

# NEBRASKA HOT STOVE LEAGUE



SEASON XXXVII



2020 HSL Champion  
West Des Moines Cubs  
Manager: Shamu

400

## FROM THE BULLPEN

2021 Campaign

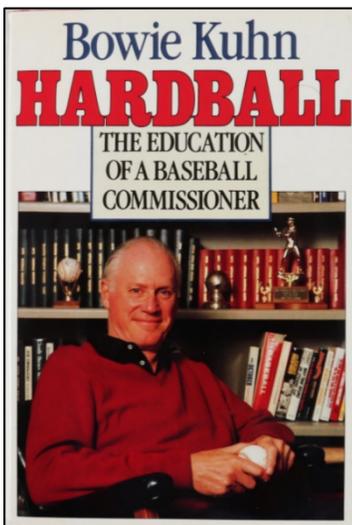
Edition No. 6

March 26, 2021

Brethren:

This edition of *From the Bullpen* comes to you from the breathtaking mountains of Summit County, Colorado, where HQ and I have been spending the week in a desperate search for a brief change of scenery in these activity-stifling times.

### BOOK REPORT: *HARDBALL* By Bowie Kuhn



During our down time this week, when not binge-watching *Better Call Saul*<sup>1</sup>, I have been reading the book *Hardball*, the autobiography of former major league baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn, who served two tumultuous seven-year terms plus at the helm between 1969 and 1984. It is really fascinating to read about all of the labor strife that Kuhn had to deal with during this era when Marvin Miller was trying to help the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA) rid professional baseball of the pseudo-slavery player contract system with its innocent-sounding but wickedly one-sided "Reserve Clause." Some really compelling stuff. Allow me to share a few anecdotes from the book:



As the 1974 season approached, Henry Aaron needed only one dinger to tie Babe Ruth's career record of 714 home runs. However, the Atlanta Braves were scheduled to open on the road at Cincinnati that year and Braves owner Bill Bartholomay indicated that he was going to sit Hammerin' Hank out for the first three games of the season so he could tie and break the record at home. Commissioner Kuhn did not

<sup>1</sup> To which I am now fully committed, after a lame two or three episode foray a year or two ago.

feel this would be in the best interests of baseball, and so he ordered the Braves to play Aaron in at least two of the first three games at Riverfront Stadium.

Kuhn attended the opening day game in the Queen City with Vice-President Gerald Ford as his special guest—having traveled there together from DC on Air Force Two—and Aaron did not disappoint, sending the first pitch that he saw over Charlie Hustle's head and the left field fence for a home run. Instant jubilation, even for an opposing player. Kuhn had planned a brief on-field ceremony to honor Aaron right then and there, but apparently nobody had bothered to tell this to Reds' executive Dick Wagner. As the Commish and VP Ford were attempting to walk down to the field for the celebration, they saw that nobody had bothered to bring around a ladder to allow them field access.

Kuhn approached the crusty general manager of the Reds, the notoriously stubborn and taciturn Dick Wagner<sup>2</sup> for assistance in getting them down onto the field, but Wagner<sup>3</sup> initially refused and indicated they were not going to stop the game for such nonsense. Surprised but not subdued at Wagner's refusal, Commissioner Kuhn quickly exercised his imperial powers and ordered Wagner to stop the game and allow for the celebration, threatening suspension if the man referred to as "the Field Marshal" did not comply. He did, and the brief celebration was had.

 Kuhn was born in Washington, D.C., where his mother was from, but his father was a native German who emigrated to Pittsburgh when he was young. As a boy, Kuhn made a dollar a game as a scoreboard boy inside the scoreboard at old Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C., when the scoreboard would be a brutal sweatbox on humid summer days. When Kuhn was a senior at Theodore Roosevelt High School in Washington, D.C., he was approached by the then-coach, Red Auerbach, about going out for the basketball team since he was 6 foot 5 inches tall and had not previously played. After a tryout, Auerbach and Kuhn agreed that he was best suited to being a supporter and not a player, but after Auerbach moved on, his replacement coach put Kuhn on the team, where he earned his only varsity letter.

 The 1972 strike by the MLBPA was the first ever in professional sports, according to Kuhn. Marvin Miller used it to enhance his leverage in negotiating the arbitration clause as well as the 5/10 (5 years with one team, ten years of total ML service) trade veto rule in 1973.

 In 1974, arbitrator Peter Seitz ruled that Catfish Hunter was a free agent because his owner, Charlie Finley, was late in making a \$50,000 annuity insurance payment required under Hunter's contract. Although initially Kuhn imposed a moratorium on any dealings with Hunter, eventually he lifted the embargo and the Catfish Hunter sweepstakes began. Club owners and managers from many of the major league teams flocked to tiny, rural Ahoskie, North Carolina, to the law firm of Cherry, Cherry & Blythe to make their pitch for the Catfish. Not surprisingly, the Yankees won this

---

<sup>2</sup> Who, many of you may know, was married to a first cousin of the mother of our own beloved Underbelly.

<sup>3</sup> Who many people pronounced "Vogg-nerr" after the stern and staid German composer.

beauty contest by virtue of a \$3.5 million contract with Hunter, an absolutely insane amount at that time.

 Kuhn was no fan of Charles O. Finley. While he acknowledged in the book that Finley skillfully built the Oakland A's team that won three straight World Series championships, he stated that it was "distasteful" to hand him the championship trophy for three consecutive years. Finley was no admirer of Kuhn either, and during a three-week trial involving Kuhn nullifying Finley's attempted fire sale of Rollie Fingers and Joe Rudi to the Boston Red Sox, Finley's enmity toward Kuhn was apparent and led to him repeatedly referring to Kuhn as "the village idiot." When the two encountered each other in the hall of the courthouse, Finley would greet Kuhn with an "Eff you, you SOB!"

 While Kuhn comes across in the book as rather arrogant, thin-skinned and imperious—as well as a revisionist historian in some respects--he scored points with me because of his following comments about minor league ballparks and people:

*One of the joys of travel for me was the minor league ballparks and people. I always felt that the heart of baseball was in those nostalgia-laden bandboxes and hard-striving people. There was a rich-textured, profound feel of the game in the minors that I found nowhere else, something closer to the game I first knew as a lad in Griffith Stadium and Forbes Field. So I beat my way across the minors from the Carolinas to Oregon, from Connecticut to West Texas, and I ate their hot dogs, savored their hospitality and told them how much I cherished them. There was jubilation in my shop as the minors soared in popularity during my time in office.*

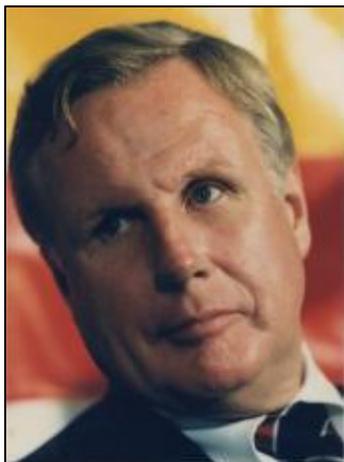
On balance, I thought *Hardball* was an excellent read, particularly for someone who was an ardent fan of the game during his 15 plus years-regime, and who remembers the many historic, game-changing events of those times. I recommend it without reservation.

Lastly, as your bonus for this week's edition of *From the Bullpen*, the following is the obituary which ran for Underbelly's third cousin-in-law, thrice removed, the inestimable Dick Wagner. Do yourself a favor and read it. The man had a career, mostly in baseball, which is best described as unparalleled. Wow.

See you on Sunday, boys. Can't wait!

Skip

*Richard Wagner, a former sports, entertainment, and broadcasting executive who spent twenty-five years in major league baseball, died October 5th [2006] in Phoenix Arizona. He was 78. After several years as Director of Promotions with the St. Louis Cardinals, Wagner*



*joined the Cincinnati Reds in 1967 and spent fifteen years in the front office during that club's successful run as "The Big Red Machine." He began by supervising business affairs for the Reds, helping to pioneer, develop and refine marketing and promotional efforts that resulted in a series of attendance records. Later, he added duties on the player personnel side and in 1978 was made President and General Manager of the team. During the years Wagner was part of the organization, the Reds won two World Series, four league flags, and six division titles. His tenure with Cincinnati ended in 1982, and several years later became President of the Houston Astros. In 1986, the Astros won a National League Western Division title. In 1988, Commissioner Peter Ueberroth and American League President Bobby Brown named Wagner a Special Assistant. Throughout the next decade, he served Brown and a succession of Commissioners ---U-*

*berroth, Bart Giamatti, Faye Vincent, and Bud Selig-as a top-level aide. Wagner's life in professional baseball began at a very young age. In 1947, fresh out of the Navy and only 19, he took a position as business manager of the Class D farm team in Thomasville, Georgia, a Detroit Tigers affiliate. In a prosperous era for the minor leagues, with teams in many cities and towns, Wagner steadily worked his way up through leagues and classifications, shifting at one point to the Pittsburgh Pirates chain and working there under the tutelage of Branch Rickey. He held minor league administrative posts in Flint, Michigan; Miami, Florida; San Antonio, Texas; Hutchinson, Kansas and Lincoln, Nebraska. At Lincoln, in 1958, he was named Top Minor League Executive by the The Sporting News. Shifting career tracks in 1959, Wagner took a position as General Manager of Pershing Auditorium in Lincoln, Nebraska. In the next decade, he held posts in entertainment and broadcasting. He was an executive for Ice Capades in Hollywood, California. In Salina, Kansas, Wagner ran radio station KSAL. He also served as General Manager of the Forum of Inglewood, home of the Los Angeles Lakers and Kings. From the Forum, he returned to major league baseball, where he spent the remaining balance of his working years. Wagner retired to Phoenix with his wife Gloria<sup>4</sup>, who survives him. There he served on the board of the Western Art Associates of the Phoenix Art Museum and as a vice-president of the Association of Professional Ball Players of America, an organization dedicated to 'Ball Players Helping Ball Players'. He kept in contact with friends and associates from his long and varied career. A car accident in 1999 resulted in trauma and injuries that required attention for the rest of his life. Aided by doctors, nurses and therapists, he met these challenges well, approaching them with the same energy and intelligence he brought to the many jobs he was privileged to hold during his life. Dick Wagner firmly believed, and he often told his family and friends that "No one has had a better time in life than I". Richard Wagner was born in 1927 in Central City, Nebraska, to Esther and John Howard Wagner. His*

---

<sup>4</sup> Gloria's maiden name was Larsen and she was the first cousin of Underbelly's mom, Donna Marie Andersen; they grew up together in the nearby Central City and Marquette, Nebraska communities.

*brother Forrest predeceased him. Along with his wife of 56 years, Gloria, Wagner leaves a son Randy, daughter-in-law Sally, and grandchildren Zane, Liz and Ian of Vancouver, Washington; daughter Cynthia Wagner Weick, and son-in-law Brian of Monterey, California; sister Kaye Wagner of Tarzana, California; and sister-in-law Beverly McIlInay of Jackson, Wyoming. A memorial service is scheduled for October 14th in Beatrice, Nebraska at 11:30 am at Griffiths-Hovendick Chapel with Reverend Karzes of Centenary United Methodist Church officiating. Interment will be at Evergreen Home Cemetery. In lieu of flowers Dick may be remembered by a donation to the Association of Professional Ball Players of America, 1820 W. Orangewood Ave., Suite 206, Orange, CA 92868.*