

FROM THE BULLPEN



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NEW COMMISSIONER DESCRIBED AS "ENIGMATIC," RUTHLESS

The choice of the baseball owners for their new commissioner, little-known Robert Hurlbut of Lincoln, Nebraska, was described by friends and colleagues as "enigmatic." In the words of long-time friend and fellow rotisserie league owner David Ernst. "He's a hard guy to figure out." Ernst was quoted as saying: "The guy will bungee jump out of a hot air balloon, yet he's afraid to take a bath in more than six inches of water. One minute he tells you that he will never wear a fez, and never ride a camel. The next minute you see him galloping around the Sphinx on a two-humper, and then dancing with young Egyptian males, gaily festooned in a fire engine red fez with a gold tassel. What more can I tell you?"

Others echoed the sentiments of Mr. Ernst. Said an obviously embittered Jon "What you're buying, I'm selling" Thielen -- a credit card huckster from Omaha -- "I remember just a few years ago in Chicago, Bob dressed me down in front of all my baseball friends after learning of my own engagement. He told me my life was over, that I would never again be the Captain of my own ship. Then he gulped down a flaming quadruple shot of tequila and screamed like a banshee halfway across Lake Michigan that 'I Love My Life,' and then bolted to the dance floor and boogied solo to a Reggae band for a good hour. And then he proceeds to get engaged and tie the knot himself. Go figure!"

Others pointed out that Hurlbut can be ruthless and even mean-spirited, especially when backed into a corner. "I remember one year when I was drafting ahead of him in our Hot Stove League draft, and I told him that I was taking his cherished Vince Coleman in the next round," said fellow fantasy league owner Chuck "Shamu" Sinclair. "Underbelly turned red as a beet, snatched away my third Runza from me and tossed it in the garbage, called me an overweight, carrot-topped wussy for getting married, and told me I was making the biggest mistake of my life. And now he's taking the marital plunge. I just don't get it."

Even long-time confidante and friend, Denny "The Quiet Man" Bontrager, could not hide his amazement. "He'll never paddle his own canoe again," remarked Bontrager, "but he'll make a hell of a commissioner. After all, he's beat me out of 11th place in the Hot Stove League standings for the last three or four years in a row. That man knows his baseball!"

The consensus was that Hurlbut will be a powerful and decisive commissioner for the major leagues, acting swiftly to resolve any disputes between labor and management. When asked what his greatest fear would be as the new commissioner of baseball, Hurlbut reported that "I just hope that I can finally get a good seat where I won't have to worry about getting 'Turked.'" When asked what his first official post-strike act would be as the new Guardian of the Gate, Hurlbut replied, "I'm really not sure. I'll have to go talk with Jody."

COMMISSIONER HURLBUT TAKES WIFE, SETTLES STRIKE

AP Lincoln, NE — By any account, October 8, 1994, was a red-letter day for Lincolnite Bob Hurlbut and major league baseball. After beginning the day with a subpar round of golf with his wedding party at Woodland Hills in Eagle, Nebraska, this former refrigerator deliveryman was tabbed by the baseball owners' association to replace Bud Selig as acting commissioner of baseball. Hurlbut's busy day continued as he immediately called the owners' and players' associations together for a coast-to-coast video-conferencing bargaining session, determined to break the gridlock and settle the strike. After taking time to exchange wedding vows with new bride, Jody Vasina, in an early evening ceremony at the Cathedral of the Risen Christ, the new strongman of baseball put the finishing touches on the strike settlement via cellular phone as he rode in a champagne-doused limousine to his wedding reception at the Rock 'N' Roll Runza in downtown Lincoln.

Hurlbut was asked at his reception how he had been able to bring the baseball strike to such a swift conclusion, only hours after being named commissioner of major league baseball: "Hey, baby. It was a piece of cake. I just had to let those punk millionaires know who was boss. Once they got the drift on that, it was a snap. Get it?"

When asked if players' representative Donald Fehr was a stumbling block to the settlement, Hurlbut responded: "Donnie Baby? Are you kidding? He knows better. The last thing he wanted was for me to put a biceps lock on his ugly grape and give him a Dutch rub."

Hurlbut declined to comment on the rumor that the settlement involved a Union-style seven-figure kickback to Fehr.

The new czar of baseball quickly made his mark on the game known, shouting down the bombastic Steinbrenner when a faction of the owners attempted to break rank, and demanding unfettered discretion and power when dealing with owner and player relations. Seizing upon his new-found power, "The Little Dictator," (as he has already been branded by the media) fulfilled a long-time dream and ordered the immediate invalidation of the contracts of Darryl Strawberry, Dwight Gooden, Vince Coleman, Rickey Henderson, Benita Santiago, Sammy Sosa and Deion Sanders. And finally, to close out a frenetic day at the helm, Hurlbut ordered the immediate transfer of the baseball franchises in Milwaukee, Seattle and Pittsburgh to Omaha, Lincoln and Grand Island, Nebraska, and the construction of three new baseball parks to house them: "Bob's Ballpark" in Omaha; "The House That Hurlbut Built" in Lincoln; and "Underbelly Park" in Grand Island, to be modeled after the historic Polo Grounds. The announcement, made from the dais at his wedding reception, was greeted with whistling, cheering and stamping of feet, as the excited throng in attendance broke into a spontaneous wave, and then carried the triumphant Hurlbut out of the Rock 'N' Roll Runza on their shoulders, and into the streets of Lincoln, where they were met by a flood of frenzied fans.

When the hullabaloo from his masterful settlement of the strike had settled down, Hurlbut and his new bride enjoyed celebrating their new marriage with friends and family. The couple was treated to a stirring poetic tribute by groomsman and long-time Hurlbut caddy, David Ernst:

A POEM FOR UNDERBELLY

I first met Bob in Lincoln.
The year, I think, was '72.
Back then he had a bit more hair
And hung out with a motley crew.

He starred for Houston Fleetwood
On the mound and at the plate.
He could have played in the major leagues

But for a twist of fate.

They needed him at old B.N.
A man to pull the switch.
But most of all his name was called
When they needed a fourth for pitch.

A train man till his dying days,
You'll find him at the yards,
Or hiding in a boxcar
Dealing out the cards.

A traveler by nature,
By car or train or plane.
He's been to every country,
But no longer welcome in Spain.

I've been with him in the Islands
Where he earned a golden tan.
I've heard the natives call him
The Ugly American.

I've broken bread with him in Egypt,
Watched him sail upon the Nile.
He even wore a fez there,
And that really made him smile.

I've seen him ride a camel,
Although he swore he never would.
I've heard him order a meal in French.
He asked for a saucer of wood.

We've been to many ballparks
And tipped back many beers.
I've seen him get the tap from the Turk
Among his greatest fears.

He bungy jumps from hot air balloons.
He parachutes from planes.
He parasails across the sea.
His courage never wanes.

I've often heard him comment,
Oh, how he loves his life.
He said, "You guys are crazy!
I'll never take a wife."

He watched as Dave and John and Chuck
From bachelorhood they turned.
He gasped with fear as they went one by one
So you think he would have learned.

But by and by Bob met fair Jody
And life will never be the same.
Tomorrow they'll walk down the aisle together
The great bold eagle she has tamed.

Bob said he'd never ride a camel.

He said he'd never take a wife.
He promised he'd never wear a fez.
But he lied -- and tomorrow he will truly
love his new life.

Hurlbut was visibly emotional after the recitation of the poem, turned to his new bride, and, choking back tears, announced, "It was all a big lie. My life as a bachelor was empty and meaningless. My world travels and baseball trips were only to fill the lonely and miserable hours of my solitary life. Now it's up to you to change all that, Jody. Make me a whole person, make my life complete, I beg you!"

After this gut-wrenching confession, after baring his soul to family and friends, Hurlbut turned to the tearful crowd and announced, "Hey, what's everybody staring at? Did somebody die? Let's party!"

Taking a page from his bachelor-days playbook, Hurlbut dazzled the curious onlookers with his footloose and devil-may-care dancing, ripping off a tango with his new bride that would make Valentino proud, segwaying into a crowd-pleasing break-dance, and then finishing off the set with a solo Russian folk dance, to the stomps and cheers of the maddened crowd.