

## Mr. Cub: Ernie Banks

by Scott Sosebee

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(Apr 3, 2023) This continues the series on baseball in Texas

If you begin to name the best Texas-born and raised baseball players your list would most assuredly have Ernie Banks somewhere near the top. Banks, who played his entire career with the Chicago Cubs and acquired the nickname of ‘Mr. Cub,’ made the National League All-Star team eleven times, won consecutive NL MVP awards in 1958 and 1959, and accomplished almost everything a ball player could through 1971 except for winning a pennant or a World Series. After all, he played for the Cubs.

Ernie Banks was born in Dallas in 1931, the second of twelve children. His father was a construction and warehouse worker who also played some semi-professional baseball on three teams in the Dallas area. Ernie was a talented all-around athlete, and those who saw him play as a teenager in Dallas thought he was a much better football and basketball player. But his father wanted him to play baseball, so after he graduated from Booker T. Washington High in Dallas in 1950, he signed to play semi-pro ball with the Amarillo Colts, the team’s first African American player.

Banks was the acknowledged most talented member of the Colts, and it did not take long for the Kansas City Monarchs, the most famous and best team in the Negro American League, to sign him to a contract. The Negro League had entered a precarious time in the years immediately following Jackie Robinson’s breaking of the MLB color barrier, and they made a concerted attempt to sign some young and often overlooked players. Banks joined the Monarchs for the last part of the 1950 season, but then was drafted into the United States Army in 1951. He was stationed in Germany until late 1952 and then joined the Monarchs to play in 1953.

After Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color barrier with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, the rest of the MLB teams began to scramble to sign black players. One team that had not yet signed an African American to play for the big league club by the end of 1953 was the Chicago Cubs. Cubs scouts had their eye on Ernie Banks, and after he had finished his season with the Monarchs in August 1953, they signed him to a deal and immediately brought him to Chicago. He made his MLB debut on September 17, 1953, and played the final ten games at shortstop. He began the season the next season at that spot as well and had a fine first full season, although he finished second to Wally Moon in the Rookie-of-the-Year voting.

Banks became a bona fide star in 1955 when he belted 44 home runs, drove in 117, and finished the season with a .295 average. He also made the first of his eleven all-star teams. He endured a nagging infection that limited his play some in 1956, but in the next four years Ernie Banks hit 176 home runs and had 524 RBI—both tops in the National League. He also began to turn himself into one of the top fielders at his position, finally winning a Gold Glove in 1960. He was the NL MVP in 1958 and 1959. Most people acknowledged that Ernie Banks was one of the best players in baseball and the top shortstop in either league. Poor knees and a loss of speed meant Banks had to switch to first base in 1961, and while his defense declined, his hitting did not.

Banks was one of the best players in baseball, but his team was decidedly not one of the best teams. Through Banks' first eleven seasons in Chicago, the Cubs had one winning season—82-80 in 1966—and did not come close to the playoffs. The closest “Mr. Cub” would come to the playoffs was in 1969. The Chicago team led the NL most of that year, but they had a terrible late-season swoon and were caught and passed by the “Miracle” New York Mets. Ernie Banks would retire in 1971 without ever having appeared in the postseason. He played in 2,528 games without a playoff appearance—a major league record. Although he may have had a reason to be glum, he had another nickname, “Mr. Sunshine,” and gained a reputation as one of the happiest players in the game. His famous mantra, “Let's play two,” reflected his almost youthful effervescence for the game he loved so well. Ernie Banks died of a heart attack in January 2015, which meant he did not live to see his beloved Cubs win their first World Series since 1907.

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