

BASEBALL DIGEST

★★ WORLD SERIES EDITION ★★

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By Abe J. Schear
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It would be unlikely to ever be able to replicate the career of Bob Hope. Working as a PR person and usher for the first Braves' team, Bob later became the public relations director for the Braves and the Atlanta Hawks (and the Atlanta Chiefs). In addition, and with the encouragement of Ted Turner and the Braves, Bob orchestrated the media around the 1972 Baseball All Star game and the Hank Aaron home run chase.

Without the benefit of a manual, Bob was able to add fun to the early Atlanta Braves experience without reducing the product to the woeful quality of play in those first years. It helped, for sure, that Bob is an Atlantan since birth, and he understood the southern mentality.

In 2015, Bob was inducted into the Atlanta Hospitality Hall of Fame, an honor which recognized his lifetime achievements and his robust volunteer spirit.

In his interview, Bob recounts an Atlanta period not too far into the past, one with wonderful characters and, like today, a "we can" attitude. His stories surely bring to life an Atlanta we have only read about, but not fully appreciated.

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Bob Hope "Memorable Moments"

Schear: Bob, where did you grow up?

I grew up in Atlanta and basically have lived here most of my life. I was in New York for 4 years, but Atlanta's my hometown.

What part of town did you grow up in?

1753 Moores Mill Road, which is Buckhead area. But back then Buckhead was more out in the country than it is today.

I live right near Moores Mill and Howell Mill.

Oh yeah, absolutely.

That was a pretty neighborhood then and it's a pretty neighborhood now.

It was a nice neighborhood. We didn't have an interstate connector back then,

Yes, we would drive down to the games. I was too young to drive back then.

Was your family interested in baseball?

Oh yeah. My dad had played baseball growing up in high school. So he was a big Crackers fan. We enjoyed baseball.

I guess the games were on the radio back then. They were the Crackers, they weren't Major League Baseball.

It was definitely the Crackers. I mean the Crackers were on Ponce de Leon and you had your favorites. Eddie Matthews was probably the darling of the Crackers and then he went to the big leagues.

They had a lot of players that came through and went on to play in the big leagues.

"We just knew there was a tree in the outfield."

so you were a little far out.

Interstate 75 probably wasn't even built then. Did you follow baseball as a child?

Yes I did. I went to a lot of Atlanta Crackers games and you know we would go to Ponce de Leon Park. Somehow, one of our neighbors was a friend of several of the Crackers players. I remember going down to their house and meeting Bob Montag and some of the other players. Whitlow Wyatt was the manager. In fact, we had a German shepherd dog that had gotten too big for our yard and we gave it to Wyatt to take out to his farm.

So you would drive down to the games?

Did you have many memories of the park or the magnolia tree out there?

Oh yeah. The magnolia tree was a fixture. I don't think that we necessarily knew that it was unique to Atlanta. We just knew there was a tree in the outfield. I heard all the stories about the longest home run ever hit was by Montag. It landed in the railroad car and ended up in Chattanooga, and that type of legendary thing.

It all gets recycled. The railroad track is part of the beltline now and they basically hit it from Home Depot onto the beltline.

That's right.

That's how I see it now when I walk on the beltline. Now did you play

baseball as a child?

I think all of us played baseball. Back then, baseball was probably in third place in the city schools. Football was the king and basketball was number two and then baseball. Oddly enough, I went to Northside High School. I think one of the years we didn't have enough

“Bob, Eddie Robinson may want to make a trade, but if you're not around and I'm not around he can't do it. So let's go sailing.” So we did.

Well, Mr. Bartholomay is a nice man. So did you follow a Major League baseball team when you were a little boy?

“I never would've been in a bar brawl if I didn't know Eddie Matthews.”

players to actually fill out the team, but everybody played a little baseball. Whether you were good at it or not, you still played baseball.

Well, what position did you play?

I was third basemen because Eddie Matthews was our star player. That was my position of choice.

Matthews had a pretty colorful history when he was in Atlanta. He was a 24/7 kind of guy, there's no question about it.

I could've probably gone my entire life and never would've been in a bar brawl if I didn't know Eddie Matthews and since I was with Eddie Matthews, I've been in several of them.

I was talking with someone about Eddie Matthews, who was a terrific baseball player and an interesting fellow, but he kept the lawyers busy when he was in Atlanta. I know that for a fact.

Well Eddie just had an active temper. I would be sitting there watching Eddie and the conversation would be casual and thoughtful. Then somebody at the next table would say something to him and chairs would start flying. It was just the nature of his personality. He drank too much – there's no question about that.

Well there's a big smile on your face, so they must be pretty good memories.

It was fine. I love Eddie Matthews. We went to baseball meetings one time in Hawaii. Eddie was the manager of the Braves and Eddie Robinson was the General Manager and he told us we needed to stay close because he was about to make a trade. This woman, Bill Bartholomay's wife, was from Hawaii and she wanted to take us out on the sail boat. Matthews looked at me and said

I mean you watched Dizzy Dean and Pee Wee Reese, the announcers on TV. All you could get was pretty much the game of the week. Tony Kubek was on for a while. On the radio you could listen to the St. Louis Cardinals.

Did you collect any baseball memorabilia?

Everybody collected baseball cards. We didn't know that it would've been worth holding on to them. After a while I think our moms threw them out. Part of growing up was having baseball cards in a shoe box.

Did you put your baseball cards on your bike?

My brother did. I think I wrecked my bike too many times.

I used to flip cards; it was sort of a gamble. You would flip them against the curb, see if they stood up or fell down. You could do pretty well with some unsuspecting people. Did you listen to or watch the games? Was either one your favorite?

Probably watching the game on TV. The game of the week was easy, because every Saturday you would turn it on (obviously it was black and white). It wasn't as easy to follow baseball on the radio. I would listen to the Crackers sometimes. Following the Crackers is very similar to following the Braves here. The Crackers were our team and big league baseball was something that was played in other places.

Somehow, down the road you got involved with the Braves.

I needed to work my way through college. I started at Georgia State and I was working on the graveyard shift at a Mead packaging company. I told people that I could do more push-ups than anybody on earth. I stayed up all

night pushing these giant rolls of paper across the concrete floor after doing it all summer and three or four months during the school year. Did that all night and then I'd go to classes in the morning. I would try to get some sleep and study. I thought there had to be a better way than that. So one Saturday morning I had my Dad drive me over to the brand new Braves stadium in Atlanta, which was just sparkling. There were trailers outside, they didn't have offices yet. I walked around and spoke with a man named Jim Hay. He told me I could fill out an application and that I could start ushering. This was during the spring of my senior year and then very quickly after that they said they had an opening. The assistant PR director was going to the army for 6 months and they asked me if I wanted to interview for the job. Lee Walburn, who was the publicity director, asked me if I knew how to write a press release. I said “absolutely I knew how to write one,” but I didn't even know what one was. He asked if I knew how to do baseball statistics. I said “yes.” He said “well bring me some samples tomorrow.” So I scrambled around. There was a guy I went to school with named Richard Hyatt who worked as a stringer for the Atlanta Constitution sports department, so I called Richard. I told him “You've got to help me write a press release and show me how to do baseball statistics.” So we did it that night. I put it in a manila folder and went in to see Lee the next day. He looked at it and said “Well, you did pretty well.” He hired me for six months and fourteen years later I was still there.

Did they have much of an idea of what they were doing? They were pretty new.

Well they were new but you know they actually ran a pretty good operation. Dick Cecil was business manager who had come from Milwaukee and done the transition. In 1965 the Crackers played in the new stadium. I ushered and did the score board in 1965 and then went into the PR department. In '67, we had the Atlanta Chiefs soccer team and I did both. I was in college and the assistant PR director for the Braves, and the PR director for the Atlanta Chiefs soccer team. It was just a great opportunity. It was a small operation, but they did good

work and I learned an awful lot because I got to do everything.

Was it pleasant to work with the newspapers back then?

Yes, well I think it's pleasant to work with them today. I enjoyed working with the newspapers. The difficult situation was that you had an afternoon paper and a morning paper. If you ever had an announcement one or the other was going to get the break on the story. The one that did not receive the breaking story would be furious. So you did have to deal with those things. The writers were friends and during my tenure, there were blessings in knowing the traditions of baseball, but there are also blessings in not knowing the traditions.

So, Atlanta hosted in 1969 the playoffs with the Mets and then, in 1972, I was

hospitality. What I didn't know until the Sunday night before (the game was on Tuesday), when the teams came in I had this hospitality set up and Major League Baseball hired the security guards. My wife was the first one to start to go in there and they said "no, no, it's men only" and I thought well that's crazy.

well it looks pretty, but it looks pretty lonely. So, they painted stripes down the first and third base lines and the tops of the dugouts. From the outfield this looked glorious. The game was about to start and I get a call from the umpire and he said we couldn't paint the field like this, it's against the ground rules.

"It was just a fun and rambunctious time."

She was walking away and Bill Lucas, who was our farm system director back then, and who was African American, grabbed my wife by the arm and said "come with me Susan" and he looked at the security guard and said "You know, they used to treat our people this way too," so they went in and word got out. Suddenly they were letting the wives

I thought, "oh my goodness, what am I going to do?" He said well we can't have the game. Luckily all the umpires were upset and trying to figure out what to do. So they called Bowie Kuhn who was the commissioner of baseball (who turned out to be just a wonderful friend) and he came down to the field. I had never met him and I thought oh my God, it's all over for me. I walked down to the Commissioner, he looked around and I said "It looks nice, doesn't it?" The umpire said "Well it's against the ground rules, you can't do it." The Commissioner said "get me a rule book." I ran up and got the rule book and he said, "This is an exhibition game, we can do whatever we want." It was just a fun and rambunctious time. I always tell people, I was 25 years old when I went into Major League Baseball All-Star game and sometimes you can do things better when you're young than you can when you're old, because you just don't know exactly why things that make sense are wrong. You just do them.

"There was a lot of innovation that went on in Atlanta simply because we were ignorant."

in charge of Major League Baseball all-star game. I wasn't really engrained in the tradition of baseball so I didn't understand that only members of the baseball press association were allowed to come into the press box. Again, I figured if you were there and you had a job to cover it, I didn't care if you were TV, radio or what, you could come in the press box. That initially set fireworks off, but then it settled down at work.

As to 1972 the all-star game, I had been to the all-star game the year before in Detroit and thought the hospitality

in the rooms. It was just really fun. I think that there was a lot of innovation that went on in Atlanta simply because we were ignorant and really didn't know why baseball did things a certain way.

That first year of the all-star game, I decorated the field. You know the NFL always had those giant logos in the center of the field. I thought well that would be cool if we had one of those in the middle of the center field. I found the guy in New Orleans that the Falcons had told me that he did the stencils. I called him and asked him if he could do

Let me fall back. You mentioned somebody that I really would love for you to talk about a second. Talk for a second about Bill Lucas.

Bill Lucas, first of all, was a wonderful man, considering what he went through and the time he went through it. There were a lot of things that happened in a very general and congenial way in Atlanta during the civil rights movement. It kept things calm and Bill Lucas was at the heart of all of that. There was some hate mail, but Bill never flared up. Bill and Hank (Aaron) stayed calm. The communities stayed calm. Bill was very active in the African American community here and very active in engaging the white business community with the African American community. I remember when I was a PR guy how

"I want it the size of the high school gym."

seemed pretty stale. I thought that was because they didn't have enough money. The next year Major League Baseball said we'd have \$40,000.00 for hospitality. I thought, well that's not very much. I called the NFL and asked how they did the hospitality for the Super Bowl. I went to the Chamber of Commerce and they called Coca-Cola, Southern Company, Delta Airlines and Atlanta Gas Light. They got money from each of them, so we had this lavish

one for the All-Star game for me. He said "yes just send me the logo for it, we'll do it." He then asked "How big do you want it." I said "Well, how big can you do it?" He said "Well, I do them in the high school gym." I said "I want it the size of the high school gym." So, we painted this giant All-Star logo in center field. My ground crew had done it because he knew it was spraying on like food color. Then they got up in the upper deck and looked at it and said

thrilled I was to be inducted into the 100% right club or the 100% wrong club, which is now a black organization really, the hierarchy of the black business community. Bill would work with them and he would bring in 12 or so black business people, who would then be honored by the organization. They

I think that's right, and part of that carries over from Ted Turner. Rubye Lucas was on the Turner board for years. He had made sure that he paid attention to the family. Ted, through all his craziness, is very wide open and has a big, giving heart. In this case, he cared a great deal about Bill.

“My all-time favorite duo was Dusty Baker and Ralph Garr.”

would do things like the Two Friends Award where they would get any of the top athletes to come to their big banquet. If they honored a black athlete, the black athlete would have to bring his best black friend. If they honored a white athlete, the white athlete would have to bring his best white friend with him. Bill was sort of the orchestrator and peace maker. He was very bright. He built a good farm system at the time when the Braves didn't really have the money to build a good farm system. He was loved by the players. He certainly started the core basis of minor league players for the Braves. He brought in people like Paul Snyder and the ones that continued to build it until they started winning in the 90's. He was quite remarkable.

It was a big loss when he died.

Oh, a huge loss. It was probably the worst night of my life. I can vividly remember the phone ringing in the middle of the night and just thinking this is not good. For whatever reason I just had this feeling that I didn't want to answer this phone. Getting word that he had an aneurism and going to the hospital and Rubye, his wife, was in the waiting room. It was me and her. She was holding on to me, crying and all. I thought this was not something I had ever done before and I didn't want to do it. It was a difficult time for all of us who knew him. He was 43 years old. He was vibrant and had an infectious, outgoing personality. One of the truly greatest people you'll ever meet. *[Note: Bill Lucas, the Braves' general manager, was the then highest ranking black executive in professional baseball. He is a member of the Braves Hall of Fame.]*

It seems like the Braves have actually done an okay job of making sure they didn't just let him be forgotten.

Thanks for sharing that. Who were your favorite players back then?

That's pretty easy. There were just certain players that were just fun to be around and my all-time favorite duo was Dusty Baker and Ralph Garr. Back then, you had a speaker's bureau, they hired three or five players to come in and just make speeches. I always put Ralph and Dusty together and the reason was they were like the greatest comedy team ever. Dusty was a straight man and Ralph was just hilarious.

Both of them were just great. One time, a promoter around town called me up and he was furious because Ralph and Dusty didn't show up for the circus parade that morning. I thought, well it's unlikely but I didn't know what to do. So I go to lunch and came back, and Ralph and Dusty were sitting there. I remember Ralph looked up at me and said "Are you mad at us?" I said "Yeah, I'm mad at you. You didn't show up to the circus parade." Then they explained to me that they walked up to the parking lot at the corner of Harris and Peachtree Street or whatever. A guy came up to them and took them across the street and pointed to an elephant. He had a stick with a nail on the end of it and poked the elephant in the trunk. He said now climb up that trunk, sit on the elephant and hold on to its ears and ride it down Peachtree Street. I said you don't have to tell me anymore, you were smart not to go. But they were just great and fun to be around.

Mike Lum was fun to be around. Phil Niekro and Hank Aaron were always gracious. They were two that were committed to do the right thing, and Phil was chairman of almost any charity that

came along. One time, Phil grabbed me and said "Bob, I'm chairman of the Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and I want you to be a big brother." I said I would be a terrible big brother. He finally got me into it. Phillip Lewis was 8 years old and I was his big brother all the way until he graduated high school. So they would recruit you to do good things. Also, the players back then were very different, particularly during the Ted Turner era. We had all these crazy promotions, the crazier the better for Ted. He was apt to come up with all of these ideas. The players were great, and would come in and present their ideas to me. I remember one of them particularly. They had found some Italian restaurant that was willing to cook spaghetti on the field after the game and the players wanted to cook it too. So we had an event with the Braves players cooking spaghetti on the field.

I interviewed Phil Niekro once and he was absolutely a gentleman. It was a lot of fun.

Phil has always been that way. I did an interview with him for the Atlanta Rotary Club a few months ago. He's just delightful and his stories are so remarkable when you consider growing up with Joe and their best friend was John Havlicek.

What was the chaos like when Hank Aaron hit his 715th home run?

Well, the event was quite remarkable. Luckily, we had hosted the '72 All-Star game, and we knew how to handle a lot of press. I called the NFL and asked them how to do a big press conference and they told me how to do a pre-game and post-game press conference. Then we would schedule interviews during the day every 15 minutes with the right people that needed to interview him in person. It really was quite wearing on Hank but he was always gracious about it, but the buildup was just intense. I don't think any of us had any idea that he was going to hit 715 on opening night. In fact, I was pretty foolish. We had so much preparation for opening night. I sent our assistant PR director to Cincinnati and that first day when Hank hit 714, I thought oh my gosh I'm in trouble. Then he came in for the opening night.

They sat him down. They didn't play

him after that.

Well they didn't want him to play, that was the problem.

He didn't play on Sunday, did he?

He did, he played all 3 days. I was holding my breath. I thought what I will do here if he hits both home runs in Cincinnati? It became a big issue. Why in the world would the National League or even Donald Davidson, who had the title of Game Director and had a lot of flexibility when setting the schedule, have let us open on the road? I think we outsmarted ourselves. Donald figured he would open three days in Cincinnati and then come home and have this long home stand and Hank would hit both home runs in Atlanta. So it was a big shocker when he hit that first home run. Cincinnati wasn't pleasant all along. There was a little bit of controversy when Jesse Jackson had called Hank in the locker room. He asked Hank to ask for a moment of silence for Martin Luther King, because it was the anniversary of his assassination. Hank put his request in with the Reds and Dick Wagner with the Reds turned him down and said they wouldn't do it. Then suddenly the media makes it sound like Hank was raising hell over something when he was just making a reasonable request.

Before the first Atlanta game, it was somebody's idea for Pearl Bailey to sing the national anthem. How did you get her to sing?

Somebody had her phone number and I was asked to give her a call. I was doing the pre-game ceremonies for the opening game, which is why I stayed and didn't go to Cincinnati. I had to paint the flag on the field, which was a map of the U.S which looked like a flag, and we were going to re-live this is your life Hank Aaron. We wanted to do something that was pretty dramatic, which was the National Anthem and Pearl Bailey was about as big a name as any. Somebody gave me her phone number. I called and this lady answered the phone and I said "Ms. Bailey?" She said "Can I tell her who's calling?" I told her "this is Bob Hope, not the television Bob Hope." She said "I know which Bob Hope this is, the

one with the Braves." She said "This is Ms. Bailey." She was just delightful, and I asked her if she would come sing the National Anthem. She said she would love to do it and would be there.

What do you remember about that night?

Well, it was chilly and raining. I remember there was a lot of pre-game chaos on the field. Of all the ceremonies we have had I don't think I've ever been accused of underdoing anything. I probably overdid it. We had a lot of people that were there for Hank, which put a lot of pressure on him. He had to see them before the game, socialize and talk with them. I remember the excitement from his mom and dad being there. It was just kind of a shocker when he swung the bat and the ball went over the fence. You just sort of stand there watching the game and for whatever reason the reality was a little surreal. After all, this is the first game, he is surely not going to hit it tonight, and suddenly one swing of the bat, and it's over with. Tom House comes running in with the ball. Tom House was sort of like a cartoon character, very bouncy. I

so you would have a couple of drinks before the game. There were other colorful announcers. I remember Harry Caray and Skip Caray.

You were with the Braves for a long time.

Yes, 14 years.

Tell me if you were a commissioner of baseball for a day or two what would you change about baseball?

You see it from a PR standpoint and you understand the fans' perspective. What would you do?

I think they are doing a pretty good job within the game. I definitely think that the timing of the pitches to keep the game moving along is important. I also don't think you should give a pass to the batter and not throw the four balls for intentional walk. I think the mechanics of the game and the symmetry of the game are so important. When you consider that there are 81 home games and how much they charge per ticket and what the attendance is today, they don't get credit for marketing it. I think if there was anything that I would change would be to work much harder to get the personalities out there.

"Pearl Bailey was about as big a name as any."

always tell people that Tom House was a really good relief pitcher. If Tom House could pitch in the big leagues, anybody could. He wasn't really a great athlete, but just a great guy. He came running in with the ball and he was all excited and he ran to the two guys who did all of our security and nobody could possibly get on the field, but then we saw the guys running around the bases with Hank.

This is just great. I just have a couple of more questions. So, of the announcers that were around, which were your favorites?

I think my favorites were, all of them were different in their own way, Ernie Johnson. Pete Van Wieren. I remember listening to audition tapes when we hired Pete for \$17,000/yr. It was down to two, either Pete or another guy. Skip would want to take you into the press lounge

There was a time when baseball really was a soap opera sport and you would follow it, day in and day out, and the players were personalities and you knew what they were like, you knew them as people. It was like watching a soap opera on TV. Today you don't really get the opportunity to understand their personalities. The players change teams a lot and it's not quite the same intimate relationship that you had with the fans. I think if they could build on personalities of the players, it would help a lot.

What do you think of the new ball park?

I think they did a marvelous job, though I'm not sure why we need three ball parks.

Well, this is great and I'm going to stop right here. Thank you so much.

**Bob Hope
“Memorable Moments”**

***** 73rd EDITION *****

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