

A Baseball “Lifer:” Paul Richards

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at sosebeem@sfasu.edu.

Learn more about ETHA by visiting the website at www.easttexashistorical.org.

(Mar 29, 2023) I love baseball and many of the best baseball players and managers ever have hailed from the Lone Star State. So, with the season about to begin, I thought I would offer a few baseball history columns

Ask the casual baseball fan about Paul Rapier Richards and you might get a quizzical look, or even more likely an abrupt, “Who?” But ask one of those committed “seamhead” followers of baseball about Paul Richards and you will get an earful of “fantastic manager,” “brilliant tactician,” and “heck of an executive.” Texan Paul Richards truly fit the bill of a term very rarely used today—he was the consummate “baseball lifer.”

Paul Richards was born and raised in Waxahachie where he was a fine athlete in many sports, but baseball was where he excelled. He began his professional career as an infielder in the Brooklyn Dodgers organization in 1926 when he was seventeen but eventually became a catcher. He spent seven years in the Dodgers system before finally making his major league debut in April 1932. It was a short-lived trip because the Dodgers sold him to the Minneapolis Millers of the AAA American Association in June of that year. He starred for the Millers and caught the attention of the legendary John McGraw, the owner/general manager of the New York Giants. McGraw recognized Richard’s potential and bought his rights from Minneapolis in September 1932.

Richards played two years with the Giants, generally as a back-up, then two years with the Philadelphia A’s, but then he had to return to minors with the Atlanta Crackers. It was in Atlanta that Richards also began his managing career when he became a player-manager for the team in 1938, and he quickly established himself as one of the best game managers in AAA ball. He retired as a player in 1949 but he was not ready to leave baseball. He took the job as the manager of the Chicago White Sox in 1951. Chicago’s south side

baseball team had fallen on hard times and was barely competitive in the strong American League of the immediate post-war years, but Richards instantly made a difference. Paul Richards looked around his Chicago team and knew that he had no chance of competing with the powerful New York Yankees and Cleveland Indians, so he decided to do something radically different: rely on speed, pitching, and defense. His White Sox, nicknamed the “Go-Go Sox” for the way they ran around the bases, dove for batted balls, and hustled at every turn, posted four straight winning seasons, but they could never catch the Yankees or Indians.

After four years in Chicago, Richards was ready for a new challenge, and he got one with the newly christened Baltimore Orioles. The Orioles were originally the woeful St. Louis Browns, one of the lousiest franchises in baseball history, but they had moved to Baltimore in 1954 and hoped a new setting would bring new direction. Paul Richards began to change the Orioles fortunes in 1955 when he became the manager/general manager of the team. He followed the same strategy that had turned around the White Sox, signing players who played good defense as well as top-flight pitching prospects. It was Richards who signed such Oriole legends as Brooks Robinson, Steve Barber, and Milt Pappas. The Orioles were basically starting from scratch, but the talent finally came together in 1960 when the Orioles finished second. Although Richards would leave the team after that year to return to his native Texas, the Orioles would continue Richards’ concept and became one of the best teams in baseball through the 1960s and 1970s.

Richards answered the call to return to his native Texas in 1960. Major League Baseball awarded Houston a franchise to begin play in 1960 as the Colt 45s, and they hired Richards as their first general manager. He immediately began stocking the Colt 45s with young talent such as Joe Morgan, Jimmy Wynn, Mike Cuellar, and Rusty Staub. Richards had a plan to bring the new Houston team along slowly, but owner Roy Hofheinz had other ideas—he needed a winner to fill the seats in the new Astrodome, so he fired Richards in 1965. Unfortunately, many of those budding stars would go on to fame in other locations as the newly named Astros jettisoned many of them for players who would not fulfill their potential.

Richards moved on to Atlanta, where he set out to rejuvenate the Braves, who had come south from Milwaukee. The Braves, long a second division team, won a divisional title in 1969 and Richards retired. He didn’t stay away long as he returned to Chicago as a 67-year-old manager with the White Sox in 1976. That didn’t work out too well and he left that job after one year, but he would continue to work in baseball as a special consultant for the Texas Rangers—a team that needed a lot of help. Paul Richards was still a baseball man when he died of a heart attack at the age of 77 in 1985 at his home in Waxahachie—a baseball lifer to the end.

###