

Montreal Royals Vignettes 1946-1960:

From Jackie Robinson to Tommy Lasorda and Sandy Amoros

The focus of the presentation will be on five players whose impact on baseball far exceeded their talents, as defined by their major league statistics. As was the case with Expo 67 (whose name gave birth to the city's major league baseball team), the eyes of the world were on Montreal in 1946. This of course was because of Jackie Robinson's playing for the Montreal Royals. Like Expo 67, Jackie Robinson, the Royals and Montreal met and exceeded all expectations.

Jackie Robinson

The 1946 Montreal Royals were the most successful baseball team the city ever had. This includes the Expos of 1981 and 1994. The 1946 Royals won 100 games, won the pennant by 18½ games, and won their first Junior World Series. In their first playoff series, the Royals faced Newark. The Bears were managed by Canadian-born George Selkirk, the man who replaced Babe Ruth on the Yankees. In the final game of that series, score tied, ninth inning, two out and Tommy Tatum on first for the Royals, Herman Franks hit a double. Third base coach and manager Clay Hopper waved Tatum home. The ball arrived before the runner but the umpire called Tatum safe. This call ended the game and series. Bedlam erupted and both benches emptied. The umpire was escorted off the field by police. The catcher went ballistic¹. Nine years later that same catcher had a similar meltdown, this time in the World Series. The play at the plate would again see the ball arrive before the runner. The umpire would again rule the runner safe.

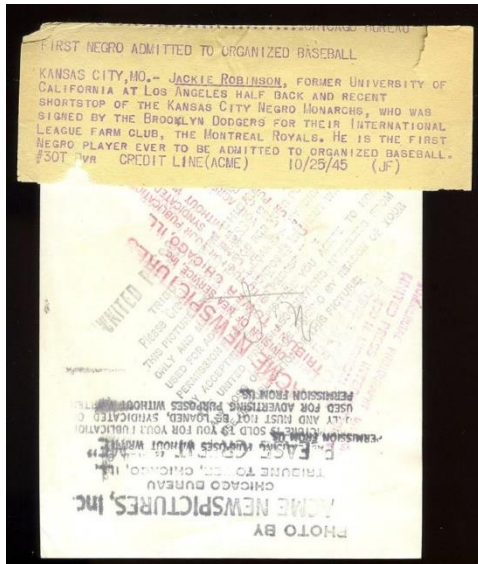
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XY-XshGhMU>

The catalyst this time had also played against that same catcher in that 1946 playoff. It was Jackie Robinson, and the catcher Yogi Berra. That year 1955 saw the Royals' parent team win its first World Series. Jackie of course played on both these teams' first championships, and contributed significantly to each.

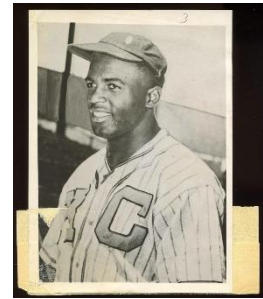
1946 saw Robinson winning the International League batting crown with a .349 average. He was joined on the IL All-Star team by four more Royals position

players: Marvin Rackley, Tommy Tatum, Herman Franks and Lew Riggs. Teammate Steve Nagy was the league's winningest pitcher (17 wins). He also made the All-Star team. The Montrealers had four other players who hit over .290: Earl Naylor, Dixie Howell, Spider Jorgensen and Al Campanis. Finally, there were Les Burge and Red Durrett, who each hit more than 30 home runs and combined for almost 200 RBI.

With the exception a few games at UCLA, Robinson played no organized baseball prior to 1945. He made the Kansas



City Monarchs, a top team in the Negro Leagues, in 1945². He hit .414. A rookie at age 26, he had only 63 plate appearances with the Monarchs, stealing only two bases³. Still, Dodgers GM Branch Rickey had seen and heard enough to make Robinson his man to break the colour barrier. At left is the Acme News Wire Service release from October 25th, 1945⁴; the slug on the reverse (shown) has a description of Robinson being the first African American to be signed to a professional baseball contract. The slug and photo (above) were produced two days after



Robinson signed with the Dodgers organization, and the day that Robinson was released from the Kansas City Monarchs.

It is well known how much pressure, hate and abuse Robinson suffered, both in the IL and in his first years with the Dodgers. In William Brown's book on the Royals, Brown tells of a 1946 Spring Training game between the Dodgers and Royals. Robinson bunted a ball. Dodger second baseman Eddie Stanky, covering first, tagged Robinson hard in the groin. Royals center fielder Kermit Kitman noted that Robinson was both angry and in pain but did not react. Kitman added that Stanky later apologized by saying that Rickey had told him to do it as a test. Brown parenthetically and correctly notes that Stanky was probably not concerned about the "test". A year later, Stanky was much involved with the plot to keep Robinson off the Dodgers⁵. However, in his autobiography Duke Snider points out that it was Eddie Stanky who first came to Robinson's rescue in the infamous

Phillies/Ben Chapman incident: “You cowards, why don’t you yell at somebody who can fight back?”⁶



Rickey did try to mitigate some of the tension Robinson would undergo by signing another black ballplayer to the 1946 Royals. This was RHP John Wright (at left with Robinson) from the Pittsburgh Homestead Grays. However, Wright played poorly both in Spring Training and in the two games he pitched in the regular season. He was demoted in May. Rickey replaced him with Roy Partlow, also of the Grays, who fared no better⁷.

The statistics below are from baseballreference.com. The first four players listed are the top four finishers in the IL MVP voting for 1946. They are listed in order of votes received (Jackie Robinson finished 4th). The fifth player was another of Jackie’s team mates, Marv Rackley. The table suggests that the voting was not biased against Robinson. Statistically, his fourth place finish seems fair. Overall there is no question that Eddie Robinson had a better season than Jackie, and deserved to win the MVP. Arguably Jackie could have finished second, as his statistics seem superior to those of his teammate Tommy Tatum, who finished ahead of him in the voting. Rackley is included because he played in the same number of games (124) as Robinson but stole many more bases (65-40). Rackley was faster and a better base stealer.

Player	Age	Team	Aff.	G	PA	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB
1 Eddie Robinson	25	Baltimore	CLE	140	607	528	99	168	25	5	34	123	3

2 Bobby Brown	21	Newark	NYY	148	597	510	70	174	27	4	5	68	4
3 Tommy Tatum	26	Montreal	BRO	129	539	483	93	154	27	2	4	58	28
4 Jackie Robinson	27	Montreal	BRO	124	553	444	113	155	25	8	3	66	40
Marvin Rackley	24	Montreal	BRO	124	550	465	102	142	20	14	4	66	65

Al Gionfriddo

The principal Royals/Dodgers in this paper, in addition to Jackie Robinson, are Chuck Connors, Tommy Lasorda, Sandy Amoros, and Al Gionfriddo. Gionfriddo (also known as G.I.) is the lynchpin. By this I mean his career had a significant influence on, or was impacted by, the others. In his SABR biography of G.I., writer Rory Costello quotes journalist John Zant:

“Gionfriddo told me he had felt a kinship with Jackie Robinson. The first black major leaguer in the modern era endured scorn not only from opponents but from some of his own teammates. He would not go into the showers until everybody else was done, Gionfriddo said, until one day he went up to Robinson and said, ‘Jackie, what are you waiting on? I’m not accepted any more than you

are, but we're part of this team. Let's go.'" Costello also cites an interview with Mike Downey of the L.A. Times in which G.I. says "I made sure Robinson had the locker right next to mine."⁸

Gionfriddo (shown at right in a 1948 Royals pinback) was the most notable player in the 1947 World Series. It was Game 4, bottom of the 9th, two out and Bill Bevens of the Yankees was pitching a no-hitter, a feat never accomplished before in World Series history. Bevens had a runner on first via his ninth walk. G.I. was sent in to pinch run. He was relayed the steal sign from Brooklyn manager Burt Shotton. He slid head first. The ball was there in time, but catcher Yogi Berra's throw was high. Phil Rizzuto caught the throw and tagged Gionfriddo. Rizzuto was livid when the umpire ruled the runner safe. Casey Stengel ordered the next batter (Pete Reiser) walked. Cookie Lavagetto then broke up the gem with a double to win the game 3-2.



Gionfriddo's great claim to fame occurred in game 6 of this same 1947 Series. This was one of the most famous catches in World Series history (most certainly Red Barber's most famous call):

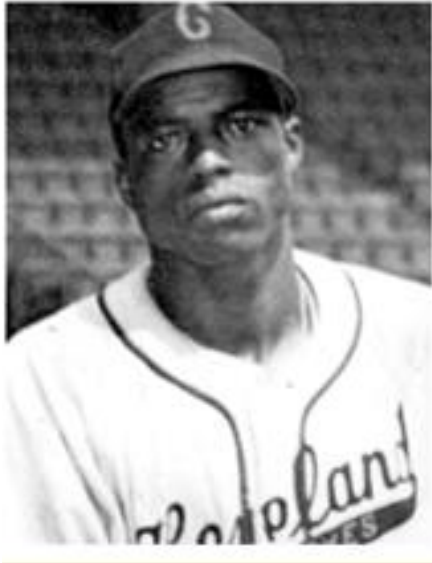
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SrtxVs8uMI>

It preserved the game for the Dodgers.

After his renowned World Series successes in 1947, G.I. was sent down to the Royals on April 14, 1948. He played four successful seasons there, hitting .281 but never again appearing in a major league game.

1948 was another successful year for the Royals. Duke Snider starred for them in the first half but was called up to the Dodgers in August. Don Newcombe (shown at right in 1949 between Robinson and Roy Campanella) was arguably the ace of the staff, with a 17-6 record and 3.14 ERA. Jack Banta had comparable stats to Newcombe's, but Newcombe's no-hitter, I believe, earned him the edge.



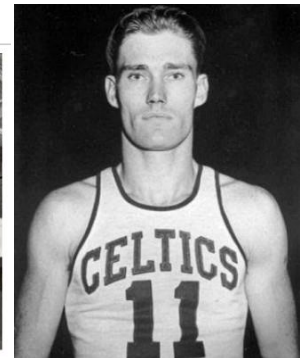


Sam Jethroe (seen at left with the Cleveland Buckeyes of the Negro American League⁹) also was instrumental in the Royals' success. He hit over .300 in both 1948 and 1949 before moving to the Majors, though never playing for the Dodgers. He played his last five years in baseball for the Toronto Maple Leafs. The Royals won their second Junior World Series in 1948, defeating American Association Champions St. Paul, also a Dodger farm club managed by Walt Alston.

In 1949 Jethroe stole 89 bases for the Royals, breaking by 2 an IL record set in 1919. The Royals did make it to the Junior World Series but lost to the Indianapolis Indians. The ace of the Indians staff was Mel Queen; his son of the same name later became pitching coach of the Toronto Blue Jays.

Chuck Connors

Chuck Connors played for the Royals between 1948 and 1950. He had played basketball for the Boston Celtics¹⁰ in the two previous winters (the team's first two seasons). He is credited with being the first professional basketballer to shatter the glass behind the backboard, apparently having done so at a 1946 practice¹¹.



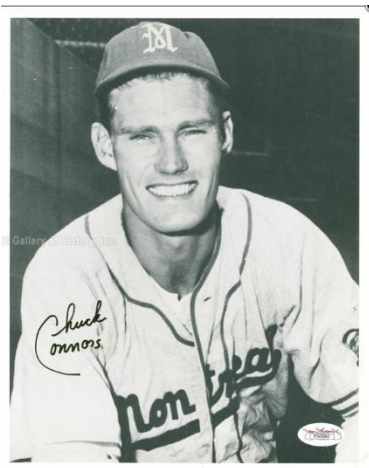
To those of us who are Baby Boomers, Chuck Connors was Lucas McCain. McCain was the lead character of a 30-minute black and white TV Western called *The Rifleman*. If you were a baseball fan growing up in Montreal, you also knew that Connors played first base for the Montreal Royals. It was rumored that he had made it with the parent team Brooklyn Dodgers (a 3000 mile away memory) and that he was in the movies. Young Montrealers had very limited exposure to cinema. The law prohibited anyone in Montreal under the age of 16 from



entering a movie theatre. Also most of us grew up with only 1 and later 2 English language TV stations.

In fact Chuck Connors played in only 1 game and had but 1 AB (1949) with the Dodgers. In 1951 he was traded to the Cubs. He played the last 66 games for the Cubs, who called him up from their Los Angeles Angels farm club. He was sent back down at season's end. This turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to him. In September of 1951, he received a phone call from Bill Grady, the casting director for MGM. Grady was an ardent Angels fan. He asked Connors to test for a small role in the movie *Pat and Mike*. This classic film starred Spencer Tracy and Kathryn Hepburn. Connors played one more season for the Angels¹², but when the film was released baseball lost him to Hollywood. He would appear in 65 films and 50 TV shows.

Connors was involved in baseball's most celebrated holdout. After the 1964 season, it was Connors who was instrumental in Don Drysdale's and Sandy Koufax's signing a movie deal to star with him. In his 1967 *Sports Illustrated* interview Buzzie Bavasi stated that the movie signing had no effect on the negotiation¹³. As it was Buzzie writing the article, the fact that he put it in the story would suggest otherwise.



Connors was very successful with the Royals, hitting .305 over his three seasons. In 1949 he knocked in 108 runs, 20 more than he had in the Junior World Series-winning season of 1948. In 1954 Al Gionfriddo was still playing ball for Newport News, another Dodger affiliate, when he was released. He decided to retire from baseball, but Chuck Connors intervened. He convinced Gionfriddo to stay in baseball, playing in Santa Barbara in the California League. He played successfully for two years, eventually returning to Santa Barbara in 1962 as General Manager. He stayed until the end of the 1964 season, after which the Dodgers wanted him to move. He refused. The vacancy created enabled Tommy Lasorda to get a job managing the Pocatello Chiefs in the Pioneer League, his first step in becoming a Hall of Fame manager.¹⁴

Tom Lasorda

In his essay for *The Hall*, Lasorda attributed his success to his first job with the Dodgers, not to his first job within the Dodger organization. This was the position of coach under Walt Alston. They had been together when Alston managed the Royals. When Alston became the Dodger manager he did not want Lasorda as a pitcher, but as a coach. Lasorda was content to manage in the minors and turned down that Dodger offer, believing Alston did not want him. When he was told that Alston specifically requested him as coach he accepted.

Tommy Lasorda was born and grew up in Norristown, Pennsylvania. His nickname was Mungo after his favourite ball player, Van Lingle Mungo, whom he did meet at a dinner. He was signed by the Phillies in 1945 for \$100 and a per diem of \$3.33¹⁵. As a player Lasorda won 107 games for the Royals in his 9 years in Montreal. His major league career was less successful: he was 0-0 in the 8 games he pitched for the Dodgers, and 0-4 in the 18 games he pitched for the Kansas City Athletics. His career ERA in the majors was 6.48. His success as a manager, however, is well known. Lasorda holds 10 honorary PhD degrees; not bad for a guy who never attended college¹⁶.



Sandy Amoros

The Royals' last manager, Clay Bryant (1958-1960), was managing the Dodgers' St. Paul farm team in the American Association in 1952. It was he who dubbed newly arrived Edmundo Amoros Sandy. This was because of Amoros' resemblance to featherweight boxing champ Sandy Sadler. Most sports fans were aware of and had seen Sandy Sadler, thanks to network coverage of the Gillette Friday Night Fights.



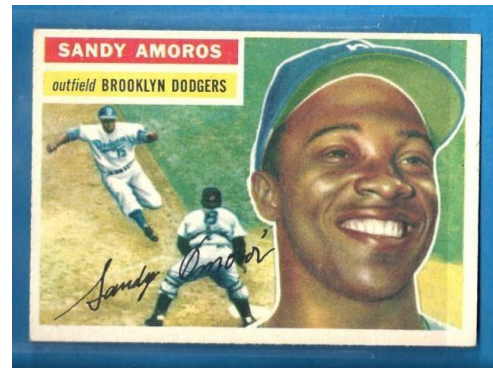
Amoros¹⁷ played all of 1953 for the Royals, leading the IL in hitting at .353. Walt Alston was promoted from the Royals to the Dodgers in 1954. In Spring Training Sandy hit .421, but Alston sent him down, calling him a streak hitter. Many felt Alston was pressured; as the Dodgers already had five black players they had reached saturation. Amoros hit .352 with 14 homers in 68 games before being called back up to the Dodgers.

In the sixth inning of Game 7 of the 1955 World Series, Shotgun Shuba pinch hit for Dodger second baseman Don Zimmer. In the bottom of the inning Junior Gilliam moved from left field to second, and Sandy Amoros came in to play left field.¹⁸ With nobody out and two runners on, Yogi Berra was next up for the opposing Yankees. Amoros played the pull-hitting Berra toward left-center field, but Berra sliced a drive the opposite way, down the left-field line. The two tying runs seemed destined to score. But the left-handed Amoros, who had been judged the fastest man in the majors when he first joined the Dodgers, raced towards the corner and caught the ball with his right arm fully extended. His throw to shortstop Pee Wee Reese, and the subsequent relay to Gil Hodges, doubled runner Gil McDougald off first, saving two runs and the game for the Dodgers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xcw7TH581uo>

The *Sporting News* termed it a “\$100,000 catch” that “will not be forgotten as long as The World Series is played.” A *New York Times* review of 100 years of World Series play acclaimed it “One of the ten greatest moments in World Series history”. Jackie Robinson’s steal of home in this World Series did not result in a Dodger victory. Both Gionfriddo accomplishments in the 1947 World Series resulted in Dodger wins, but they lost the World Series. Of the three “linked” spectacular World Series plays by Dodger ex-Royals, this Game 7 Series winning exploit has to be at the top.

Sandy Amoros was financially ruined by the Castro takeover of Cuba. When he refused to coach the Cuban National Baseball Team, Fidel Castro stripped him of all his assets. He remained in Cuba until 1967 when he finally got out. He sold televisions in the Bronx for three years before his employer went bankrupt (the business burned down). He was unemployed, and only a few days short of receiving a baseball pension. John McHale alerted Buzzie Bavasi, who told Walter O'Malley, and O'Malley arranged the pension for Amoros.



In 1977 Amoros developed a circulation problem from his diabetes, leading to a leg amputation. A Brooklyn surgeon, who was an old Dodger fan, donated an artificial leg to him. He moved to Tampa, where BAT (the Baseball Assistance Team) provided him financial assistance. He died in 1992 at age 62.¹⁹

The Last Days

Branch Rickey left the Dodgers in 1951. Initially, the Royals were unaffected. However, Walter O'Malley was not as enamored with Montreal as Rickey had been. When the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles in 1958, Spokane (closer to Los Angeles) became the Dodger farm team of choice, and the end of the Royals became imminent.

1958 was the last hurrah for the team. They won the IL pennant and beat Toronto to win the Governor's Cup, but lost the Junior World Series in four straight games. Their next (and last) two seasons saw the Royals finish in sixth and eighth place.

Notes

¹ William Brown: **Baseball's Fabulous Montreal Royals**, 1996.

² BST Auctions Oct 20 2018. Lot #212. Sold for \$329.

³ baseball-reference.com

⁴ BST Auctions Oct 20 2018. Lot #212.

⁵ Brown.

⁶ Duke Snider and Bill Gilbert: **The Duke of Flatbush**, 2002.

⁷ W.M. Akers: sports.vice.com, April 15 2015.

⁸ Rory Costello: SABR BioProject biography of Al Gionfriddo.

⁹ Photo courtesy Negro Leagues Baseball Museum at nlbm.com.

¹⁰ Still photo courtesy <https://elgurudelbasket.com/chuck-connors-rompio-primer-tablero-historia-nba/>.

¹¹ Charlie Bevis: SABR BioProject biography of Chuck Connors.

¹² Bevis.

¹³ *Sports Illustrated*, May 15 1967.

¹⁴ Bevis.

¹⁵ National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum: **The Hall**, 2014.

¹⁶ NBHFM.

¹⁷ Sporting News Collection MEARS Photo.

¹⁸ Lew Paper: **Perfect**, 2010.

¹⁹ Rich Marazzi and Len Fiorito: **Baseball Players of the 1950s**, 2004.

Fred Toulch
November 2018