

Forget the disappointing Phillies; follow a team you can count on

By William C. Kashatus

Michael Volpe wasn't the only fan who became a free agent in the off-season. While he was courting — and eventually signed on with — my once-beloved Phillies, I switched my allegiances, too. I just got tired of all the Phils' broken promises and the insulting way they play on the nostalgic sentiment of the fans instead of building a good team to get excited about.

Since 1980, when they won their only World Series, the Phillies have been run like a business where profits seem to matter more than the product or the feelings of the fans. Where players, coaches and managers turn over as frequently as the latest market trend. Where the brain trust has vacillated between the "quick fix" — free agent signings, trading for other club's unrealized potential and salvaging a veteran or two near the end of their careers — and a youth movement. There is a business without direction, without loyalty and without much of a future.

So I've decided to give my loyalties to the Athletics. No, not the Oakland A's; the old Philadelphia A's. Over the winter, I became a charter member of the Philadelphia Athletics Historical Society and decided that it would be much more enjoyable to turn the clock back and follow the trials and tribulations of Connie Mack's colorful — and extinct — team than to suffer through another disappointing season of Phillies' baseball. It's not as crazy as it may sound.

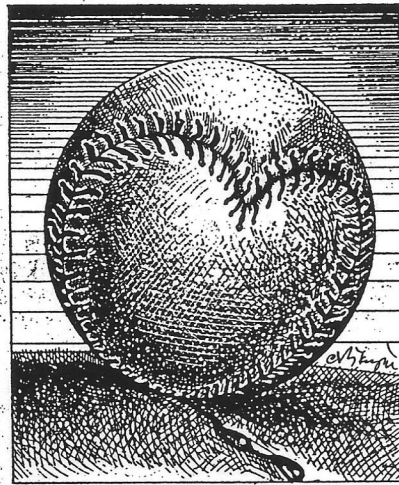
One of the great advantages of rooting for a team that no longer exists is that it can't disappoint you. You already know what to expect. And with the A's, I can expect five World Series titles, nine pennants and two championship dynasties. What's more, I can depend on an owner who actually knows something about baseball and how to run a franchise.

Connie Mack's genius came from his unique ability to anticipate successful trends in the game. He was, for example, the first to use college ball as a proving ground for the majors, discovering three of the game's all-time hurlers from the college ranks (Eddie Plank from Gettysburg, Charles Albert "Chief" Bender

two highly exceptional infielders (Eddie Collins from Columbia University and Jack Barry from Holy Cross).

Mack also paid attention to the fans. He knew that Philadelphians love to grow up with their ballplayers, to watch them develop into a winning team, and to glory in their triumphs and suffer in their defeats. And he accommodated them.

Between 1924 and 1932, A's fans came to know and love some of the greatest — and most colorful — players in the history of the game: Mickey Cochrane, a lifetime .320 hitter who was known to respond to a loss by weeping, pulling his hair and butting his head against the dugout wall; Jimmie Fox, an intimidating power hitter known to launch home runs even farther than Babe Ruth himself; Lefty



GARY VISKUPIC

Grove, a pitcher with 300 career victories who tore through the clubhouse laying waste to lockers, watercoolers and, on occasion, a teammate or two, when he lost, and "Bucketfoot Al" Simmons, who could be just as vicious, working himself into a homicidal rage against pitchers before going to bat. All of these ballplayers joined the A's in their youth, blossomed into superstardom and departed Philadelphia as "can't-miss" Hall of Famers. Divided loyalties didn't exist. Philadelphia was an A's town.

Connie Mack was a shrewd, enterprising businessman, capable of offering top dollar for a prospect if, in his estimation, the player was worth it. Nevertheless, he ran a tight payroll, paying nothing against selling

turnstiles stopped clicking, he became "Mack the Knife" and ruthlessly dismantled the team. It was the only logical thing to do. Mack realized that when the fans became too complacent with winning, and his players more concerned about salary than performance, it was time to sell.

At the same time, Mack was the consummate professional; a symbol of the enduring values of the national pastime during an age when the game was riddled with rowdiness, intemperance and scandal. He emphasized team commitment rather than catering to individual stars and preserved the integrity of the game by extolling the virtues of clean living and total abstinence among his players. Rarely did he display anger and never did he engage in profanity. He let his feelings be known with a stare or question that would stifle the most unruly player.

He even dressed the part of a gentleman. Believing that uniforms were meant for players, he preferred to dress in a three-piece business suit, neck-tie, detachable collar, and a derby or straw skimmer. Thus, the tall tactician cut quite a dashing figure as he waved his trademark scorecard from the edge of the dugout, positioning outfielders with the skill of the unmistakable baseball genius he was.

To be sure, Connie Mack managed only two kinds of teams during his half-century in Philadelphia — unbeatable and lousy.

His nine pennants, five World Series, and two championship dynasties were balanced with 17 last place finishes. His 3,776 victories as a manager are exceeded only by the 4,025 defeats he suffered — still a record for most losses by a single manager.

And his careful nurturing of two championship dynasties was matched only by his ruthless skill of dismantling two of the greatest teams of all time, in 1915, and again in 1933.

But when all was said and done, Connie Mack showed us that there was more to baseball than winning or losing. What matters just as much is how you play the game. That is why the Phillies will have to do more than capture another world championship to win back my heart.