

Fred Russell and Baseball

By Bill Traughber

April 29, 2009

Fred Russell was born in Nashville and a Vanderbilt graduate that became a legendary sports writer for the *Nashville Banner*. Russell graduated from the university in 1927. He was a member of the Commodore baseball team, but saw limited action. Russell wrote in his autobiography "Bury Me in an Old Press Box" about his baseball days:



"Vanderbilt has no journalism course, and even had there been one in my day, I always felt I was lucky. So did some other people. The Vanderbilt baseball coach, Josh Cody, a superstitious fellow, thought the team had a better chance to win if I kept custody of the infield practice ball, which I did except on those few dangerous occasions when I was pitching or playing in the infield. And if I showed up at an important basketball game, Josh had a place for me on the bench—always on his left."

Russell authored several books recounting his experiences mingling with athletes from all sports. He covered the Nashville Vols baseball team of the Southern Association for the *Banner*. These are some of the baseball related stories from his book published in 1957, "Bury Me in an Old Press Box:"

*Ben Chapman [Nashville-born] thought up a clever scheme of checking [curfews] when he managed the Phillies. The elevator man who came on at midnight at the club's spring headquarters, the Fort Harrison Hotel in Clearwater, was a baseball bug. So Ben would give him a baseball and suggest that he get some of the Phillies' autographs before he went off duty at 8 a.m., and show him the ball the next night. Thus Chapman got the evidence—in writing.

*The game's true rowdies thrived long before my day, but Buster Brown, a Nashville first baseman and pitcher of the 1920's, wouldn't have been out-tongued in any era. He was from East St. Louis and his nose and tell-tale thickened scar-tissue beneath the skin around his eyes showed he had been a prizefighter. He carried a spring-lock knife with a blade about five inches long—actually kept it in his uniform a fact well known to visiting players. Regularly before a game Buster would stroll over to the visiting bench, stick his head in and ask, belligerently: "Any you guys want to fight?" There would ensue a silence. Then Buster would say: "If you doesn't then keep your lip buttoned."

*Jimmy Hamilton, an Ohioan who managed all over the minors, including Nashville (1923-28), was notorious for always having three clubs: one coming, one going and one on the field. At Mobile in 1930 he traveled with twelve regular players and in each of the seven other Southern Association cities signed semi-pros for three-day stretches. Jimmy was unpredictable, a violent extremist, cordial one day and not speaking the next. During a Nashville road slump he threw all the bats off the train, proclaiming that to pay freight on them was a sheer waste. He detested the wearing of knickers and once made two players change to overalls, saying they "should be learning a trade."

*Strangest bargain I've witnessed in baseball resulted in Charlie Dressen, jobless and broke, getting his first chance as a manager at Nashville in July, 1932. "How do I know you can manage?" [Fay] Murray [Vols owner] asked him. Dressen had no answer for that, but inquired as to what he expected for the remainder of the season. "I want a team that can beat .500, can win over half its games," Murray explained. "That's all I ask this year. We got off to a bad start; we won 36 and lost 40 now. I won't have a manager who can't win more than half his games."

"Here's a proposition," Dressen said. "Make me manager the rest of the season and if the club doesn't win over half its games, you don't owe me a cent of salary. Just bare expenses." Murray amused took him up. On the last day of the season, Nashville under Dressen had won exactly 38 games and lost 38. That afternoon they broke loose for a six-run rally in the eighth inning to win the final game from Atlanta, 12 to 8. And a manager started on his way to the big leagues.

*Now out of baseball, [Johnny] Gooch often exercises a mock cynicism. I saw him in Nashville one day recently thumbing a ride in the opposite direction from which all traffic was moving. "Just trying to

spot a true friend," he said. "A true friend is one who'll turn his car around and take you where you want to go. "I was sitting next to him at a café counter one time when he had trouble getting salt to come out of his shaker. "Don't nothing work no more," he said.

*Many catchers become managers, among the four now handling major league clubs is Paul Richards of Baltimore, intelligent, highly imaginative and—in his days at Atlanta—the owner of a fiery temper. During one season, 1938, umpires ejected him twenty-three times. When his club wasn't playing to suit him, Richards enforced a rule that nobody could take a shower for an hour after a defeat, the players had to sit and brood too.

*Another funster to reform before he arrived in the Southern Association as Nashville manager in 1949 was Rollie Hemsley. A pennant winner his first year, too When Rollie was catching for the St. Louis Browns, he used to bring in a basket of frogs from his farm and distribute one to a berth in the railroad sleeper as a road trip began. Manager Rogers Hornsby fined him \$50. "Hornsby was against playing cards, drinking beer and almost anything you can think of," Hemsley said. "So one night before we left on a trip, I brought a knitting set, got a corner seat in the smoker and pretended to knit. Wasn't doing too bad either. When Hornsby came around, he fined me \$150. I bet I'm the only ball player in history who ever got fined for knitting."

*Outfielder Dusty Rhodes of the New York Giants was a [Vols manager Larry] Gilbert discovery, raised on a farm near Montgomery, Alabama. Nashville started him with Hopkinsville, Kentucky, in the Kitty League, where he was encountered walking toward the ball park one day eating a slice of bread with a loaf under his arm. "I had to eat cornbread all my life," Dusty explained. "I always said that if I got into baseball and get enough money I would buy a loaf of light bread and eat it all."

*When bad luck comes in concentrated doses, and the snakes are really after you, I'm reminded of Rod Murphy, an Atlanta first baseman in the 1920's. In a game at Nashville his first-inning error had permitted two runs. He popped up the first time at bat, struck out the next time and on the third trip with runners on first and second and none out, he hit into a double play. Exasperated and self-condemning, Murphy chose not to return to the Atlanta bench, but exiled himself for the remainder of the inning by sitting on the ground against the grandstand wall in short right field. In the front row box seats at the exact location were two little boys whose doting father had over-stuffed them with peanuts, popcorn, ice cream and soft drinks. One

became sick, in a big way, vomiting right on Mr. Murphy, and I can see Rod now, stalking to the clubhouse leaving cap and shirt behind and raving to heaven.

*I, sitting on the Nashville bench, remarked that Mike Dejan, Birmingham outfielder, certainly could hit the ball a long way. This conversation ensued:

JOHN MIHALIC—"Yes, he has a lot of power, as much as anybody in the league."

ORIS HOCKETT—"What nationality is he, French?"

BOB BOKEN—"No, he's a Pole."

MIHALIC—"I know one thing, he was born in Canada."

BOOTS POFFENBERGER—"That's tough."

MIHALIC—"Why? What's tough about it?"

POFFENBERGER—"He can never be President."

Russell also co-authored with George Leonard the booklet, "Vol Feats, 1901-1950," a history of the first 50 years of the Nashville Vols published in 1950. He died in 2003 at age 96.

If you have any comments or suggestions you can contact Bill Traughber via e-mail WLTraughber@aol.com.

