

# “Aparicio to Henry to Skowron”

## A Close Encounter With Baseball's Immortals

*“A partial plate on my left side and Nellie Fox is to blame.”*

So began the essay I submitted to the Buffalo News trying to earn a spot on the field along side a group of traveling Hall of Famers about to play in what was billed as “Buffalo’s Grand Old Game.”

The year was 1984, and a Chicago promoter had put together a four-city tour of retired major leaguers, every one an All Star and many Hall of Famers. The lineup was to include names like Mays, Spahn, Doby, Cepada, Wynn, Feller, Ford, Larsen, Banks, Wilhelm and many others. The most important name to me, as you’ll soon learn, was former White Sox Shortstop, Luis Aparicio.

First let’s set the scene.

In the early ‘80s Buffalo was in the midst of a baseball revival. Mayor Jim Griffin had recently obtained a AA franchise and a working agreement with the Chicago White Sox. It was his dream to bring a major league team back to Buffalo, and this AA team was to be the first step. And no, my use of the word “back” is not a typo.

The original Buffalo Bisons began play in 1877, and although they were a AAA franchise for most of their history, from 1879-85 Buffalo was a member in good standing of the National League. Yes, THAT National League.

By the late ‘60s the Bisons were a successful AAA franchise, the farm club of the Cincinnati Reds, and fielded a team that included Johnny Bench, the greatest catcher ever to play the game. The quality of minor league baseball prior to MLB’s expansion was never higher, but the economics of the game were changing, and the city lost its AAA franchise after the 1970 season. It seems that the opportunity to watch major league baseball every Saturday afternoon on NBC’s Game of the Week reduced the popularity of minor league baseball in America, and Buffalo was no exception.

Once Mayor Griffin restored professional baseball to Buffalo plans were begun to build a new downtown baseball park, to be named Pilot Field. It was the first of the retro-style, fan and player (grass field!) friendly designs out of HOK Sport in Kansas City, the company that later brought the same concepts to Camden Yards, starting a trend that continues today. The new park would have two decks designed to hold 20,000 fans, and would include extra-large supporting beams strong enough to accommodate an additional two decks. Alas, the franchise Buffalo sought was awarded to Toronto instead, and those decks would never be needed. But that's another story.

Until Pilot Field opened the AA Bisons played their home games in War Memorial Stadium, a venue originally built for football and home to the Buffalo Bills for the first 12 years of their existence. When you shoehorn a baseball diamond into a football stadium you end up with odd field dimensions. Thus, in a mirror image of the LA Coliseum, the Dodgers' first LA home, with its 295-foot left field wall, War Memorial had an even shorter right field porch, one that had left-handed hitters drooling the minute they walked on to the field.

The stadium had been vacant for years and was in such poor shape that it was known affectionately as "The Rockpile." Its condition was so bad that writer Brock Yates was quoted in Sports Illustrated as having said that it looked "...as if whatever war it was a memorial to had been fought within its confines."

As bad as it looked, The Rockpile's 1930s design was deemed perfect as the setting of one of the best baseball movies of all time, "The Natural." It was filmed there in 1983 and starred Robert Redford, Glenn Close, Robert Duvall and Kim Basinger. A few former major leaguers with ties to Buffalo were also in the film, including Phil Mankowski, one time AL Rookie of the Year Joe Charoboneu, and the lesser-known Sibby Sisti. (In a mildly strange coincidence, my family had lived in a house once owned by Sisti that sported a basement stair railing made of his old baseball bats.)

In 1984 I was 36 years old, married and the father of two sons. Refusing to give up the pastime of my youth, I played second base in two softball leagues, one that used modified fast-pitch rules. It wasn't baseball, but there was bunting and sliding and stealing and...well, it was close enough.

One afternoon in May of that year I picked up the afternoon paper to find an announcement that there was to be an Old Timers game involving former major leaguers to be played in late June. My eyes widened when I saw the sidebar, headlined “A Baseball Buff’s Dream Come True,” and my heart beat double-time when I read:

“Two winners—one for each league—will be invited to a party honoring the players the night before the game. Then they will join their teammates in the morning at the hotel, bus to the ballpark, take part in pre-game ceremonies and batting practice. Once the game starts, they will ride the pines with the AL or NL reserves until the manager—Gene Mauch for the Americans, Herman Franks for the Nationals—decides the time is right. Each winner is guaranteed one at bat and one inning in the field.

And, when it’s over, each player will have memories to last a lifetime, not to mention a uniform from the team of their choice as well as a Louisville Slugger with his name inscribed on it.”

The rules of the contest were simple: anyone over the age of 35 (just made it!) could enter by submitting a 50-word essay explaining why they wanted to play for the American or National league. Ten finalists were to be chosen and brought to The Rockpile to take batting practice with the Bisons, after which the two winners would be announced.

That sidebar headline said it all: A Baseball Buff’s Dream Come True! What could be cooler than playing along side the heroes of my youth? These were the same faces that stared out at me when, as a boy of twelve, I sorted through my collection of baseball cards (a collection that my mother, in keeping with an age-old tradition, tossed out when I left for college, cards that today would be worth.... yada, yada).

I immediately sat down to gather my thoughts. What would it take to win? I decided that humor was the key. With only 50 words to impress the judges, there was no time to fully explore my love for the game, or to find a way to tug at their heartstrings. Nope, it would have to be funny, and funny in a way that jumped off the pile and hit ‘em right between the eyes. My first draft went like this:

*I don’t enter contests. Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes? Toss it. \$18.5 million dollar Lotto? Ho-hum...look at the suckers in line. Wait? A chance to rub elbows with the greatest ballplayers of my youth? I can suit up and take swings against Spahn? Mingle with Mays and Mantle? Breathe the same locker room smells as Aaron and Stargell? Show me where to start the incision and my left arm is yours. Well...okay, the right arm if you insist, just let me get my swings in before you start the operation. After that experience I wouldn’t even need anesthesia.*

Cute, I thought, but nothing that would grab the judges by the horsehides. I needed something more “out there.” That idea of an operation got me thinking, and led to this second attempt:

*I'm sitting in the doctor's office, standard motif—plastic begonias, soothing watercolors, G-rated magazines—but an inner turmoil clouds my vision: the doctor is waiting to hear my decision. Should he operate? Wait...an old Sport magazine halfway down the pile...hmm...an article on the late Nellie Fox, my boyhood hero. Now THERE was a MAN...a wad of tobacco the size of a ping-pong ball pushing against his cheek, shins a miniature roadmap of Los Angeles from holding his ground on a thousand double-plays...suddenly I know I've made the right decision, “No, Dr. Thurlow, they'll be no sex-change operation for me!” How could I suit up with the gods of my youth on June 23<sup>rd</sup> without the proper equipment?*

Now if *that* doesn't get their eyeballs swimming in their heads, I thought, nothing would. But, then again, this was more than 30 years ago. At that time most people couldn't define “transgender”, and Renee' Richards' successful fight to play in the Women's U.S. Open had only recently concluded. This version was “out there” all right, but well beyond the standards of a family newspaper. I'd have to try something else.

Okay, forget the medical angle, but Nellie Fox? He could still be a hook to hang my tale upon. Like me, he was a second-baseman and an undersized singles hitter. A Hall of Famer, he was crucial to the success of the Go-Go White Sox, winning the MVP in 1959. Although Fox wouldn't be with the Old Timers (he'd passed away in 1975), his keystone partner, Luis Aparicio would be. That led to my third and final attempt:

*A partial plate on my left side, and Nellie Fox is to blame.*

*I was a 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman, half of the greatest double-play combination St. Agnes Parochial School ever saw. I wouldn't take the field without a wad of bubblegum big enough to choke Godzilla nestled against my teeth. I had to look like Nellie, and used that bubblegum to push my left cheek out to the proper dimensions. I could spit with the best of them, but never learned to hit the curve ball (to this day I can't put on my glove without salivating). Anyway, all that sugar rotted my teeth and they, like Nellie, are gone for good. The dream lives on though, and you could fulfill a big part of it by choosing me to play for the American League alongside Aparicio on June 23<sup>rd</sup>.*

A few weeks later the phone rang. It was the Sports Editor of the News advising me that I'd been selected as one of the ten finalists, and was to report to the Rockpile the following Thursday afternoon with glove and spikes to take batting practice with the Bisons!

The next few days were one long daydream. I imagined taking the field with the American League team, lining up at 2<sup>nd</sup> next to Aparicio. I'd make a diving stop to my right and flip him the ball to start a double play, then come to bat to lead off the next inning. Isn't that the way it always goes? The guy who makes an outstanding play to end an inning always leads off the next, doesn't he? Well, this time that guy would be me.

I had no doubt that I would be chosen. Playing softball twice a week and running three miles every other day or so meant that I was in game shape. And, when I read the follow up News article profiling the finalists, I became even more confident. Most looked to be at least twenty years older than I, and one of them was a woman! This could even be even easier than I'd thought.

When Thursday arrived I drove to the stadium and went through the players entrance, up the tunnel and out on to the field. Every fan knows that feeling of leaving the darkness of the passageway and watching the bright, green grass of the diamond come slowly into view. Knowing that I was about to actually walk out and play on that field made the moment even more special. The setting sun, hanging above the third base stands, threw a layer of golden light across the field, completing the perfect scene.

I found a seat in the dugout, laced up my spikes and took up a position at 2<sup>nd</sup>. It was disappointing to see that the only Bisons on the field were a bullpen catcher, an older guy throwing batting practice and a few club interns helping to shag flies. The rest of the team was back in the clubhouse suiting up for the game. But that didn't matter. I was dancing on the balls of my feet on a professional baseball field, waiting for my first ground ball.

Each of the contestants was allowed ten or so swings, but I wasn't anxious for my turn to come. I wanted to display my fielding chops first, to show that I could keep up with the major leaguers I'd be playing with in two weeks. When the contestant who'd been manning the shortstop position went in to bat I moved over before someone else could take his spot. I handled a few ground balls with no trouble, but my big chance came

when the batter hit a high pop fly in foul territory behind third base. Because this play is more difficult for the third baseman, it's the shortstop's responsibility. Without hesitating I raced to the area where I thought the ball would come down and settled under it. Just a routine play, my body language tried to convey, as I casually caught and tossed the ball toward the mound, where a Bison intern picked it up and placed it in a bucket behind the pitcher.

With one exception, another 30-something guy who drove a pitch off the left field wall, most of the contestants couldn't do much with the bat. My turn arrived and I too started slowly, but soon was making solid contact. As per my usual, the hits didn't travel very far, but most were line drives, well struck. I swore I heard someone behind the cage utter the phrase, "frozen ropes" as my turn ended. I left the park that day sure that I'd done everything I could to prove I was worthy to take the field on June 23<sup>rd</sup>. Now it was up to the judges.

It was a huge relief when the call finally came. There'd been far too many days spent waiting and wondering, savoring all the wonderful things that would be mine when I won—the uniform, the personalized bat, the story and pictures in the following day's paper. Then it hit me—the box score! I would be in the box score! Right there, just beneath "Skowron, 1b" and "Aparicio, ss" it would say "Henry, 2b". I'd be memorialized forever among the greats of the game. I imagined myself getting that box score bronzed and hanging it in my office where every visitor would see it, and where I could sit at my desk and stare at it all day.

When the call ended I sat there, staring at the receiver in my hand until the sharp buzz of a dial tone, followed by a snarky female voice that said, "If you wish to make a call, please hang up and dial again," broke my trance.

How could this've happened? Who beat me out? The News secretary wouldn't tell me who'd won, only that the results would be in the next day's paper.

Visions of striding on to the field and standing next to Aparicio, images that had shone so brightly in my head for weeks, were shattered into so much diamond dust. My distress was magnified the next morning when I read that a woman had taken what I'd considered my spot! Beaten out by a girl? Good Lord, what was going on? Apparently I was the victim of some horrible, politically correct attempt at gender balance.

Of course, if this happened today I would not have been at all surprised at the notion of a woman wanting to play baseball. In fact, I've recently become a supporter of "Baseball For All," an organization founded by Justine Seigal, the 1st woman to coach for a MLB organization—A's in 2015). Her group is working to give every girl a chance to play real baseball. (You can learn more about this movement at their website—[Baseballforall.com](http://Baseballforall.com).)

My battered ego began searching for reasons other than gender bias that explained my loss. Perhaps the judges thought that, because I was twenty to thirty years younger than the Old Timers, I was too young. Or maybe (and most ridiculous of all) after seeing my display of baseball skills at that practice they thought I might be TOO GOOD? That perhaps one of my "frozen ropes" might be too much for the aging stars?

I eventually came to my senses and got past my disappointment at not winning the contest, but (I'm ashamed to admit now) when June 23<sup>rd</sup> came around, I stayed away from The Rockpile. I couldn't face seeing someone else out where I so badly wanted to be.

Reading an account of the game in the News the following day, I got a small sense of relief to learn that the experience of the contest winners bore little similarity to the vision I'd had of the event. While each did get a turn at bat and played one inning in the field, it wasn't at all as I'd imagined. Each contestant was the 10<sup>th</sup> man (person?) on the field, playing a position that in softball is known as the "short fielder." And their turn at bat really wasn't a part of the game—simply an extra out in the inning. Finally, the aspect of the experience I'd most obsessed over—seeing my name listed among those of my heroes—would never have occurred. The next day's box score had nary a mention of either of the contest winners.

While I didn't win the contest, my brief brush with Buffalo baseball immortality got me excited about the game again. I switched from softball to the real thing, joining a team that played in the city's MUNY league, albeit at the lowest level. Teams consisted of guys like me in their late thirties or early forties along with kids just out of high school.

It was great to be on a real baseball diamond again, with 90 feet between the bases and live pitching, but in just my second game one of those kids taught me a painful

lesson about declining reflexes. Swinging at what I mistakenly thought was a slider about to break over the inside corner, my left arm took the full brunt of the pitch. My radius snapped like a popsicle stick and the ball trickled out to the mound, where the young fireballer casually picked it up and tossed it to first. Then, adding insult to my injury, as I lay there moaning in the batter's box the umpire raised his right arm and called me out.

My teammates surrounded the umpire and argued loudly on my behalf, but his out call was the correct one. Because I'd offered at the pitch that broke my arm, the ball was in play, and I was out.

So ended my renewed baseball career, short as it was.

I came back from that injury, but it was to a softball diamond this time—and a coed league to boot. I figured that, if it was okay for girls to play, rather than fight progress I might as well join 'em.

Thanks to Wikipedia and Buffalo News columnist Mike Harrington for background information used in this article. Any hyperbole or errors of fact are the sole responsibility of the author.