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Four priests, a hot towel and tiddlywinks: Our recap of Colt .45s debut 50 years ago today

Posted on April 10, 2012 at 2:06 pm by Zachary Levine in General

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Today the Astros celebrate the 50th anniversary of beating the Cubs 11-2 in their first game as a franchise by wearing their Colt .45s throwback jerseys. Here's how the accounts of that game looked one day later in the pages of the Houston Chronicle, loaded with wit, a couple of dated expressions and gratuitous piling on the Cubs.

BY ZARKO FRANKS
Staff writer

In the privacy of the Houston Colt dugout, a squat, gray machine, plugged into an electric circuit, fed moist heat to a pitcher's arm between innings.

Therein lies the story-behind-the-story of Bobby Shantz's five-hit job in Houston's 11-2 win over Chicago's Cubs in the National League baseball opener here Tuesday.

The machine is the hydrocollator. It houses perhaps a dozen moist pads.

After each inning when the 36-year-old Shantz returned to the dugout, trainer Jim Ewell would slap a towel wrapped heat pad on Shantz's left arm.

"We kept the arm hot for the full nine innings," says Ewell. "We didn't want that arm cooling off."

Ewell had used this same treatment for the once sore-armed Shantz in Kansas City several years ago.

Telegrams poured into the Colt clubhouse for Shantz after his win.

They can ad-lib on this opening day victory until umpires go soft-headed, but the Houston players who should be identified by name, rank and serial number line up like this:

Shantz first, of course, the once-little lost Dutchman who has seen service with the now-defunct Philadelphia A's, Kansas City, New York's Yankees and the Pittsburgh Pirates.

He may live in Ambler, Pa., but he's found a new home here. The fans cheered when he stepped to the plate. They booed the opposing pitcher when he threw a pitch a bit too close for comfort to Shantz.

From his press box observation post general manager Paul Richards marveled: "He's the greatest."

After Shantz, the next golden boy was Roman Mejias, the gold-toothed, 29-year-old Cuban.

A cigar clinched between the even, flashing teeth, Mejias told of his new batting technique, responsible, he says for the two home-runs he hit into the left-field bleachers.

"I just wait for the ball," he says. "I do not lunge. I hit with the hands, the wrists and the shoulders, not the body. That's the mistake. Never the body."



From left, Greer Lee, Danny Crain, Edward Neuhaus, Gene Crain, Johnnie Head and Mrs. E.L. Crain Jr., cheer the Colts to victory. (Chronicle)



Opening day in 1962 for the Colt .45s at Colt Stadium. Three years later, the team changed its name to the Astros and moved into the Astrodome. (Chronicle)

Mejias' first smash soared about 390 feet into the bleachers over the National Bank of Commerce fence sign (4 per cent interest on savings)

His next one was a mite shorter but equally as effective. Each time two players were on base. Thus Mejias, the poor man's Roger Maris, accounted personally for six runs batted in.

And it wouldn't be kosher to neglect catcher Hal Smith, third baseman Bob Aspromonte or outfielder Al Spangler.

Smith, the forgotten man of the 1960 World Series (if Smith hadn't hit his home run to tie the game in the eighth, there would have been no fame for Bill Mazeroski), hit a home run into the left-field stands, for Houston in the third.

And Aspromonte hit safely three times in four times at bat and scored three times. Spangler, who scored three times, got two hits.

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This opening day was heady, strong stuff to the new-born Colts.

"You guys broke fast from the starting gate," quipped an observer. "What gives, Richards give you all shots of adrenalin?"

Catcher Smith, at home with a guitar or a baseball bat, replied.

"We didn't come out here to play tiddlywinks, son."

Joe Amalfitano, second baseman and friend of Willie Mays, smiled:

"We played good today. But don't forget. There'll be days when we play bad."

As for the losers, one unidentified Colt in a milling mob later, cried out in mockery:

"Our hearts bleed for them."

Five Cub pitchers tried to roll back the tide of Colt hitters sassy and tanned and imbued with the health of Arizona sunshine.

They tried in vain.

Thus dawn broke Wednesday on a pure silver note of success for the Houston baseball team.

This first baseball game, it must be said, belongs in the category of a spectacle.

The fertile brain of Roy Hofheinz, the 33 per cent man of the Houston Sports Assn. (owner of the Colts) had worked overtime to celery-garnish the ball park.

Usherettes in baseball flannel blouses and skirts piped with cardinal borders seated the fans.

The grounds keepers wore orange shirts and blue Texas boots. The Hofheinz promotional touch extended itself to the pampered press corps. The menu included boiled shrimp, Pastrami, ham, cheese, meat balls and sauce, and appropriate hot weather juice.

The judge had taken out insurance against possible rain.

As the Chronicle's Morris Frank observed:

"The judge got a monsignor and four priests here. No telling how many other clergymen and rabbis he invited out."

As always, the judge prevailed. It doesn't rain.

Otherwise, the crowd of 25,271 (it was not a sellout) gave the indication that it liked what it had seen.

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