

Thursday, May 19, 2011

What's in a Name?

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Baseball has many things in its history that it can proud of such as a past that can claim ownership of having influenced the cultural diversity of sports and our society. As some may consider many of baseball's moves to be political, I view it as simple business progressions while improving an existing product. Baseball has always been unique in the way it operates and promotes itself. Part of baseball's uniqueness is its use of nicknames to identify its participants. We all have names- first, middle and last names. We even have nicknames, extending the explanation of who we are. These nicknames are given to individuals, groups and teams reflecting their character, skill, purpose or religion. Baseball is famous for its variety of nicknames. However; it is becoming more difficult in today's game to find a player with a professional name other than his given name at birth. I will not begin to explain why this has occurred. What I will say is that the culture of game has changed in a way that does not promote individuality.

Baseball names have served the game well, promoting and representing the game and individuals for decades. These names identified some of the greatest players who ever wore a uniform or managed the game. Many of these names are nationally recognized and others were household names to a city or region. Names like the Babe, The Wizard, Doctor K, The Rocket, the Big Unit and Charlie Hustle brought national attention to the game and the players creating excitement and anticipation of what these players were able to do. In baseball, a nickname is more than an AKA. It's a personality. It's who he is. It stands for what he represents. It stands for what fans expect to see out of a performance from that player. It should be noted that a nickname doesn't always describe a physical skill. It may describe an emotion or physical characteristic. In any case, a nickname becomes the primary name of identification; The Babe also known as George Herman Ruth, The Unit also known as Randy Johnson, The Rocket also Known as Roger Clement, The Wizard also known as Ozzie Smith, The White Rat also known as Whitey Herzog and Mookie also known as William Heyward Wilson. There are many other names, some more recognizable than others, having had a great impact on the game as well as individual careers.

The association of nicknames was not limited to individual players. Teams enjoyed the recognition that nicknames provided. The Bronx Bombers, The Big Red Machine and The Lumber Company were all good and well known teams respected for their dominance in a specific era of the team and baseball history. Just as anything else, names can reflect the good, bad or indifference and in all honesty, some nicknames are not very flattering. Whether you agree or disagree with the names, their meaning or suggestions, they have been a valuable part of baseball in its effort to reinforce its connection with its fans. Do you recognize these names: Murders Row, The Ripper, The Kid, The Hit Man, The Bash Brothers, The Big Unit, The Lumber Company, The Big Red Machine, The Rocket, Crime Dog, Spaceman, Nails, Toy Cannon, The Thrill, Rock, Say Hey Kid, The Georgia Peach, Sarge, Puge, The Bull Dog, The Barber, The Big Cat, The Yankee Clipper, The Bull, The Hawk, Stan The Man, Oil Can, Stretch, The Penguin, Strap Iron, The Cobra, Pops, Rooster, The Mad Hungarian, The Splendid Splinter, The Family, The Gas House Gang, The Wiz Kids, The Miracle Mets, Go Go Sox. If you do not recognize all of the names don't be alarmed, after all, what's in a name?

-Mookie Wilson