mets.

Survivors

According to our records, the number of men who have performed on the diamond for the Boston Braves currently totals forty-four. The list is reproduced below and we welcome any updates.

Bob Addis (Outfield, 1950-51)
Johnny Antonelli (Pitcher, 1948-50)
Ray Berres (Catcher, 1940-41)
Lew Burdette (Pitcher, 1951-52)
Eddie Carnett (Pitcher, 1941)
Dave Cole (Pitcher, 1950-52)
Clint Conatser (Outfield, 1948-49)
Gene Conley (Pitcher, 1952)
Del Crandall (Catcher, 1949-50)

George Crowe (First Base, 1952)
Jack Daniels (Outfield, 1952)
Alvin Dark (Shortstop, 1946, 1948-49)
Ducky Detweiler (Third Base, 1942, 1946)
Jack Dittmer (Second Base, 1952)
George Estock (Pitcher, 1951)
Roy Hartsfield (Second Base, 1950-52)
Ralph Hodgins (Outfield, 1939)
Tommy Holmes (Outfield, 1942-51)
Virgil Jester (Pitcher, 1952)
Art Johnson (Pitcher, 1940-42)
Ernie Johnson (Pitcher, 1950, 1952)
Eddie Joost (Shortstop, 1943)
Art Kenney (Pitcher, 1938)
Billy Klaus (Shortstop, 1952)
Steve Kuczek (Pinchhitter, 1949)
Walt Linden (Catcher, 1950)
Danny Litwhiler (Outfield, 1946-48)
Johnny Logan (Shortstop, 1951-52)
Harry MacPherson (Pitcher, 1944)
Dick Manville (Pitcher, 1950)
Ray Martin (Pitcher, 1943, 1947-48)
Eddie Mayo (Infield, 1937-38)
Ralph McLeod (Outfield, 1938)
Luis Olmo (Outfield, 1950-51)
Gene Patton (First Base, 1944)
Bill Ramsey (Outfield, 1945)
Tommy Reis (Pitcher, 1938)
Norman Roy (Pitcher, 1950)
Hal Schacker (Pitcher, 1945)
Nick Strincevich (Pitcher, 1940-41)
Bert Thiel (Pitcher, 1952)
Don Thompson (Outfield, 1949)
Al Veigel (Pitcher, 1939)
Norm Wallen (Third Base, 1945)

Bees/Braves teams from 1937-52 all have living representatives. Eddie Mayo is the sole survivor of Bill McKechnie's fifth place 1937 club. By year, the breakdown is as follows: 1937 - 1; 1938 - 4; 1939 - 2; 1940 - 3; 1941 - 4; 1942 - 3; 1943 - 3; 1944 - 3; 1945 - 4; 1946 - 4; 1947 - 3; 1948 - 6; 1949 - 7; 1950 - 10; 1951 - 8; 1952 - 13. The oldest former player is Ray Berres at 99 while the "baby" is 76-year-old Gene Conley. The population breaks down into 19 pitchers and 25 position players. Reunion guest Ernie Johnson, with 8 victories is our winningest pitcher; Art Johnson recorded the most defeats (16). Art Johnson and Dave Cole are tied at 49 for most appearances on the mound for the Tribe. As expected, the most games played for Boston overall and for a position player belongs to Tommy Holmes at 1,289 plus 6 World Series contests. After "Kelly," the runner-up is Al "Blackie" Dark at 282 games and 6 World Series appearances. Dark is followed by Ray Berres (205), Danny Litwhiler (183) and Johnny Logan (179). Holmes also holds the distinction of being the last surviving manager of the Boston Braves. Steve Kuczek, a shortstop by trade, possesses the highest batting average, 1.000, by virtue of his successful pinch hit double in his sole major league appearance in 1949. Pitchers Harry MacPherson (1944), Dick Manville (1950) and third baseman Gene Patton (1944) are the other living Tribesmen with but a single game of big league service. Hurlers Eddie Carnett (1941), Art Kenney (1938) and Al Veigel (1939) avoided such inclusion by participating in one additional game.

A Natural

Hitting for the "cycle" is a rare feat in baseball. Even rarer is to accomplish it "naturally" – *i.e.*, single, double, triple, home run, – in that sequence. It happened only once in Boston Braves history. Beaneaters' left fielder **Bill Collins** experienced a career day at bat on October 6, 1910 at the South End Grounds. He had come to Boston from the Giants during the preseason as part of the trade that sent Buck Herzog to the Hub. Collins' four hits of ascending magnitude were part of a twenty-two hit barrage against Philadelphia. Twenty runs crossed the plate for the home team while the visitors plated seven. Despite all of the activity on the diamond that afternoon, the game was completed in one hour and forty-eight minutes. Playing in 154 games, Collins batted .241. He would never appear in more than 32 games during his remaining three seasons in the big leagues. Collins drifted to Chicago and Brooklyn in the National League and finished with Buffalo in the Federal League in 1914. His highest batting average over that span was .189.

No-Hitter Buster

Who are you going to call to break up a no-hitter? None other than our own BBHA Hall of Famer, **Tommy Holmes**! Over the course of his illustrious career, Kelly deprived opposing pitchers of a shot at immortality three times, twice during his rookie season. The first instance took place on June 13, 1942 at Wrigley Field against 27-year-old Cubs right-hander Leslie "Bill" Fleming, formerly of the Red Sox. It was his third National League start. Fleming and the Braves' Tom Earley hooked up in a pitching duel that saw the only run score as the result of the latter's eighth inning wild pitch past Ernie Lombardi with Bill Nicholson on third. Earley held the Cubs to four hits. Just four Braves reached first base and none advanced. Holmes stroked a two-out sixth inning single just beyond the reach of Phil Cavaretta in right center field. Frequent reunion attendee **Len Merullo** was credited with a sparkling fielding play at shortstop in the eighth inning to shut down a late game Tribe threat. Fleming would perform for the Cubs for parts of four seasons, departing the majors in 1946 with an overall 16-21 record.

Later in the 1942 season, Holmes repeated the feat, this time against Rip Sewell and the Pirates at Forbes Field. This time, he led off the game with a single and stroked another single and a double in four official at bats. All the other Braves bats were silent in this 6-0 August 25th defeat. Sewell recorded his fourteenth victory and fifth shutout. Future and former Braves, Bob Elliott, Johnny Barrett, Vince DiMaggio and Al Lopez were in the Buc's lineup.

Holmes' last no-hit buster occurred the following season on August 28th at the Wigwam. He was the only Tribesman to solve the Giants' Van Lingle Mungo, and he did it twice. Tommy's performance was the only saving grace in this Ladies' Day offering that drew a light crowd of 3,110. Again, Holmes opened the game with a single, a gift from Mungo, who failed to cover

the base as first sacker Sid Gordon fielded the ball. Only two other Braves reached first base, both after being hit by pitched balls. The 12-0 loss represented the third successive shutout inflicted on Boston. Manager Casey Stengel, out of a cast, was still on crutches as the result of the fracture suffered when hit by a car in Kenmore Square. During an open date in this series, both clubs scheduled exhibition games against local military service teams.

Tommy Holmes' multiple accomplishments mirrored those of an earlier Brave, first baseman **Big Ed Konetchy**, who broke up potential hitless performances by New York pitchers on September 28 and 30, 1916 and deprived St. Louis pitcher Marv Goodwin of this claim to fame on August 21, 1917. Other Braves no-hitter busters include **Sherry Magee** (September 29, 1915 vs. Grover Cleveland Alexander of Philadelphia), **Fred Snodgrass** (July 7, 1916 vs. Gene Packard of Chicago) and **Bob Elliott** (May 15, 1951 vs. Ewell Blackwell of Cincinnati).

1948 Book

Work continues on a book about Boston's 1948 baseball season. A significant portion of the publication, to be produced by the Boston chapter of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) and Rounder Books, will be devoted to the Boston Braves. The core task is to memorialize all of the players on the Tribe that appeared on the club's roster that historic season. Thanks to those BBHA members who have volunteered to date. SABR is providing guidance to all writers. There are still players lacking biographers, however. Please consider volunteering to help. Those left are: **Paul Burris, Al Lyons, Ray Sanders, Clyde Shoun, Bobby Sturgeon and Ernie White**. Contact **Bill Nowlin** if you can help out in this tribute to be released during sixtieth anniversary of the Last Hurrah of National League baseball in the Hub. Bill can be reached at bnowlin@rounder.com.

Sittin' In The Jury Box

There was a reunion within our reunion in October. **Ducky Detweiler** and Frank Malzone previously had crossed paths in the Class D Eastern Shore League in 1948. Malzone was breaking into pro ball, beginning his third base career with the Milford Red Sox. Exhibiting big league potential, he batted .304. Ducky was the playing manager of the Federalsburg Athletics. Although Ducky's team finished next to last, he hit a lusty .341 and clubbed 21 homers. One of Ducky's players eventually made a brief big league appearance with the Philadelphia Athletics in 1953, shortstop Charles "Spider" Wilhelm.

The Detroit Tigers trek to the World Series marked the third time that a team reached that level of post-season play within three seasons of losing 100 or more games. The 1911 Boston Rustlers (107 losses) and 1912 Boston Braves (101 losses) preceded the 1914 World Champs. Other clubs with this distinction include the 1965 Red Sox (100 losses; AL champs in 1967), the 1967 Mets (101 losses; 1969 World Series

champs) and the 1988 Atlanta Braves (106 losses; 1991 NL champs). The Tigers topped the loss list with 119 defeats in 2003.

In addition, the Bengals broke an ignominious record previously held by the Boston Braves. The Tigers' twelve consecutive losing seasons before a trip to the Fall Classic is now the historic benchmark. The Braves suffered eleven consecutive losing seasons (1903-13) before reaching the World Series in 1914.

The 2006 World Series reminded us of **Roland Hemond's** long and illustrious front office career, which started with the Boston Braves. At one time, he employed Cardinals manager Tony La Russa and SVP and GM Walt Jocketty. Hemond also hired Tigers manager Jim Leyland and president, CEO and GM Dave Dombrowski. He attended the first two games of the Fall Classic and posed for a picture at home plate with his protégés. Hemond also was recently awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters by the University of Phoenix.

In his October 22nd World Series Notebook column for the *Boston Herald*, Steve Buckley noted that Roland Hemond was the last employee of the Boston Braves still active in baseball. However, **Chuck Tanner** and Cumberland, RI's **John Goryl**, two Boston Braves farmhands, remain on the payroll of the Cleveland Indians. Tanner is a special assignment scout while Goryl is an advisor in the player development area.

We were glad to hear that the Washington Nationals post-season housecleaning did not include pitching coach **Randy St. Claire**. St. Claire, the son of Boston Braves catcher **Ebba St. Claire** (1951-52), will be entering his fifth season with the Expos/Nationals in 2007.

The Twins' Joe Mauer became the first catcher to win the American League batting title (at .347) and first backstop to lead either league in hitting since **Ernie Lombardi** of the Braves commandeered the top spot in the Senior Circuit in 1942 with a .330 average.

Our popular long-time reunion guest and BBHA Hall of Famer, **Tommy Holmes**, was unable to be with us this year. If you'd like to send holiday greetings to him, his new address is 22601 Camino Del Mar, Apt. 2209, Boca Raton, FL 33433. No autograph requests please.

Last of the Ninth

Many thanks to those contributing clippings and items to the BBHA. Our list includes **Reverend Gerald Beirne, John Materazzo, George Small, Midge Landry, James O'Connell, Mort Bloomberg, Jack Wholley** and **John Ahokas**. Special thanks to **Ronnie Joyner** for his portrait of Bama Rowell. The Executive Committee of the BBHA wishes you a happy and healthy holiday season. **Bob Brady, BBHA Newsletter Editor, 25 McAndrew Road, Braintree, MA 02184-8245.**