

FROM THE BULLPEN

Official Newsletter of the

NEBRASKA HOT STOVE LEAGUE

2023: Our 39th Season

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October 18, 2023

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Ted Bridges
("PAwesome")
Wahoos
Returning Champion

Jeff Bechtolt
("Screech")
Monarchs

Jon Blongewicz
("Sunny")
Blues

Denny Bontrager
("SloPay")
Bears

Jim Buser
("Tirebiter")
Redbirds

Rick Drews
("Big Guy")
Tigers

Dave Ernst
("Skipper")
Senators

Bob Hurlbut
("Underbelly")
Tribe

Scott Krause
("BT")
Saints

Mike Morris
("Mouse")
Bombers

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Dave Ernst

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IN PRAISE OF MR. OCTOBER

By curious happenstance, I woke up this morning to read my daily chapter of *Why We Love Baseball* and saw that the chapter (#24) was titled *Mr. October*, and subtitled *October 18, 1977, Bronx*.

In other words, exactly 46 years ago *today*. As HQ would put it, one of those *God Wink* moments. So of course, I have to share it all with you fine fellows, so that all of you, like me, can now know exactly how Reggie Jackson became known as *Mr. October*, and it's not in a way that anyone would expect.

So here you are:

Most people think that Reggie Jackson got his famous nickname Mr. October *because* he hit three home runs in Game 6 of the 1977 World Series against the Los Angeles Dodgers. That's sort of true.

And it's also not true at all.

By the time he hit those three home runs, there were some people already calling him Mr. October. It's just that they didn't mean it as a compliment.

Baseball nicknames have often started out as insults. Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford called Pete Rose Charlie Hustle, because they were annoyed by the way he ran to first base on walks and never stopped talking or moving during spring training. "Hey," Ford said to Mantle sarcastically, "look at Charlie Hustle over there." Rose later embraced the name.

Shoeless Joe Jackson hated his nickname all his life. Negro Leagues star Turkey Stearnes got the nickname because he ran like a turkey, and he didn't like that one, either. They called Ted Williams "Kid," because he didn't like being called a kid. They called Eddie Collins "Cocky." They called Charlie Keller "King Kong," because, as Lefty



Gomez said, "Keller wasn't scouted. He was trapped." Keller so loathed the nickname that people knew better than to say it to his face.

So: Mr. October. That sounds complimentary, right? Well, let's start here: The 1977 Yankees were a complete mess. They had signed Reggie during the off-season, and probably the quickest way to explain him is to use the words he used about himself in his autobiography, Reggie: "My name is Reggie Jackson, and I am the best in baseball. This may sound conceited, but I want to be honest about how I feel."

Reggie was hardly the only strong personality with the Yankees. The newspapers called owner George Steinbrenner "King George." The manager, Billy Martin, was always getting fired and always getting in fights. The catcher and captain, Thurman Munson, was a proud Ohioan who always felt like the team was disrespecting him.

Jackson gave an interview early in the season that questioned Munson's leadership skills.

"I'm the straw that stirs the drink," Jackson said.

There were problems all season. At one point, Jackson refused to high-five the rest of his teammates after a home run and claimed it was because his hand hurt.

"He said that?" Munson asked incredulously. "He's a liar."

Later, Martin and Jackson almost came to blows on national television. Later still . . . well, hey, why don't we just let the *New York Post's* Henry Hecht summarize it for us. He wrote this on the day that the Yankees clinched the American League East.

Reggie Jackson can't stand Billy Martin. He has an uneasy truce with Thurman Munson. He wants to do well for his ego and for George Steinbrenner. Thurman probably wishes Reggie would disappear. He hates Steinbrenner over a small matter of some \$1.3 million. Martin has no use for Steinbrenner, little use for Reggie except when Reggie hits a home run.

See how much fun it is being around the Yankees?

But hey, the Yankees did make the postseason, and Reggie guaranteed that he would be the difference maker. He was, you see, Mr. October. That's the name he gave himself. "People with the strongest character usually succeed in the biggest moments," he told a reporter. He meant himself.

It might have gone unnoticed except Jackson promptly had a terrible American League Championship Series against Kansas City. He went 0-for-4 in Game 1 and misplayed a ground ball. He went hitless again in Games 3 and 4. He was so bad that Billy Martin benched him for the decisive Game 5. Jackson did come in later as a pinch hitter in the seventh inning, but the bottom line is that he hit .125 for the series and the Yankees had won in *spite* of him, not because of him.

It didn't get much better in the early part of the World Series against the Dodgers. Reggie was pulled for a defensive replacement in Game 1. He went 0-for-4 with two strikeouts in Game 2, and then after the game, he angrily second-guessed Martin's decision to start Catfish Hunter, who had been injured and had not pitched for more than a month.

"How could he pitch him?" Jackson complained. "In a World Series, how do you make a decision like that on a guy like Hunter? It's not fair to Cat, and it's not fair to us."

Martin was furious: "This guy has a lot of growing up to do," he raged. "As long as I'm the manager here, I'm gonna do things my way, and no player will ever tell me what to do. If he wants to come into my office and make a suggestion, I'd love it. I'd like to teach him. Maybe he'd make a good manager someday."

But as angry as Martin may have been, it was Thurman Munson who had reached his breaking point. He was angry about the mayhem surrounding the team, angry about his contract, and most of all, he was angry at Reggie Jackson for, well, everything.

"We're trying to win a damn World Series and somebody's stirring," Munson told reporters. "If I was hitting .111 or whatever, I wouldn't be second-guessing the damn manager. I'm going to stop talking here because the more I talk the angrier I get."

But he went on . . .

"Don't call me Captain Yankee. Call me ex-Captain Yankee. There are so many things going on. I've just got to laugh. Reggie hasn't been doing all that well. Still, he keeps talking. I guess Billy doesn't realize that he's Mr. October!"

There it was. There was the introduction of Mr. October. Munson meant it as the biggest dig he could imagine. Jackson was hitting .136 in the playoffs. He was causing endless problems. He was dragging the Yankees down. And yet he was calling himself Mr. October.

That was the joke.

Only . . . the newspapers didn't really get the joke.

Over the next days, they started referring to Reggie Jackson as "Mr. October." Some put quotations around the words to indicate irony. But others liked the sound of the name. It does have a ring.

In Game 4, Reggie Jackson doubled and homered and the Yankees were suddenly just one win away from the World Series title.

"While Ron Guidry held the spotlight," the Associated Press wrote, "a great deal of credit for the triumph must go to Reggie Jackson, the man his teammates call 'Mr. October' because of his record of performing well in postseason play."

The man his teammates call Mr. October.

Poor Thurman Munson. His joke had backfired. Jackson did not, at that point, have a record of performing especially well in the postseason. Going back to his days in Oakland, he was only a .254 lifetime postseason hitter with five total home runs. But the power of Reggie's personality made him seem greater. People were really beginning to call him Mr. October.

And then came Game 6 and the name would be his forever.

* * * * *

The Yankees were down by two runs when Reggie stepped to the plate in the second inning. Dodgers' pitcher Burt Hooton walked him on four pitches.

Reggie came up again in the fourth, again against Hooton. The Yankees still trailed. But on the first pitch, Reggie Jackson swung with all

his force—nobody swung the bat harder than Reggie—and he hit a home run that soared into the second deck at Yankee Stadium. “Goodbye!” Howard Cosell screamed on national television, as if the ball were an unwanted party guest.

Reggie’s third time up was in the next inning, this time against Dodgers’ reliever Elías Sosa. The Yankees led 5–3. Again, first pitch, Jackson turned on it and this time hit a screaming line drive to right field, and it was over the fence in what seemed like an instant. The first home run was majestic. The second was violent.

And the third . . . well, the third home run was unforgettable. The Yankees led 7–3. The Dodgers’ pitcher was knuckleballer Charlie Hough. Jackson went to the plate with only one thought: Hit a home run. “And when I saw that first pitch,” Jackson would say, “I thought, *Oh boy!*”

Oh boy. Brian Koppelman, writer and creator of the television show *Billions*, was 11 years old and in the crowd that day. The memories of the night stay vivid, but none more than the sight of Reggie’s home run taking flight toward center field.

“It seemed like it would go forever,” Koppelman says.

It has, in many ways, gone on forever. It jolts the senses even now. The Yankees won the World Series and Reggie won the thing he wanted more than anything: his place in baseball history.

“Now I believe him,” his teammate Mike Torrez said. “Now I know why he calls himself Mr. October. Now we’ll all call him that.”

AND THAT’S NOT ALL

Of course, it isn’t. It wouldn’t be a *Bullpen* without the ol’ Skipper gilding the lily a bit.

After I read Chapter 24, I cogitated a bit about where I was and what I was doing on October 18, 1977. Here’s what I came up with: I was matriculating at the University of Nebraska College of Engineering and Technology, about two months into my junior year. I was into my second year of being a member of the *Theta Xi* fraternity and my first year of living in the house at 1535 R Street. I was rooming with Brother Mouse in our corner two-man room, decorated with weathered, red-painted barn¹ wood, which led us to name our cozy little bachelor pad “The Loft.”

So on October 18, 1977, instead of being “tuned in” to the drama of the World Series between the New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers and the love quadrangle of George Steinbrenner, Billy Martin, Reggie Jackson and Thurman Munson, in all honesty I was probably more focused on hosting our next co-ed gathering in The Loft.² I’m not even certain that I remember hearing about Reggie’s three-homer Game Six in real time back then, my priorities being temporarily misguided as they were.

¹ Rescued from an old barn at the Don Everett (he of Runza fame) farm near Crete, Nebraska where I had worked as a “farmhand” the previous summer, which job carried with it the not to be under estimated side benefit of being instructed to take teen-aged Runza carhops water-skiing around Blue Stem Lake at formal and informal Runza restaurant gatherings.

² Purely because of my sympathy and concern for my roommate and brother, Mouse, of course, who was such a shy and awkward teenager at that time, completely incapable of attracting or entertaining members of the fairer gender.

And so to digress even more, the Saturday before last I paid a visit to good old *Theta Xi* for a tailgate fundraiser sponsored by, spoiler alert, my old Loft roommate, Brother Mouse. Seems the house is in need of a bit of facelift, so Mouse has been generously hosting tailgate fundraisers for the past several years.

But now to the point. As Will and I were leaving the tailgate to head over to the Champions Club and a different tailgate, we ran into one of my absolute idols in the fraternity, *Peewee Schultz* from Beaver Crossing, Nebraska, pictured below.



Brother Peewee Schultz

There are so many great stories about Peewee that I could write my own *Why We Love Peewee* book à la Joe Posnanski, but I'll share just my favorite one here now. When Peewee was in the house, he was more or less a parttime student and a fulltime farmer, commuting back and forth to Beaver Crossing. One day, just as *Hell Week* for our pledge class was about to begin, Peewee drove up to the back entrance of the house in his farmer pickup with his prize goat "Road Hog" riding shotty in the passenger seat, seat-belted in and very much an alert and active passenger. As Peewee unbuckled Road Hog and helped him out of his pickup truck and into the house, our pledge class learned that we were being charged with the care, feeding and maintenance of Road Hog for the next week, and that Road Hog was now an honorary 20th member of our pledge class, and would be living with us in the basement for the coming week. And so he did.

he said the public has stopped looking They (young teachers) all want to be available jobs.

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Photo by Ted Kirk

Something grandma knitted for me? A cashmere sweater on-the-hoof is taken for a brisk stroll about campus by two pals, Mark Creglow and Bryan Wolfe.

**Profess
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NU Regents assess student fee di

By Rod Murphy
Regents delayed a decision on the fees
issue at their Jan. 7 meeting to determine a
student opinion, he said.

At the next
said, he plans to
tory student fees

Road Hog Returns in '78 for Another Pledge Class "Visit"

Ah, those were the days, eh, Mouse?

Have a great rest of the week. Go Big Red.

Skipper