

Joe Morgan's death brought back memories from my days working for the Cincinnati Reds. A favorite good story is how Joe ended up with the Reds. You may enjoy it ...

A Roger Ruhl Memory and Good Story (10/12/20) ...

Joe Morgan died yesterday at age 77. Say it ain't so, Joe.

There were great and really good players on the Cincinnati Reds teams of the 1970s. Johnny Bench, Pete Rose, Tony Perez, Dave Concepcion, Ken Griffey, George Foster, and Cesar Geronimo, not to mention an often-underrated pitching staff. But Joe Morgan was not only great, he was the most important.

The power hitting 1970 Reds won the National League West in a walk and swept Pittsburgh for the pennant before losing to Baltimore in the World Series.

In the 1970-71 off season, I joined the Reds as Publicity Director. More significant, however, was that centerfielder Bobby Tolan, one of the few Reds players with speed, tore an Achilles tendon playing basketball. The Reds became an ordinary ballclub in 1971 and finished 79-83 in a tie for fourth place in the National League West.

Reds General Manager Bob Howsam was convinced that playing on Astroturf at new Riverfront Stadium required more speed than the Reds had, and Tolan's absence from the lineup in 1971 reinforced the opinion. The top roster priority in the 1971-72 off season was adding speed to the ballclub.

As the off season began, Howsam and his lieutenants developed their usual list of potential trades. My recollection is there were about 20-25 double-spaced on a page of paper. The idea was to identify trades that made sense for both the Reds and other ballclubs. No point suggesting a trade that the other team would never make. If the Reds had excess talent in a particular area, what trade partner lacking in that area might be interested.

The Reds had two first basemen ... Lee May playing first base and Tony Perez getting by at third base. Both had high trade value and either one was viewed as expendable for the right player.

The top two potential trades on the list involved either May or Perez, whomever would bring the most value from the other club.

One involved an American League club ... May or Perez for a player whose identity I will share someday.

The other was with the Houston Astros and was a little more complicated, but it moved along while the other deal stalled.

Talks had started during the 1971 Pittsburgh-Baltimore World Series, and they continued until the Baseball Winter Meetings in Scottsdale-Phoenix in late November. The meetings began with the minor league phase at a Holiday Inn in Scottsdale; after a few days, they would later move to the posh Arizona Biltmore for the major league phase.

The winter meetings were a great occasion for trade talks, but the first couple days produced little news for the starved baseball writers covering the goings on. The Reds-Astros trade continued to inch along. On the second or third day at the daily morning staff meeting in his suite at the Holiday Inn, Bob Howsam announced that there was a deal with Houston.

The trade had started with May or Perez for Joe Morgan, but that meant the Astros would need a second baseman. With either Perez departing or May departing and Perez moving to first base, the Reds would need a third baseman. The solution was that the Reds would send second baseman Tommy Helms to Houston and get third baseman Denis Menke and pitcher Jack Billingham in return. But Howsam wanted more. Houston agreed to adding little known outfielder Cesar Geronimo to the deal, while the Reds gave up utility player Jimmy Stewart. At the last minute, Howsam got the Astros to include outfielder Ed Armbrister in the deal as well.

There were 10 or 12 people in Howsam's suite ... Howsam, his lieutenant Dick Wagner, Manager Sparky Anderson, Player Personnel Director Sheldon (Chief) Bender, Scouting Director Joe Bowen, Special Assignment Scout Rex Bowen, Special Scout Ray Shore, Traveling Secretary Paul Campbell, Player Personnel Assistant Sal Artiaga, one or two Reds scouts who covered the Southwest, and me.

Howsam was concerned that a leak of the news would mess up the deal. Houston General Manager Spec Richardson accepted Howsam's invitation to orchestrate the announcement. Everyone was to remain in his suite until the announcement press conference in the early afternoon. I typed a message to be posted on the Press Room bulletin board ... "There will be an announcement of a major trade at 2:00 p.m. today." Dick Wagner called for a bellman. When he arrived, Wagner ushered him into a bathroom near the doorway, gave him \$20, told him to post the paper on the Press Room bulletin board, and swore him to secrecy about where he got the message. We often joked about what the perplexed bellman thought was going on.

And so we waited ... and waited. Finally, the clock neared the appointed hour. As Publicity Director, I was the one who walked to the podium, turned on the microphone, asked for quiet, and then announced the trade. The Press Room was jammed with writers starved for news. And we most certainly had news to give to them ... May, Helms and Stewart for Morgan, Menke, Billingham, Geronimo and Armbrister. Jaws dropped. Baseball writers tried to grasp the news ... who got the best of whom?

The early reaction was not good for the Reds. One beat writer wondered if the Reds announced the correct Cesar ... surely we meant Cesar Cedeno and not Cesar Geronimo. After the announcement, Howsam, Anderson, Bender, Bowen, and Shore spent time with the media explaining why the trade was good for both teams (that's what both teams always say). But the early returns from reporters covering the Reds indicated dissatisfaction. A Cincinnati Enquirer headline read something like: "Reds trade May, Helms for a bunch of guys named Joe."

After the formal press announcement, Howsam, Sparky and a few others returned to the suite. We began placing telephone calls to key media in Cincinnati and the region ... Dayton, Middletown, Hamilton, Springfield, Columbus, Indianapolis, Louisville, Lexington, Huntington, Charleston. The goal was to explain the trade ... the Reds had added much needed speed to the lineup. Not everyone was buying it. May, Helms and Stewart were all very popular players. Fans were miffed.

Only time would tell. And it certainly did.