

A Conversation with...

MR. ASTRO, LARRY DIERKER

and Joe Pratt

Larry Dierker has been associated with the Houston Astros baseball franchise since 1964, when he pitched his first game at old Colt .45 Stadium. He pitched thirteen seasons for the Astros and one with the St. Louis Cardinals before he retired from baseball in 1977. He finished with 139 wins and a 3.31 earned run average. In 1979 he became a color commentator, broadcasting Astros games until 1997, when he left the booth and returned to the bench as the team's manager. For five seasons he was the most successful manager in Astros' history, taking four of his five teams to the playoffs and leading the team to 102 wins in 1999.

In November of 2007, we met at his home in Jersey Village and talked about his career with the Astros, baseball, and Houston.



Larry Dierker began his career in an instructional league and pitched in his first major league game for the Houston Colt .45s on his eighteenth birthday.

All photos courtesy of Houston Astros, unless otherwise noted.

LD: I started out in Little League when I was seven years old. You were supposed to be eight to get in the League, but I was at the forefront of the Baby Boomer generation, and we moved into some track home neighborhoods in the suburbs of Los Angeles, and the fathers were all excited and energetic, coming back from the war...They built a big complex of fields and held tryouts at a public park, and I went down there with my dad just to watch because it said you had to be eight years old. But then, it turned out that they needed a couple more kids to fill out all the teams, and so I got in one year early. And then, I continued through Little League, Pony League, Colt League, high school, American Legion, and was generally one of the better players throughout that whole time. By the time I got in high school, it was evident that I could throw pretty hard and so I started getting scouted. There were twenty teams back then and I ended up filling out some sort of a questionnaire and sending it in for the office for seventeen of them, not the Dodgers. That was the team I followed. They were not interested. But when it came down to it, it was the Twins, the Cubs, and the Colt .45s. . . . I signed out of high school, got a pretty big bonus, and a college scholarship where they would pay me \$1,000 a semester.

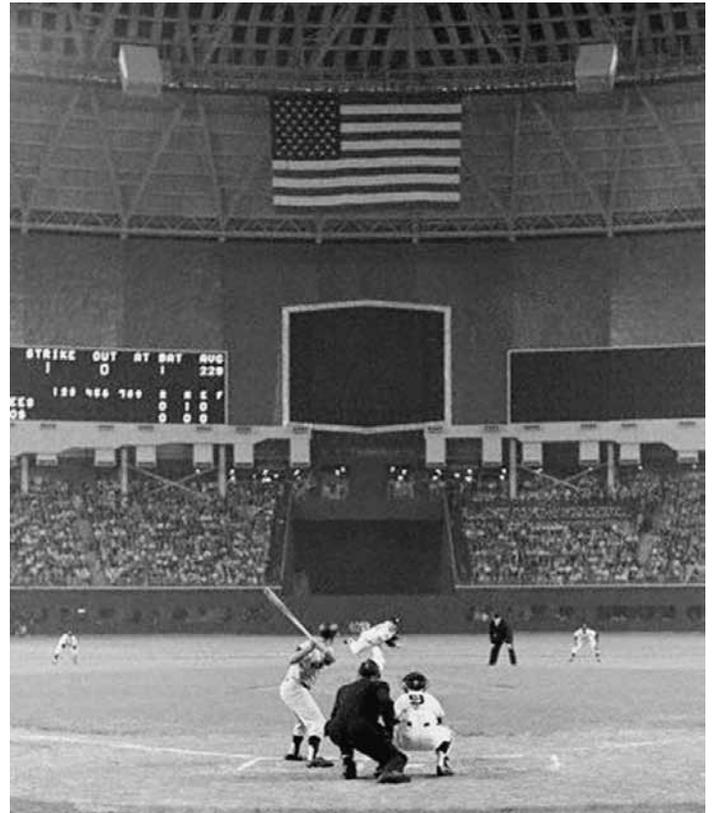
So I started my career when I was seventeen in an instructional league and went to school during the off seasons. I came up [to Houston] in September that very first year, pitching three games for the Colt .45s. The first one was on my eighteenth birthday. I pitched against Willie Mays, and he hit one foul off me about 450 feet. And then, I ended up striking him out. So, that was kind of a career bullet point. I never went back down.

I was so excited about playing baseball in the major leagues that . . . I did not notice that Houston was so hot or that the mosquitoes were so big, they could carry you off and all the things that people said about old Colt stadium . . . I went back to California to go to college the first couple of off-seasons and at that time, I thought, well, this will be a great place to have a baseball career. The Astrodome was fabulous. I was happy with Houston but I sort of thought that in the end, I would end up in California. But the longer I stayed here, the more friends we made and the deeper our roots grew.

[The opening of the Astrodome the next year] was terrific. I can remember at the end of spring training, we came back here, and we played those exhibition games with the Yankees. And when we came up to the Dome, it was dark outside and the lights were on inside. So, when we got off the team bus, we walked into the Astrodome, went in the locker room, and walked out and looked at the stadium. And walking out through the tunnel and looking at the expanse of the field and scoreboard, it was breathtaking. I can even remember at the time saying I felt like I walked into the next century. It was almost like it had a flying saucer quality to it or something, futuristic.



The expansive interior of the Astrodome, as it appeared before the gondola was raised to the roof, "had a flying saucer quality to it."



The Astros played their first exhibition game against the New York Yankees on April 9, 1965.

It was really hard to hit a home run [in the Dome]. The only thing that was somewhat helpful to the hitters was the original version of Astroturf was a really fast track. So, the infielders did not have quite as much range as they had in other ballparks, and the balls that were hit into the gaps or down the lines generally made it to the fence. And so, it was probably a better than average park for doubles and triples, but certainly way below the average park for home runs. I think, at first, it was just intriguing, and I think the infielders kind of liked it because they did not get any bad hops. But then, you know, after a while, you know, with diving for balls and slamming down on it and getting abrasions and hitting down hard and everything, after a few years, players did not really like the Astroturf that much. The original Astroturf in the Dome did not have any padding under it . . . just concrete.

JP: Do you think that pitching in the majors at such an early age helps explain your relatively early retirement?

LD: I think it [starting so young in the majors] was probably not the best thing for me, in retrospect, because I was finished when I was thirty-one. I had arm trouble for three or four years leading up to that. But, philosophically, I am not opposed to pushing a



Larry Dierker at spring training in 1965.

young player, you know, to try to maybe challenge him to perform at a higher level than he might be ready for, just to see what will happen. There are two schools of thought on that. Some people feel like the young prospect should move up one step at a time and that you should not put them into an overwhelming situation because they might lose their confidence. My feeling has been that if you put them into that kind of a situation and they fail, they will probably learn why they failed and then they will go back down. If they are the kind of competitor that you want, they will go back down there and work on that and fix it and come back up again. And if they are somebody that once defeated, they are going to be defeated forever, they are probably not the person you want anyway.

The trend has been to take longer and longer [to bring pitchers to the majors]. What happened with me is not going to happen again. [I was] a starting pitcher's manager—if you are a starting pitcher that likes to get the decision. What I would tell them is when you go out there to start the game, you want the decision — win or loss. If you are afraid to lose, you know, you are going to always be one to bail out of a tied game in the fifth or sixth inning; that way, you cannot lose. The proper mental attitude is to go for the win even at the expense of a possible loss and pitch as far into the game as you can so you do not need as much help from the bullpen. And mostly guys responded well to that. We were on a four-man rotation and pitching lots of complete games [when I was coaching the Astros]. We used to pitch the whole season on the fourth day.

I did not know that much about pitching when I signed [as a rookie]. I signed because I could throw the ball hard, and I could throw it over the plate. And I had a pretty good breaking ball. But I did not really have the best idea of what to do with that. The process of learning how to pitch was expedited by pitching in more games and more innings and being coached by professionals.... Once I signed, the process really moved forward quickly, especially, you know, having to try to compete in the major leagues. I could not only see what was happening to me when I was on the mound and talked to the catcher about it and the pitching coach or the manager. But I could also watch what Juan Marichal was doing, or what Warren Spahn was doing, and Don Drysdale, or Bob Gibson. I mean, you are right there where you can watch and see the best pitchers doing it, you know, and that really helped me learn what to do, too. So, it was a combination of pitching more innings and watching better pitchers and getting better coaching.

Jim Owens was a team mate. He pitched the first year or two that I played. He was on the staff, then he became pitching coach. And I probably learned most of the early lessons from him. And after him, the guy that was really good was Roger Craig. He came through as pitching coach for two or three years here during the middle of my career.... It is sort of an interesting dynamic because when young guys come up, they obviously take another guy's place. And so, a lot of times, the guy's place you take might be a popular guy among the other pitchers and they might be a little disgruntled at first but everybody knows



As a young player who had just joined the majors, Larry Dierker enjoyed the first class treatment, which he said would be "minor league" by today's standards.

that that is the nature of the sport. So, after the guy is gone and you are there for a while, then you are on the team trying to help and they start trying to help you.

One of the things that really helped me was there was not much pressure because we knew we were not a contending team.... It was no pressure, you are in the major leagues, getting first class treatment, riding around in chartered planes, having people give you money for your meals and stuff. It was glamorous to me. By today's standards, it would be minor league, but for me at that time and that age, I was thrilled.

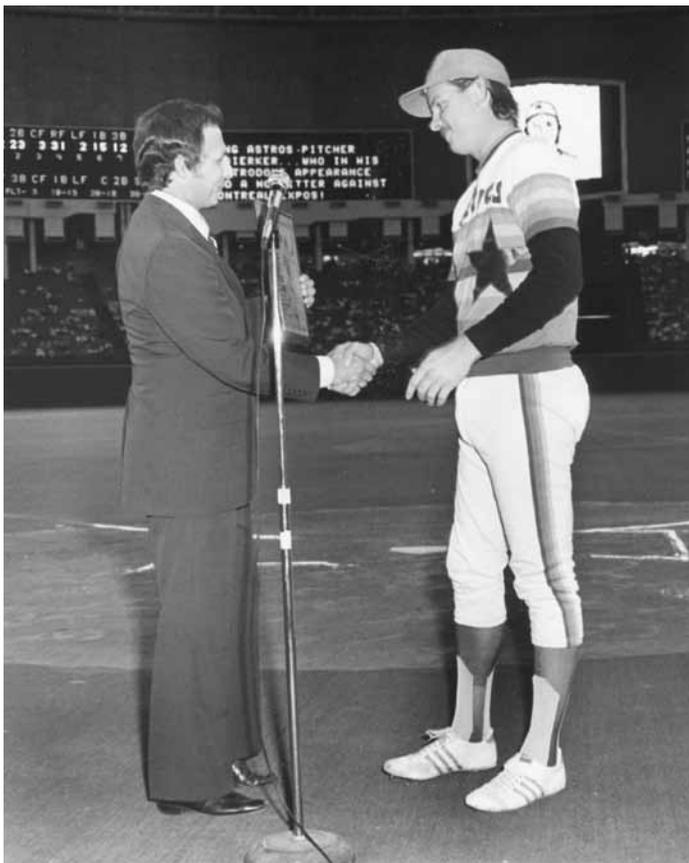
Every I time I went back to college, I started after the baseball season, so I was usually two weeks to a month late coming into classes. I could catch up just fine in classes like English or history or anything where you read a book and then you have to write about what you read, but when it came to things that were more technical, I was in trouble. About my third or fourth year,

I thought I should major in business because I had some money, and I thought that would be a prudent thing to do. But when I came back to calculus and accounting and computer science one month late, I was lost. Within a couple of weeks, I dropped all those classes, and I ended up with political science and economics. And the next year, I switched over to majoring in English.

One thing that helped me a lot — we got Johnny Edwards over from the Cardinals and he was a good catcher. In 1969 (at the age of twenty-two) in spring training, I actually went 5-0, and he was just adamant that if I was going to pitch in the major leagues, I needed to learn how to throw pitches other than my fast ball behind [in] the count 3-2. I worked on that a lot in spring training, and I found that I could get the ball over the plate, or if I did not, they would swing at it if it was out of the strike zone because they were all looking for fast balls. And that was one of the last pieces in the puzzle—you know, of putting together all the things I had to offer on the mound—to have enough confidence to do those sorts of things. And he was instrumental in that.

I feel like you could imagine how I would feel, or how any twenty-two-year-old would feel, in that position. I think I was pretty full of myself, you know. It was a good feeling. I knew I was one of the best and I knew it was not an accident. I was happy about it, and I was a big shot. I knew I was going to make a bunch more money. I think everybody has to work that out for themselves because one thing that I felt several times is when I was in





Larry Dierker received an award for pitching his first no-hitter in a game on July 9, 1976, against the Montreal Expos.

Dierker, shown here in 1975, continued to be an effective pitcher despite battling shoulder and elbow problems.



my prime and my arm was healthy, and I was warming up for a game, and I felt good, and we were playing a weak team, and I would look over and they would have a lesser pitcher warming up to pitch against me, and I thought we are going to win this game. This is going to be fun. And I asked Nolan [Ryan] if he ever felt that way one time. He said, "Not once." His attitude, it was going to be a war no matter what the team was with the opposing pitcher, and he was never going to let up. Of course, he won more than twice as many games than I did, so he probably had a better philosophy.

JP: You make the All-Star team in 1969 and 1971. Did you pitch in the 1969 game?

LD: Yes, I pitched in that game in Washington. I only faced two hitters. There were two outs in the inning. Boog Powell got a single, Reggie Smith popped up and that was it. In 1971, I was hurt. I was really off to the best start I had ever been. I was 10-1, I think at one point, and my ERA was below 2. My elbow was burning every start. But I was having so much success that I was just putting hot stuff on it and going out there. It got worse in the game at Candlestick Park, my last start before the All-Star game, to the point where I had to go on the disabled list. Don Wilson took my place, and he pitched an inning in that game in Detroit. I was there, and I was chosen for the team, but I did not pitch. . . .

I think the tendency now is to just shut a guy down until it gets to where it does not hurt. . . . I think they are a little more cautious now than they used to be. It used to be, you know, just get a cortisone shot, put hot stuff on it, take pain killers, and go out there and pitch.

In 1970, my arm was fine but that was 300 innings in 1969 and 270 more in 1970. [In] 1971, when I made the All-Star team, my elbow bothered me mid-season, and I missed the whole second half of that season. And the next year, my shoulder started giving me some trouble. I got over the elbow problem and it probably changed my delivery or something a little bit to protect my elbow. I am not sure what happened but the next year, it was the beginning of the shoulder. I was not too hurt for a few years there — I just had occasional shoulder discomfort, but the last two or three years were basically not knowing from one start to the next if I was going to be able to go out there and make my next start.

What tests they did, they never really diagnosed anything. I think if I had been pitching in a later era, in this era, there is no way that I would have retired at thirty-one. Somebody would have said, "You have got to get that shoulder fixed and keep pitching," because it is too hard to find good pitchers and, you know, when a guy is that young, it is obvious the rest of your body is fine, so I think they would have found a way to fix my shoulder. But back then, if they did not have something they knew they had to operate on, they did not operate, and they could not find anything they knew they had to operate on.



Astros owners R. E. "Bob" Smith and Judge Roy Hofheinz.

JP: Despite your sore arm, late in your career, you pitched a no hitter.

LD: I just went into that game thinking I was going to mix it up and move it around like I had been and by the seventh inning, I got the adrenaline, and I did not know my arm was sore anymore. Actually, I had lost two no-hitters on infield hits late in the game, one in the ninth inning. We were in the Dome and the last two innings, I decided I was not going to give up a ground ball that might be a hit. It was either going to be a fly ball or a strikeout. I think I struck out four guys in the last two innings, and I was basically just throwing high fast balls. I did not throw anything but fast balls the last two innings and here I was, going into the game with my arm a little fragile thinking I am just going to not overdo it, just mix it up and move it around. It was almost like two games: the first part of the game pitching and the last couple of innings just throwing. It was like old times.

In 1969, we were close in the beginning of September, and then we caved in, much like the 1996 team did, which led to me getting the manager's job — being close and then falling out in the end. I think that all of us would have liked to have had a shot at playing when it really counts at the end of September and the pennant race and in the post season. I think there was a realization during most of those years in the 1970s that we just were not as talented as the Dodgers and Reds. They were great teams. At some point, you just have to look at the other team and say, "they've got more talent than we do."

I think we felt that we possibly could have won the eastern division a couple of those years but it was just like playing in the American League East now; you know, Toronto may have a great team, but they are not going to beat Boston or New York.

There were some good trades. We got Jose Cruz for Claude Osteen. I am not sure if there was anything quite that good until Bagwell came along but that was certainly a good deal. But, you know, the Morgan deal and the Cuellar deal really hurt, and

the Rusty Staub deal, too. So, we lost a lot of talent. Paul Richards was the general manager until the judge [Roy Hofheinz] prevailed in the ownership situation with R. E. "Bob" Smith. The judge did not like Paul so he let him go and then hired Spec Richardson, and he made most of the dumb deals. But I do not think Paul Richards would have made those trades, and I think we probably would have been an even better team in the late 1960s and early 1970s if we had not made those deals. And, to me, it was really a defining moment for the franchise because my understanding is that the judge and Bob Smith were not getting along, seeing eye-to-eye, and Bob Smith gave him a buyout price and a date, and he thought he probably would not be able to come up with the money, but the judge was such a charmer and such a dreamer and an eloquent speaker and everything else, that he did manage to scrape up the money, and he bought Bob Smith out. And had Bob Smith become the sole owner instead of Roy Hofheinz, I think that the franchise would have been better.

We might not have had the Astrodome. I mean, the judge was certainly a major figure in Houston history and an innovator in terms of the Dome. And obviously, that has led to other domes and retractable roof stadiums. He was probably a genius. I think he was one of the youngest mayors any major city has ever had. But from the baseball standpoint and player personnel, I think we would have been better off with Bob Smith because I think he would have kept Paul Richards and let Paul do the baseball work, whereas, I think the judge got Spec in there and started trying to be part of it and I think that was a mistake.

JP: How did the players react to what turned out to be a series of bad trades in these years?

LD: There is not anything you [as a player] can do about it, and even when we made that trade with Cincinnati [Joe Morgan trade], I thought it was an O.K. trade. Tommy Helms was a good second baseman, so we still had a good second baseman. We had power with Lee May and Jimmy Stewart was a switch hitting, utility type player. I did not think it was going to turn out to be such a horrible trade.

If he [Joe Morgan had] stayed here, he probably would not have achieved what he did achieve... because, you know, if you are a pitcher and you have good fielders behind you and good hitters in your lineup, you are going to have a better record than if you are pitching for a lesser team. And if you are a hitter and you have good hitters in front of you and good hitters behind you, you are going to have better numbers than if you are hitting on a team where you do not have good other hitters around you. So, it helped him to be in that lineup, but he would have been a great player no matter what. He had that intensity of focus and spirit for competition that was off the charts, as most of the Hall of Fame guys do.

Craig Biggio will be the first to be a lifetime Astro to make it [into the Hall of Fame], and I think Jeff Bagwell will make it, too. Sentimentally, I hope that Bagwell makes it on the third ballot so he will go in at the same time that Biggio does. And

that could happen, you know, because his career was shortened. And so, even though his numbers are extraordinary, the total RBIs and total runs scored are a little low because he does not have as many at bats because of his injury, but his averages — on base, slugging, RBIs per year, runs scored per year—are all better than many first basemen who are already in there and I think that the voters will realize that.

JP: When were you first aware of the possibility of steroid use?

LD: I do not think that I picked up on that before it started becoming news. You know, once you read about it or heard somebody, a commentator speak about it, and then you looked around at some of the guys. I thought about the guys I played with. You know, when I was playing, there weren't many guys lifting weights, so it was possible just to assume that we all would have looked like that if we had lifted weights because we did not.

I think the effect of it is really overblown because just for one particular reason, that certainly guys hit more home runs, there was a higher quantity of home runs, but in terms of distance of the long home runs, you would think that if the steroids was making a guy that much stronger, that he would hit the ball that much farther. But there were balls that Frank Howard hit and balls that Willie Stargell hit and balls that Mickey Mantle hit in different stadiums, and these guys in this era who have played in those same stadiums, nobody has hit the ball any farther. And

*“When you are young, you are invulnerable
...the last thing you are thinking about is how
you are going to feel when you are sixty.”*

we know those guys were not taking any steroids. So, you know, I think it maybe has had an effect but I think that because of the quantity of home runs, which I think is partially due to poor pitching depth, that it is assumed that cheating is so bad that anybody could do it if you took steroids, anybody could pitch a no-hitter through spit balls or scuffing the ball. I think there is a suspicion among fans that all these things that have happened in the game would be categorized as cheating, have a major effect on the game, and I think they probably have a more subtle effect on the game, and it is really not the impact—and this is just my opinion—I think these things have not had the impact that the fans think they have.

If you have guys like Sosa and McGwire and Bonds who were already established stars, it is hard to understand why they would succumb to that temptation, but if you look at a guy that is twenty-eight years old who is in AAA making \$50,000, and major league minimum is \$325,000, he has got a wife and a couple of kids, he has been in the minor leagues for five years and he is thinking if I could just get a little better and get a couple of years in the big leagues, at least I would have a start on my next life. I can understand that.

At one of our alumni events a couple of years ago, it was the 1980 team. It was before anybody knew about steroids, and guys were sitting around having a beer, and somebody said, “Well, if I was playing now, I would take steroids. I would not want to go against all those guys if we're not going to be on the same playing field.” And just about every single guy said the same thing, you know. If everyone else is doing it, I would do it.

We will never know [who took steroids and who did not] and the other thing is what we do know, I think, is that when you are in your twenties, you do not care what effect it will have on you when you are sixty. I mean, the people were saying, “You are going to pay the price for this down the line with your health.” When you are young, you are invulnerable, you know, I mean, the last thing you are thinking about is how you are going to feel when you are sixty.

They [Major League Baseball] probably could have started [testing] sooner than they did. I think in baseball, they were probably pleased with the Sosa/McGuire thing, and probably attendance was going up, and they may have been dragging their feet almost semi-intentionally because the game was very popular, and there were a lot of home runs; and it was almost like when Babe Ruth started hitting them and other guys started hitting them, and the game became popular that the people that owned the teams and run the game were thinking, well, let's don't rock the boat. Things are going pretty good. And so, it kind of leaked out and became known, and they almost got to the point where they had to do something. And now, they have finally done something. But they still have a problem with the human growth hormones. They need a blood test, I guess. I think you can get that with a blood test.

There was a Hall of Fame player that said baseball must be the greatest game on earth to survive the fools that run it. Can you imagine when that was said? It was said in 1941 by Bill Terry. So, you know, you could say at this point in time that the players and the union run it, just as easily as you could say the owners run it. But the statement is still basically true. We have come through strikes, and we have come through steroids, and we have come through World War II, and we have come through drug trials in Pittsburgh in the early 1980s, and it seems like the game is able to survive all sorts of scandals and unseemly behavior. And now with the steroids, if a bunch of guys are implicated in January, and they say, “But we've got this stuff cleaned up now,” I think all it is going to do is make it more popular.

JP: How hard was your transition from being a player to being an announcer?

LD: It was not that hard. I think that when you do something like that, you do not really know how to do it, but your knowledge of the game can make the presentation reasonably informative even if you are not a professional broadcaster, and then after a few years, you become a professional broadcaster. It takes everybody a couple of years to learn the timing of things. It is especially difficult on TV. I mean, it is a nightmare on TV right now because they throw so many charts and graphs up there, special effects and sponsored elements, that you cannot really tell a story anymore. You cannot speak more than a couple of sentences because they are liable to put something up there on the screen, and you have to stop and talk about what is on the screen. And so, it makes it difficult to be anecdotal and to present the game the way I like to have it presented, in a friendly and informative way, because it just seems like they want that *People Magazine* flash, flash, flash, cut, flash, cut, cut — that they are trying to make the game seem like it is really fast moving and exciting when it is really just baseball. It is a pastime. And I prefer it as a pastime. On radio, you can still broadcast it that way but on TV, you cannot.

I was pretty lucky to grow up in L.A. and hear Vince Scully

all the time. And then, I spent my last year with St. Louis and I heard Jack Buck quite a bit because I was damaged goods when I went, and I only pitched thirty some innings for them, and I did not go on all the trips because I was on the disabled list. So, I got to hear Jack Buck a lot. I think those two guys were probably, in terms of just baseball announcers, the best that the National League had to offer.

I worked with Dewayne Staats and Gene Elston about the first half and then Milo Hamilton and Bill Brown the second half, roughly. I probably had a little closer relationship with the players when I first started announcing because I was just in my thirties. I was the same age as a lot of the players, and I had played with or against them. And so, it was almost like I was still a player, but then as I grew older and the players got younger, and there was nobody that I had played against or with, you know, then I had a separate relationship, which was more just a professional thing, you know — talked to them, interviewed them, say hello on the bus or around the batting cage but not go out and have a beer or go play golf or anything. It separated as I got older.

I got to get in the race as an announcer and then I got to get in the race as a manager. I was never in it as a player. That Philadelphia series [in 1980] was probably more exciting than the Mets series [in 1986]. I got to do both of those. I had Nolan's 4,000th strikeout. I was doing play-by-play on radio at that time.

[While announcing] I did a lot more statistical analysis, and I read more books from people like Bill James and others that kind of broke the game down analytically in ways that I had not thought about before. So by the time I went down to manage, I think I had a better idea of what creates runs scored, more than the fielding. The pitching was something I knew from experience, and I knew from experience that the better fielders you have, the better pitcher you are going to be. So, that was the prevent-runs standpoint and that was mostly from experience. But the offensive part was less familiar to me—slugging average, on base average, the percentage of

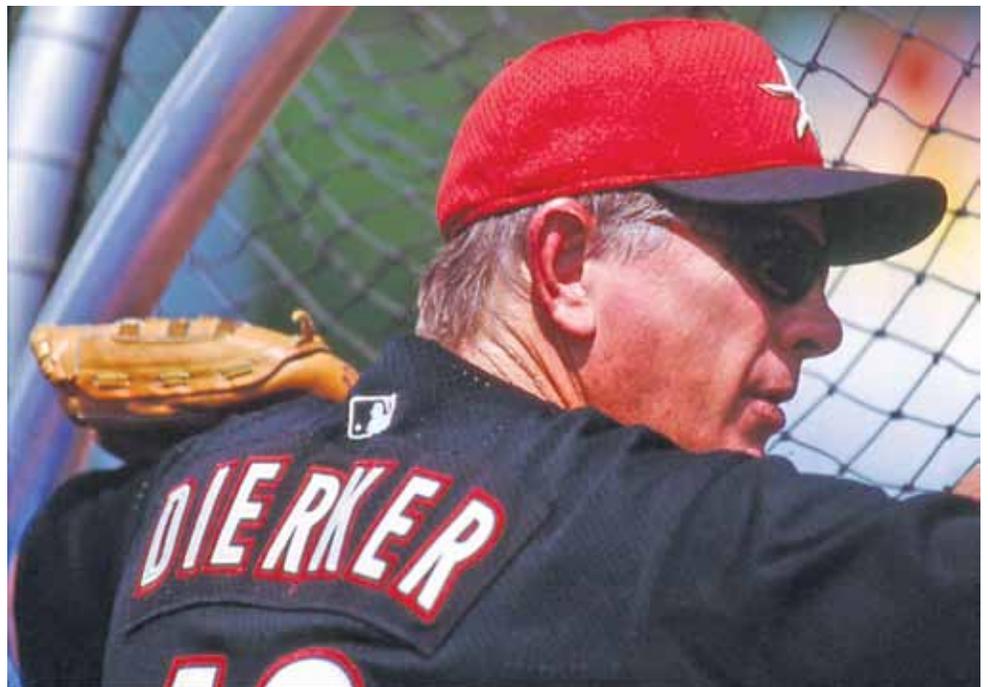
steals and what percentage you have to do to gain an advantage, and the number of the percentage of games where the big inning wins the game. And then, I went through my scorebook to see if that was true; so I went through a whole year, and about 50% of the time, you know, the winning team scored more in one inning. Even if it was a 2-1 game, they scored the two runs in one inning. And then, I took it a step farther and said, well, how many times does a team score as many runs in one inning as the other team does in a whole game, and it was 70%. So, when I went down to manage, I was armed with those ideas, and a lot of managers are not. You know, a lot of managers still think about the team that scores first wins 60% or 70% of the time. But, you know, the team that scores first could score five runs in the first inning and still score more than the other team does in the whole game. So, both of those things could happen in the

same game. But a lot of managers bunt and play little ball in the early part of the game to try to get the first run because they have heard that the team that scores first wins. I never did that when I managed. I tried to play for the big inning until the end of the game when we only needed one run.

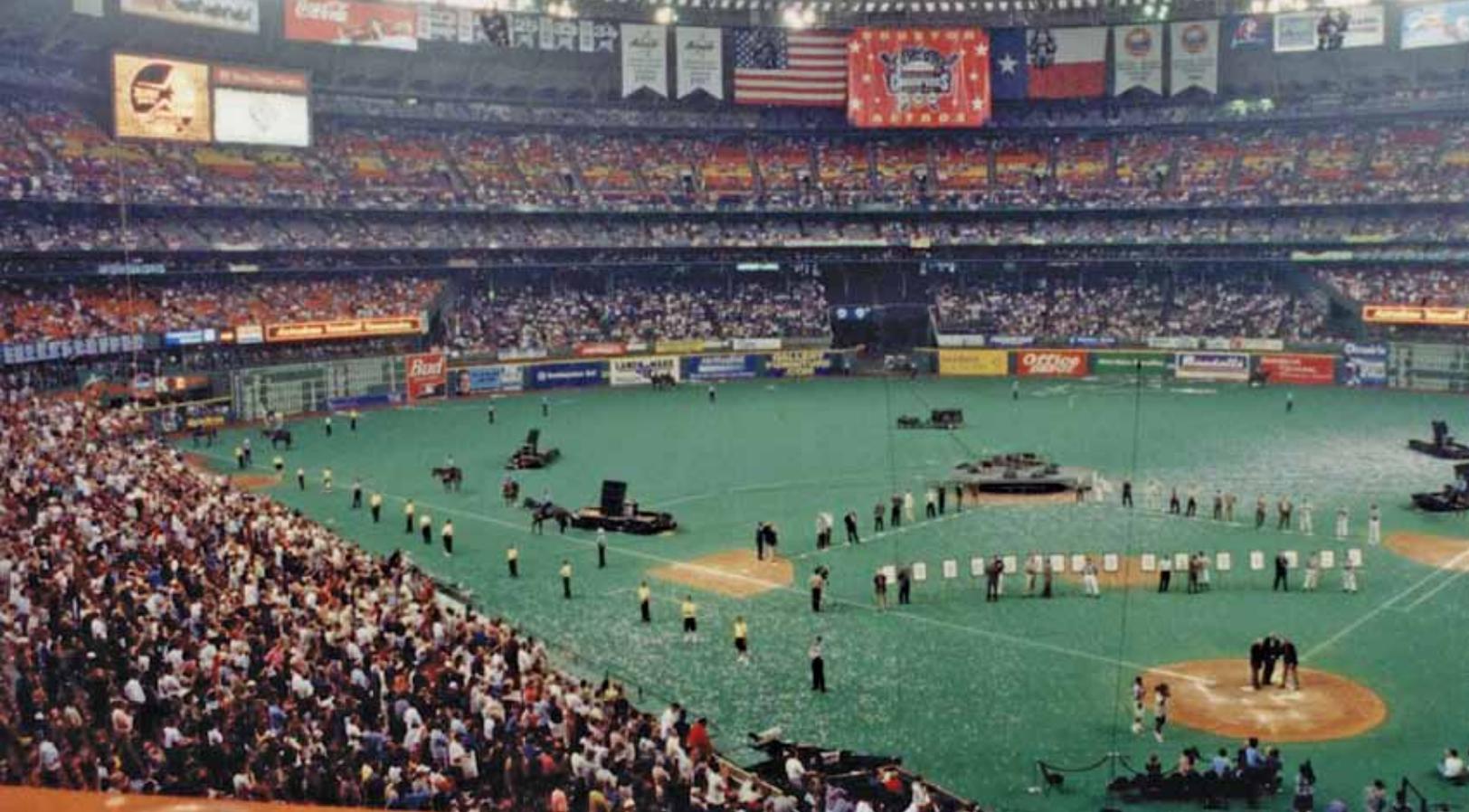
Managing the game was fun, but managing the situation was not fun. It was probably the job that I least enjoyed of all the things I have done in baseball, just because of the combination of having to get there so early because the players get there so early and have nothing to do until the game starts except talk to the media. And then, the media kind of pressure in the season where we had a bad year and even in the seasons where we lost in the playoffs. By the time it was over at first, you know, it [being removed as manager] kind of hurt my feelings because we had won the division that year; but after about one month, I felt like I had had a big burden taken off of me, and I realized that I could be a lot happier person if I did not have to be responsible for what happened out on the field. But actual tactics, from the first pitch to the last pitch, I enjoyed that.

I had great players. Oh, I mean, that is critical. You can screw up a good team if you make everybody mad and you are a bad manager, but you cannot possibly take a team of middling talent and win a championship through the shrewdness of your tactics.

I probably emphasized defense, pitching, and fielding more than most managers for that reason. I think in the Big Bang era, most managers, coming from playing positions rather than from pitching, they think a little more about how are we going to outscore the other team, and I would probably think how are we going to allow fewer runs than the other team? And I probably was less reluctant to go into extra innings to shoot for the moon, change pitchers in the fifth inning to try to have a big inning. I was kind of a save-your-ammunition type manager, not really reacting too much to what was going on early in the game unless you just absolutely had to. But if it was a close game, even if we were a little behind, I would say, "Let's save our best pinch



The Astros made the playoffs four of the five seasons Dierker managed the team, and he was elected Manager of the Year in 1998.



Larry Dierker was honored in a ceremony naming the All-Astrodome team at the final regular season game played at the Astrodome on October 3, 1999.

hitter. Let's save our right and left pinch hitter. Let's save this relief pitcher. Let's let this pitcher pitch another inning," and just kind of let the game go a little further before I started trying to use my reserves in my bullpen.

[In the play offs,] it was three times the Braves and one time the Padres. And in all of those series, we faced some sensational pitching. I mean, not only were these guys good pitchers during the year but, I mean, we caught Kevin Millwood when he struck out fifteen guys. You just could not hit him that day. It was probably the best his arm ever felt in his whole career. And his control was great too! Kevin Brown had a similar game against us. And, of course, Maddox and Glavine and Smoltz. I felt like there were times during the year that we could have scored runs off those guys throwing the way they did. But most of the time you don't hit guys who are throwing that well. . . . we just could not get past that first round, mostly because we could not score.

1998: That was the Kevin Brown year, and that was when we had our best team and won 102 games. That was the year I thought we had the best talent in the league, and the Padres beat us. I think [Randy Johnson] was 10-1. He was good in that first game against Kevin Brown, too. We lost 2-1, I think, but we only scored a run in the ninth off Trevor Hoffman because they took Kevin Brown out. But I think he pitched eight innings and struck out fifteen guys in that game. Guys were just walking back to the dugout going . . . what are you supposed to do?

In 1999, we won again — I thought that I did a better job that year, and that was the year I had the seizure. So, I missed about one month of that season. But that year, we won 97 games. And we were decimated by injuries. I had Biggio and Spiers in the outfield during most of September. We lost Moises Alou for the whole year and Richard Hidalgo for about half of the year,

and had other injuries as well. Plus, the Reds were just putting relentless pressure. . . . At one point, we won eleven or twelve games in a row and we only picked up one game on them.

It got down to the very last day of the year, and we won [against the Dodgers] in the Dome, and it was the last regular season game in the history of the Dome, and the confetti, and the Astros team of honor, and the champagne, and Harleys, and cigars. There were players from different generations, and everybody was going around hugging each other and everything. It was a really special time, that particular part of it, and that was only a part of it. To me, it was one of the most memorable days of my whole career and we had to win that game to win the division. So, I felt like, you know, 97 games in that year was probably more difficult to obtain than the 102 the year before.

And then, in 2000, the first year at Minute Maid, we had a lousy year, 70-92. The pitchers freaked out. Bagwell and all those guys were not hitting until the second half. It was just an inexplicable bad year for a team that had quite a bit of talent. And then the next year, we won again and lost in the playoffs to the Braves.

I thought [Minute Maid Park] was great. I mean, I was concerned about the home run and the effect it was having on the mentality of the pitching staff but I thought it was a beautiful park. I was ready to leave the Dome. I loved the Dome, but when they took the scoreboard down and put up more seats, it just looked like any other multipurpose stadium . . . the Dome just seemed passé at that point, and I was ready for a new one [ballpark]. And then, when I saw the new one, I loved it, and I still love it.

JP: You were fortunate to have a chance to play in some of the great old ballparks in your early years in the big leagues.

LD: Yes, I did. Sportsman's Park in St. Louis, Crosley Field, Forbes Field, Connie Mack Stadium, County Stadium — all of them.

JP: And then watched them all get replaced by multipurpose stadiums.

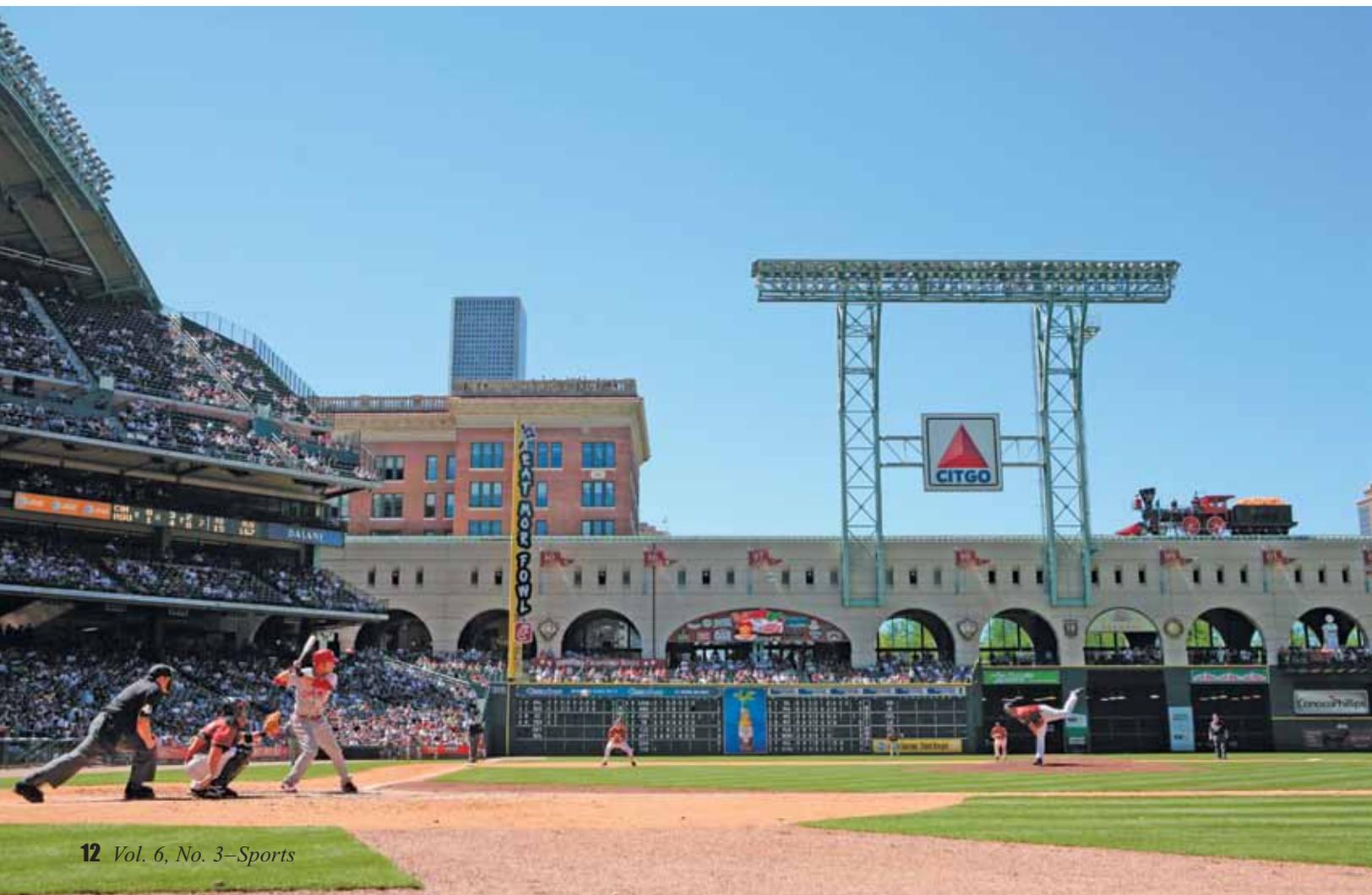
LD: Well, the Dome was . . . we kind of led everybody down the primrose path because they thought, boy, isn't this great? You can have one stadium — football and baseball, put down AstroTurf and you do not have to take care of the grass. I mean, this is the way of the future. Everybody followed and now, they have all said, "This is a terrible idea. It is not ideal for baseball or football. We need separate stadiums. The AstroTurf is no good." But all that started because of the Astrodome.

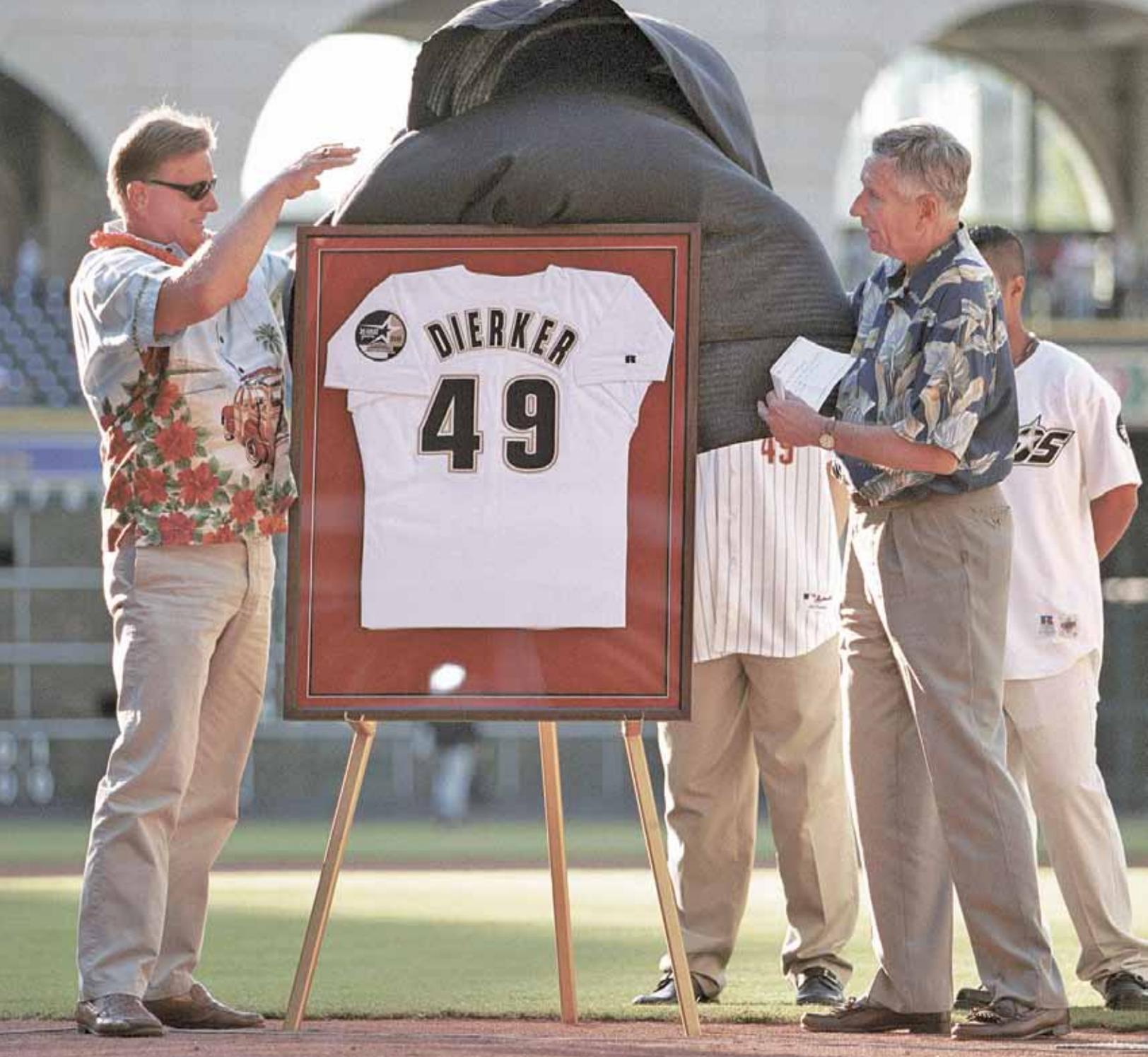
The thing about baseball that is so charming is that, you know, people collect ball parks. . . . Thomas Boswell once said — their sounds, their sights, their smells, their neighborhoods — they are unique and people go around and want to see a game in every park, or people will go around if they are golfers and they will want to play the great golf courses because every golf course is different. . . . And, to me, those two sports are unique for that reason, and I think really that for that reason, a great deal of the best sports writing has been golf writing and baseball writing.

When I got here, we had a very high percentage of Cardinals fans because the Houston Buffs were here, and all the players that came through Houston and went to St. Louis, among them,

Dizzie Dean and others, Joe Medwick and others, so people liked the Cardinals. And a lot of people watched the Yankees on the game of the week. And they were always on, and Houston did not have a major league team, so a lot of them became Yankee fans or Cardinal fans. And then, over time, you know, it seemed like the novelty of the Astrodome wore off and we really did not have a very good core of baseball fans in Houston at all. And then, when I first got into broadcasting and take it in the late 1970s, early 1980s, we had a combination of a lot of things that were good for major league sports. We had a good team. We were contending each year. The Oilers and Rockets also did. And the oil business was booming, and we were able to sell a lot of tickets and build a bigger core of baseball, football, and basketball fans. And then, the teams, all of them sort of faded. 1986 was a great team but it was just one team in the middle of a fairly long run of not too good teams. But the last ten or twelve years in baseball in Houston, with the combination of the new ballpark and the contending teams year after year, has built a core of baseball fans in Houston that I think is liable to last. But in 2007, to be drawing 35,000 and 40,000 a crowd, you know, all through the midweek in September when you are already eliminated, you know, to me, that said this is becoming a pretty good baseball town. . . . I think we are getting pretty close to getting in that group of cities where people are going to come and support the team no matter what the team does because they think, well, we may be down for a few years but we will come back, because they have the expectation that we have

The Houston Astros take on the Cincinnati Reds at Minute Maid Park.





On May 19, 2002, Larry Dierker and Astros owner Drayton McLane, Jr. unveiled the framed jersey given to Dierker to commemorate the Astros retiring his number 49.

done enough winning, been in the playoffs enough that I think the mentality is that, well, we may be down now but we will get back. . . . And I think that is the way Cardinal fans have always felt. You know, their winning teams have come and gone. They won a lot in the 1960s and 1980s but not in the 1970s. And they have won a little bit lately but, you know, I think Cardinal fans just say, well, we like the Cardinals — win or lose and we will get our share of championships.

We have a good stadium, we have had a lot of success on the field, and we have a big city that is growing. And, you know, even if you are new to Houston, if some guy comes to U of H, and he is a new professor from somewhere else, and you become friends, and you say, “Let’s go out to the ballgame,” you know, we might have another fan! He might not need you to take him the next time.

Joe Pratt is the editor of *Houston History*.