

## **Montreal Royals Vignettes**

This presentation will provide information and stories about Montreal Royals players and personnel that are significant (in some cases highly significant) to baseball. None of the players discussed is a Hall-of-Famer. I will begin with a brief history of professional baseball in Montreal until 1960: in essence, the Montreal Royals. In the stories of the 5 players that follow (Van Lingle Mungo, Jake Powell, Herman Franks, Schoolboy Rowe and Bruno Betzel), note the recurring themes of irony and coincidence.

### **Montreal Royals**

In 1860, on the Champ de Mars (a park in Old Montreal), people played a bat-and-ball game called rounders, a game similar to baseball that had been played in England since Tudor times. In about 1865 Francophone Americans who came to study at Quebec colleges introduced baseball to the locals. It became popular, with both English- and French-speaking amateur teams developing. Leagues formed in Montreal and elsewhere in the Quebec.<sup>1</sup> In 1897 the first professional team came to Montreal from Rochester. The Royals, representing Montreal in the (then Class A) Eastern League, played at the Atwater Park where Alexis-Nihon Plaza now stands. The following year, 1898, they won the league championship.<sup>2</sup> This rapid early success proved difficult to repeat: at the end of the 1917 season the Royals dropped out of the league (by that time the Class AA International League).

In 1922 the franchise reappeared in the newly formed Eastern Canada League (Class B). The league lasted two years: in the first, the Royals finished last. But in the second, 1923, the club won the pennant. When the league folded the next year, the Royals moved to the Class B Quebec-Ontario-Vermont League for that league's sole year of existence.<sup>3</sup>

In 1928, the Royals re-joined the International League, still Class AA at that time. The upward move was due in large part to the availability of the new



Delormier Stadium. With a seating capacity of 20,000, Delormier was said at the time to be a venue superior to some MLB stadia.<sup>4,5</sup>

The euphoria of the new stadium was short lived, as 1929's stock market crash was followed by The Great Depression of the 1930s. By 1933 the Royals' finances were in peril. The salvation came from a Quebecer who had made a



J.C.E. "Charlie" Trudeau, relaxing at Old Orchard Beach, dug the Royals out of a deep financial hole

fortune selling gas stations to Imperial Oil. The millionaire businessman was J.C. "Charlie" Trudeau who, along with his friend and fellow oilman, engineer Romeo Gauvreau, became the principal investors. They hired renowned administrator Hector Racine as President. With Shag Shaughnessy as the Royals'

General Manager, the club was now on solid footing.

Two years later, in 1935, they won the IL pennant. Sadly, the success went unseen by their much beloved benefactor. Charlie Trudeau died of pneumonia in April of 1935.<sup>6</sup> Of note, history will remember Charlie T. not for his baseball acumen but as the father and grandfather of two Canadian Prime Ministers.

In 1939 the Brooklyn Dodgers, under General Manager Branch Rickey, formed an affiliation with the Royals, making the Royals their top farm team.<sup>7</sup> This close association with the Dodgers enabled the Royals to be one of the most successful teams in minor league baseball. The team produced an eventual dozen Hall-of-Famers (10 during its Dodgers affiliation), and won 9 pennants. During their Dodger affiliation (1939-1960) the Royals won all 7 of their Governor's Cups and 3 Little/Junior World Series.<sup>8</sup>

In 1960 the Royals said good-bye again, this time permanently. Oddly enough, they outlasted their parent team, the Dodgers. Low attendance is suggested by many as the reason. However, the Dodgers' move to Los Angeles can certainly be considered a factor, as the 3,000 mile distance made for a very ineffective working arrangement. The Dodgers made Spokane their de facto main affiliate.

## Van Lingle Mungo

Our first vignette concerns player Van Lingle Mungo. Mungo pitched for the Royals in 1941. He was immortalized in a 1969 jazz song by Dave Frishberg entitled *Van Lingle Mungo*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKzobTIF8fM>. Between 1932 and '36 Mungo was touted as the next Dizzy Dean. He averaged 16 wins a season. Ironically, in the 1937 All-Star Game, in which Dean sustained the broken toe that crippled his career, Mungo suffered an arm injury that had the same result. The next four seasons saw Mungo struggle. He finally underwent surgery in hopes of resurrecting his career.

During Spring Training in Havana in March 1941, Mungo's Saturday game was rained out. Manager Leo Durocher rescheduled him to pitch game 1 of the double-header on Sunday. Free the rest of the day, Mungo went to the Hotel Nacional and had "a few



*The carousing Mungo, no fun at all for opposing hitters.*

drinks.” He was accompanied by Hotel Nacional hostess Lady Ruth Vine (from Tennessee). When Lady (her real name) departed, Mungo was feeling no pain and bought a round of drinks for all. Unfortunately Durocher and Coach Chuck Dressen were also at the bar, and recipients of the inebriated Mungo’s generosity. On Sunday morning Mungo met with Durocher and team President Larry MacPhail. They fined him \$200 and refused to allow him to pitch. Mungo, upset, punched MacPhail. This resulted in a suspension and return to Miami.<sup>9</sup> However, Mungo returned to the Hotel Nacional.

The star attraction at the Nacional was a dance duo named Gonzalo and Christina. Gonzalo was Francisco Carreno, a former matador. His partner/wife Christina was Miriam Morgan from Scranton Wilkes-Barre. Lady Ruth, who lived in the same Nacional complex as the couple, told Gonzalo she had a date with a Dodger, and asked if Christina could accompany them as chaperone. He agreed. At dawn on Monday Gonzalo realized that Christina had not returned. He went across the hall, knocked, entered, went past the hostess and tore away the mosquito netting dividing the twin beds. There was Christina, alone, in a blue negligee. At almost that same moment, as Gonzalo told it, he was sucker-punched from behind by a large, naked man he identified to police as Mungo. The Dodgers were notified. They snuck Mungo out of the hotel in a laundry truck with dirty laundry. They also got him out of Cuba. The couple was fired, and their marriage broke up. Gonzalo sued the Dodgers, but received compensation only to fix his face.<sup>10</sup> Mungo was banished to Montreal for the 1941 season.

### **Jake Powell**

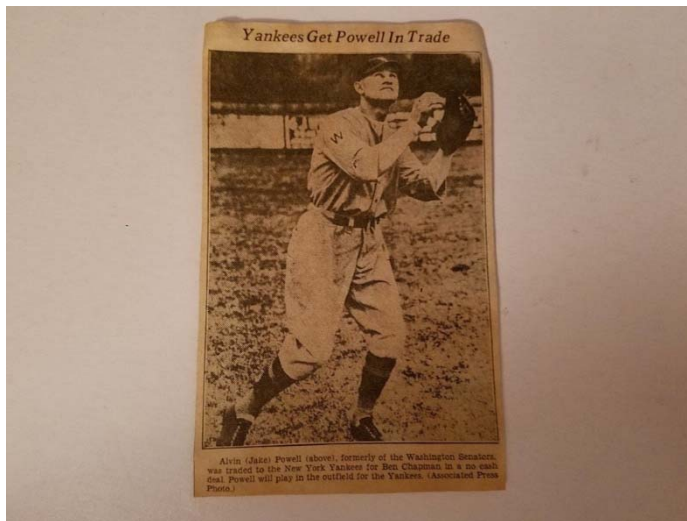
The 1941 season was a good one for the Royals. They finished in second place behind the Newark Bears. They won their first playoff round, then played Newark for the Governor’s Cup, the International League Championship. In game 7, Jake Powell came to the plate with two out in the top of the 9<sup>th</sup>. He singled in the would-be series-winning run. In the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup> it was Van Lingle Mungo who was summoned from the bullpen; he retired all three batters. The Royals had won their first ever Governor’s Cup.

They proceeded to play the Columbus Red Birds of the American Association for the Junior (Little) World Series. After five games, the Royals trailed the Red Birds three games to two. In Game 6, the Royals led 8-5 with two on and

one out in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning. Red Bird batter Hugh Poland hit a routine fly to Jake Powell, who dropped it. The Red Birds rallied to score four runs in the inning and win the Junior World Series.

It was odd enough that it was the same Jake Powell who was the hero of the Governor's Cup, knocking in the Cup-winning run in the 9<sup>th</sup>. What was more bizarre, on that very Sunday afternoon, the Dodgers were one out away from tying the World Series 2-2 with the Yankees, when Mickey Owen failed to catch strike three on Tommy Henrich. The parent team lost the game and the World Series.<sup>11</sup>

It was as a New York Yankee that Powell sunk to the depths of infamy.



During a pregame interview at Comiskey Park in Chicago on July 29, 1938, WGN Radio announcer Bob Elson asked Yankees outfielder Powell what he did during the off-season. Powell replied that he was a policeman in Dayton, Ohio. When Elson asked him how he stayed in shape, Powell, using a common racial slur, replied that he cracked blacks over

the head with his nightstick. He received a 10-game suspension from Commissioner Landis. This was the first time a player was suspended for racism.<sup>12</sup>

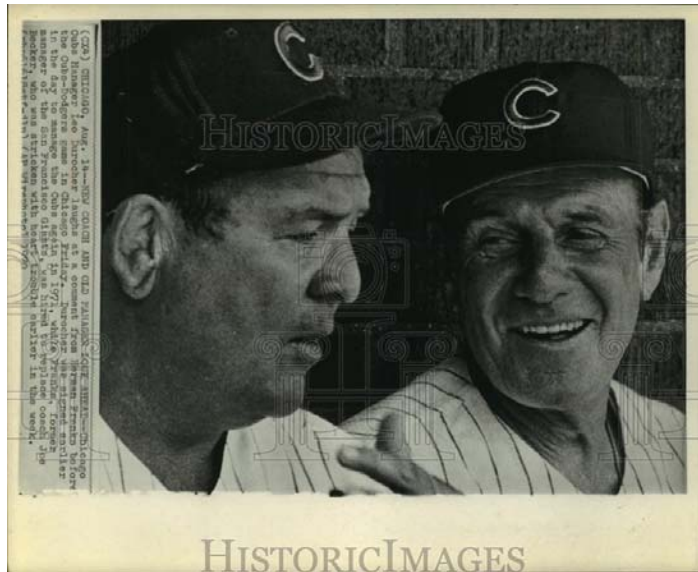
The Yankees had acquired Powell in a June 1936 trade with Washington. Does anyone know who the Yankees traded in return? An even-up trade in ALL respects: Ben Chapman. Anyone unfamiliar with Chapman ought to see the Film **42**. Adding to the irony, Powell's final season in the majors in 1945 was with the Phillies under Ben Chapman.

Three years later Powell was arrested for check fraud. While in the police station, he committed suicide by shooting himself in the head.<sup>13</sup> He broke Hank Greenberg's wrist (deliberately?) on a routine groundout in April 1936, as he ran into Greenberg's outstretched arm.<sup>14</sup> In 1933 in Zanesville, Ohio, while with the

Dayton Ducks, he stole the fan from his hotel. His manager Ducky Holmes said that he'd have stolen the mattress if he could have gotten it into his suitcase.<sup>15</sup>

## Herman Franks

Catcher Herman Franks was a key figure early in the 1941 season for the Royals. Unfortunately for them he was called up by the Dodgers. He was hitting .292 at the time. This began a friendship/alliance with Leo Durocher (son of French Canadian parents) that would impact one of baseball's most significant events. Both men remained in the Dodgers organization for some time, Franks again playing for the Royals in 1942 and 1946.



The event in question took place 10 years later. In **The Echoing Green**,<sup>16</sup> a book published in 2008, investigative journalist Joshua Prager convincingly demonstrates that the Giants cheated, and that Herman Franks was at the center of the cheating. The cheating was sign stealing, a much-honored skill if it is done on the field without mechanical or electronic aids. Durocher, though, placed Franks in the Giants' clubhouse office in the Polo Grounds, some 500 feet from home plate. Armed with a telescope and thousands of hours of baseball experience, Franks would peer in on the opposing catcher's signs. Through a buzzer system Durocher had installed, Franks would then signal bullpen catcher Sal Yvars, who in turn would signal the batter. Franks was there when Bobby Thompson came to the plate in the bottom of the ninth on October 3, 1951, although Thompson later told Prager he was concentrating so hard he never looked at Yvars. Franks never admitted anything. He told the Associated Press in 2001, "I haven't talked about it in 49 years. If I'm ever asked about it, I'm denying everything."<sup>17</sup>

## Schoolboy Rowe

In 1942 the Dodgers acquired Schoolboy Rowe. Rowe enjoyed a 17-year major league career between 1933 and 1949, mainly with the Tigers. He won 24

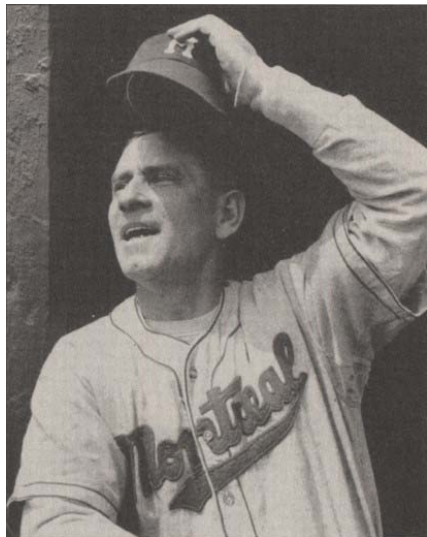
games in 1934, including an AL record 16 in a row. In 1935 he was a stalwart on a Tigers team that won the World Series. The Dodgers staff in 1942 was solid, so Rowe was shipped to the Royals for a part of that season.<sup>18</sup>



On a train ride to Syracuse during the playoffs, a teammate mentioned having seen Albert Einstein on the train. He explained that the luminary was spending the summer in the Adirondacks. “You mean Eisenstadt?” asked Rowe. “He was with us in Detroit for a while.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Bruno Betzel**

At the end of the 1942 season Rickey fired manager Clyde Sukeforth because he felt Sukeforth was too lax on drinking. In 1943 Sukeforth was replaced by an ex-Royal, a man destined for a long career in the Dodgers’ front office – Fresco Thompson. In this instance, however, Thompson fared no better than his predecessor. He was replaced at the end of the 1943 season by Christian Frederick Albert John Henry David Betzel. At birth, Betzel’s mother did not want to offend any of his uncles, so he was named after all of them. Naturally, he went by the name Bruno – after the family dog.



*Nothin' in my hat! Thompson's successor Bruno Betzel used all the tricks he knew to get the Royals back on top.*

Betzel managed the Royals for the 1944 and 1945 seasons. He was known as crusty and hard-nosed, both as an infielder with the St. Louis Cardinals between 1914 and 1918, and as a 26-year minor league manager. Despite this reputation, he was shaken by a pair of incidents which I’ll relate in reverse order.

The later incident occurred in Indianapolis, where he began his managerial career. On one occasion, team owner Jim Perry invited him on a plane ride in his private plane. Betzel missed the flight because the hotel switchboard operator forgot his wake-up call. The plane crashed and Perry was killed. One would think Betzel

would have thought himself extremely lucky; not so. He told those around him that he was “livin’ on borrowed time.”

The earlier incident occurred when he was a player with the Cardinals. In a game against the Giants in 1915, he pulled the hidden ball trick on Fred Merkle. Merkle was notorious for having cost the Giants the pennant in 1908. During a tightly-contested pennant race with the Cubs, Merkle was on first base in a game when Al Bridwell singled in the apparent game-winning run from third. With the crowd swarming the field, Merkle did not bother to advance to touch second base. Johnny Evers retrieved the ball and tagged second base; Merkle was out and the run didn’t count. Continued play was not possible, as the crowd had overrun the field. The game was to be replayed if necessary. It was, as the Giants and Cubs tied at season’s end. The Cubs won the replayed game and the pennant. The incident was/is known as Merkle’s Boner.

Seven years later, with Merkle on second base, Betzel went to the mound to give the ball to the pitcher. Instead he put it in his back pocket. When Merkle took his lead off second, Betzel got between the base and Merkle, backed into Merkle and tagged him with the ball. Merkle was declared out. The Polo Grounds erupted with cries of “Bonehead, Bonehead.” Merkle ran off the field in tears. “At that moment,” said a contrite Betzel, “I could have cut my arm off.”<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Archives Montréal: **A Brief History of Baseball in Montréal from 1860 to 1960**

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.milb.com/milb/history/top100.jsp?idx=84>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Archives Montréal: **A Brief History of Baseball in Montréal from 1860 to 1960**

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.milb.com/milb/history/top100.jsp?idx=84>

<sup>6</sup> Wm. Brown: **Baseball’s Fabulous Montreal Royals**

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.milb.com/milb/history/top100.jsp?idx=84>

<sup>8</sup> Wm. Brown: **Baseball’s Fabulous Montreal Royals**

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/news/tempest-adventures-van-lingle-mungo-chapter-133-article-1.527955>

<sup>10</sup> Alan Cohen: Mungo SABR bio

<sup>11</sup> Wm. Brown: **Baseball’s Fabulous Montreal Royals**

<sup>12</sup> Chris Lamb: *NY Times* July 27, 2008 (reproduced from the *NY Times* 1981 Bob Elson obit)

<sup>13</sup> February 22, 2014 Steve Wulf ESPN Senior Writer

<sup>14</sup> Bob Lemke Blog Nov. 12 2013



<sup>15</sup> The Baseball Historian (Andrew Joseph Blog Sunday, August 21, 2016)

<sup>16</sup> Joshua Prager: **The Echoing Green: The Untold Story of Bobby Thompson, Ralph Branca and The Shot Heard Round the World**

<sup>17</sup> Maurice Bouchard: Franks SABR bio

<sup>18</sup> Gregory H. Wolf: Rowe SABR bio

<sup>19</sup> Wm. Brown: **Baseball's Fabulous Montreal Royals**

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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