

Bad Boys, Bad Times

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## A TROUBLESOME OFF-SEASON

**F**or Indians boss Alva Bradley, the 1937 regular season could not have arrived soon enough. The fall and winter months had been filled with controversy and debate, mostly detrimental to his ball club. Bradley, who had bought the team in late 1927, had seen more ups and downs in recent days than in his entire previous tenure. Now that opening day had just about arrived, he hoped for at least a few months of smooth sailing.

The first round of turmoil began in late September of 1936. Rumors floated around the American League that the Indians might have illegally signed pitcher Bob Feller. Still a high school student, the seventeen-year-old phenom had pitched sparingly throughout the season, but in the latter part had managed to break the American League strikeout record. Feller and his incredible fastball had brought comparisons to the great Walter Johnson and all the other speed ball kings. The Cleveland front office daydreamed of the pennants the youngster from Van Meter, Iowa, would surely bring.

The dream turned into a nightmare when, on September 23, Ed McAuley of the *Cleveland News* broke the unpleasant story. The Indians beat reporter had uncovered evidence that Feller had signed directly with Cleveland and not a minor league club. The Major League rules of 1936 stated that teams could not sign a player straight out of high school. The rule read, "Major League clubs shall sign as free agents only college players and players who

have previously contracted, or accepted terms, or had service, with any Minor or Major League clubs.” This rule was introduced five years previously when minor league clubs were overwhelmed by the Great Depression and did not have the means to compete with the American or National League clubs for raw talent.

In his story, McAuley reported that most Major League teams flouted the rules on a regular basis. However, this case received national attention due to Feller’s spectacular accomplishments while still only a schoolboy. How could he have gotten to the Majors so fast? According to McAuley, the Indians’ chief scout, Cyril “Cy” Slapnicka, had allegedly signed Feller, then behind closed doors had transferred him to the Class D Fargo-Moorhead club of the Northern League.

The two organizations had a working agreement that kept Feller safely away from the other Major League teams. However, after the pitcher signed his Cleveland contract, the Des Moines, Iowa, club attempted to acquire Feller. They were puzzled by the actions of both Bob and his father William, neither of whom showed any interest in a deal. The Des Moines rep had no inkling that the Fellers had already been spoken for. When Bob set his American League strikeout record at the tail end of the baseball season, the Des Moines people knew somebody, probably Cleveland, had pulled a fast one. Lee Keyser, the Des Moines owner, wasted no time in filing a grievance with the commissioner’s office. The chances of recovering Feller were nil, whereas the likelihood for a cash settlement was a good bet.

Baseball commissioner Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis had a complicated problem to deal with. This was not a matter of some obscure minor league player that few paid attention to. No matter how the Judge ruled, his decision would be front-page news all around the country.

Landis had a strong regard for minor league players. He despised the idea of the Major League clubs having a “chain store” system that impeded the progress of young men trying to advance to the big leagues. Most clubs, particularly the Yankees and Red Sox, had extensive interests in all levels of minor league organizations. They could manipulate a player’s destiny, moving him from club to club until they believed he was ready to compete at the highest

level. This led to several procedures that Landis found despicable. “Covering up” meant shuttling a player back and forth to different minor league clubs to avoid scrutiny. This took place when a team in the Majors had no room for the player in question or believed he needed more time. The player wound up being “sold” to the minors, but only to a team that was part of the Major League team’s chain store. This procedure could go on indefinitely, denying the player a legitimate shot at the big time.

The procedure that applied to Feller was called “recommending.” A Major League team (Cleveland in this case) would sign a player (Feller), then nudge a friendly club (Fargo-Moorhead) to quietly ink him to a valid minor league contract. After a certain length of time the Major League team would advise their partner to sell the player to a higher level (the Class A New Orleans Pelicans, a long-time friend to Cleveland). From there, the Major League team would be informed what a great prospect they had, and would buy the player’s contract—which is just what the Indians, acting on manager Steve O’Neill’s recommendation, did. This appeared to be a legal move, with the paperwork to back it up. However, the Indians were quite careless in shifting Feller through their farm system before he had pitched a single inning for Fargo-Moorhead or New Orleans. He arrived in Cleveland during the springtime, doing some concession work at League Park and pitching sporadically for an amateur club. The Indians had beaten the system, yet Feller’s great pitching late in the year completely blew up the scam.

Judge Landis had little or no sympathy for William Feller and his young son, who had stayed in step with the Cleveland front office, seemingly unaware of any wrongdoing by the Indians. The Fellers notified Landis that they were happy with Cleveland and preferred to remain even if something illegal had occurred. The judge explained free agency to them and the possibility of Bob having the once-in-a-lifetime chance to collect a gigantic payday with another Major League club. Most players would have jumped at the chance to sell their services for as much dough as possible. Here was a tremendous opportunity to make an example of the Cleveland club and score one for the little guy. But William and son were adamant about staying put, forcing Landis to ponder this one for a long while.

Another issue Judge Landis had to consider seriously was that other Major League teams had violated the same rule. Ed McAuley asserted that a highly placed team official told him that if Feller became a free agent there were about ten players on each Major League roster who could become free agents as well. If these ball-players filed any complaints, it would turn baseball upside down. Although the Judge had no deep feelings for most of the owners, he did not relish wrecking the status quo. Landis decided to take a long fishing trip, telling curious writers a verdict probably would not be given until the first week of December.

While Bob Feller returned to high school in Van Meter, anxiety spread throughout the Cleveland front office. Alva Bradley heard reports of the Yankees and Red Sox gearing up for a bidding war should the Judge rule against the Indians. Surely the possibility of losing the greatest pitching prospect since Walter Johnson or Lefty Grove had to cause some restless nights for the Indians owner. But Bradley remained confident, at least in public, that he had nothing to worry about.

Eventually the newspapers reported that a decision would be revealed at the December 1936 winter meetings. Sure enough, on the tenth the ruling came down. The Indians were found guilty but were allowed to keep Feller. Judge Landis fined Cleveland \$7,500 for their actions, payable to the Des Moines club. The Judge released a 2,500-word statement blasting the conduct of the Indians and all of baseball in general. "It turns out that in reality Fargo-Moorhead had nothing whatsoever to do with signing Feller which was done by the Cleveland club, its agent Slapnicka using for that purpose a minor league contract because he could not sign him to a major league contract," the Judge wrote. Landis then slammed the process of "recommending" and gave a step-by-step account of how the Indians had violated the baseball law. Fargo-Moorhead had received only \$300 for selling Feller to New Orleans, and the Pelicans just \$1,500 for moving Feller to Cleveland. The sales were noticeably below market value for a player of Feller's perceived caliber. Though the Indians were the recipient of the Judge's fury, it was Cy Slapnicka who was singled out. Going forward, the new Cleveland general manager would need to walk the line or face the consequences.

In analyzing the situation, Judge Landis did about all he could. Allowing Feller to become a free agent opened the door for any number of ballplayers to cry foul and demand their freedom. He did not have any inclination to rule on potentially hundreds of similar cases. Another factor was the Fellers' steadfast desire to remain with the Indians. The papers would have a field day with the story and hound the Judge unmercifully. It was time to move on to other things, particularly the 1937 season.

Now that the crisis had passed, the Indians considered some moves to improve the ball club. On January 18, Cleveland and the St. Louis Browns agreed on a huge six-player trade. Outfielder Julius "Moose" Solters, shortstop Lyn Lary, and pitcher Ivy Paul Andrews would come to the Indians, while the Browns would receive shortstop Bill Knickerbocker, pitcher Oral Hildebrand, and star Cleveland outfielder Joe Vosmik. The two pitchers involved were throw-ins; neither one had lived up to his potential.

The Solters-for-Vosmik part of the trade drew plenty of criticism from the Cleveland fans and several of the sportswriters. Ed Bang of the *Cleveland News* believed trading Joe was a significant error on the part of Cy Slapnicka. Vosmik made the All-Star team in 1935, leading the American League in three different categories. His .348 batting average left him one point short of the title. But he had had a mediocre season in 1936, prompting Slapnicka to reckon his left fielder was on the down side. Many fans complained to the newspapers, believing Moose Solters, a middle-of-the-road player, could not replace the Cleveland-born Vosmik.

Lyn Lary had had some good seasons with Yankees, but the Indians were now his fifth team in the American League. He could steal some bases and cover a lot of ground defensively, but his batting average had declined on a yearly basis. Bill Knickerbocker had won the Cleveland shortstop job in 1933 and held it over four seasons. His play could be termed steady yet lacking in any superior skills. The Indians front office thought some new blood on the team might spur them along. The trade inspired headlines throughout the country, yet the probability of Solters and Lary leading the team to the pennant seemed remote.

Two months later, the Indians, new players and all, gathered in New Orleans for the opening of spring training. The national

reporters turned their attention to Bob Feller, filing stories on just about anything concerning him. The public ate it up, particularly Feller's politeness and "aw shucks" nature. There were many positive vibes coming out of camp, mostly courtesy of the eighteen-year-old almost-superstar.

Near the end of camp, more stories appeared revealing that once again the Indians front office was in hot water with their good friend Judge Landis. On March 29 it was disclosed that the Judge had been investigating a possible cover-up in the case of minor league outfielder Tommy Henrich. The Massillon, Ohio, product was originally signed in 1934 by Cleveland ex-player and scout Bill Bradley. Henrich reported to Zanesville, an Indians affiliate. He excelled there, triggering a rapid promotion to New Orleans. The 1936 season displayed Henrich at his best, batting a lofty .346 and compiling a gaudy total of 203 hits. Clearly he stood as one of the elite players in all of the Southern Association. In September of the same year, New Orleans questionably sold Henrich and pitcher Ralph Winegarner to the Milwaukee Brewers for \$7,500. This ridiculous figure came to the attention of Billy Evans, the recent general manager of the Cleveland Indians. Evans departed Cleveland in a huff after Bradley cut his salary by 50 percent and now supervised the entire Boston Red Sox farm system. In an article in a Canton, Ohio, publication, Evans remarked that Henrich alone could easily bring a price of \$15,000 to any Major League club. Stories circulated that Henrich read the article and believed a questionable deal had taken place. He did not know that Milwaukee had recently become an affiliate of the Indians. That raised the issue of who had really sent Henrich to Milwaukee, the Indians or their long-time partner, New Orleans. Over the winter months Henrich wrote a letter to Landis, politely asking for clarification of his standing. After his tremendous season at New Orleans, should he not have received an invite to Cleveland's spring training? He asked Landis who really owned his contract. The investigation began on March 29.

Rest assured that Alva Bradley did not take the ongoing probe lightly. The brunt of his anger was directed at his former associate, Billy Evans. Bradley insisted Evans had ulterior motives in writing the September article. The Indians owner told the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, "I don't care about Henrich but I do care about learning

how long Evans will be allowed to continue the tactics that have caused us trouble since he severed his connection with Cleveland.” Bradley went on to insist that Evans was committing a breach of ethics in harassing his former employer.

Evans responded comically, advising reporters he did not know what “breach of ethics” meant and he would have to look it up. Bradley’s angry outburst probably related to the Feller decision the winter before. Apparently Evans had flown to Des Moines, Iowa, to wait for Judge Landis to issue a ruling. In the event of Feller becoming a free agent, Evans planned to park himself on Bob’s front door with a Boston contract. This irritated Bradley; throw in the Henrich situation and the messy divorce in the Cleveland front office, and it can be better understood why the owner wanted Evans cut off at the knees.

Bill Terry, the manager of the New York Giants, threw gas on the fire by saying Henrich was worth at least \$20,000. To the casual observer it appeared the Indians were guilty beyond belief. Landis would conduct a thorough investigation, but given that the Feller case had occurred just three months before, it was generally thought that he would declare Henrich a free agent.

Landis cut short a Florida vacation to meet in New Orleans with Bradley and Slapnicka. Reporters, eager to file a big story, waited patiently outside the building for over three long hours. The door opened and out came the two conspirators with dire expressions on their faces. They did not comment, though any betting man would have put it all down on Henrich and the open market. Few men, including Slapnicka, escaped the ire of Judge Landis. Cy, or as reporters were now calling him, “Sly,” had done it once. The chance of another victory seemed slim.

On April 15 Landis issued his decree. The decision read, “Investigation of the status of the player, instigated at his own request, discloses that he has been ‘covered up’ for the benefit of the Cleveland club. . . . Because of the violation of the player’s rights under his contract and the major–minor league rules, he is hereby declared a free agent.” Tommy Henrich was now able to negotiate with any Major League club.

Henrich took the high road in commenting to the press. He said, “I am satisfied of course with the judge’s decision, although

I said before I did not appeal for my free agency. All I asked the judge to do was to decide my status—if I belonged to Milwaukee outright, to Cleveland or some other club.” He immediately left the Brewers spring training site for Massillon to confer with his parents. Landis had ruled a three-day waiting period before teams could overwhelm Henrich with substantial offers. When the clock struck midnight, the New York Yankees dove in and signed Henrich to a contract. The Yanks outbid the Red Sox and Giants by offering a bonus between \$25,000 and \$30,000. Henrich would have a long, productive career in New York, becoming a four-time All-Star and a great complement to Joe DiMaggio.

The Indians front office committed a ghastly error in trying to hide the talented Henrich in the minor leagues. They may have decided that their 1937 outfield had no room for the up-and-coming right fielder. Earl Averill had reached his thirty-fifth birthday but still was one of the best in the American League in center field. Bruce Campbell had survived two life-threatening bouts of meningitis and looked to be as strong as ever. Moose Solters would be the starter in left field. On paper the outfield looked to be quite sturdy. Even so, a fourth outfielder had to be carried on the squad. Instead of Henrich, the Indians chose Roy Weatherly, another highly regarded young player. In his 1936 rookie season, “Stormy,” as everyone called him, batted over .300. However, opposing teams soon figured out he could not handle a slow curve or off-speed pitches. In 1937 Weatherly hit an awful .201 in a limited relief role.

When the Indians decided to bring up Weatherly a year prior, New Orleans manager Larry Gilbert urged them to take Henrich instead, believing he had a much bigger upside. Cy Slapnicka did not agree. He saw the great speed of Stormy and the likelihood of his playing center field in the cow pasture of Municipal Stadium. Tommy Henrich could have filled at least the utility role on a much more productive level, and with his ability the Indians would have figured out a way to get him in the starting lineup. In any event, if the Cleveland front office had not tried to be the smartest guys in the room, a pennant or two might have been there for the taking.

The 1936–37 off-season surely caused Alva Bradley more heartburn than any other term on his record. He looked ahead to the onset of the regular season and a chance to focus on the launch of

a new schedule. Nevertheless, the bad times just kept on rolling. Just prior to the start of the campaign, another depressing event occurred, though this one had no direct impact on the season. Tris Speaker, the Indian's unofficial goodwill ambassador and a fan favorite, had a severe accident. Still nimble at age forty-nine, he was attempting to build a flower box on the second floor of his suburban Cleveland home. He climbed up the porch, balanced himself, and began hammering away. Moments later the porch collapsed, tumbling the ex-Indian great sixteen feet to the ground. A lesser man would have lain there waiting for help. Not Speaker; he staggered to his feet and cautiously sat down on a lawn chair. His wife called an ambulance, which raced Tris to the hospital. The X-rays taken revealed a fractured skull, a broken arm, and a cracked bone in his right hand. Serious lacerations covered his entire face. The doctors put Tris in a hospital bed with bags of ice wrapped around his head. He could barely speak or move anything but his legs.

For a day or two the physicians feared he might not survive the injuries. To everyone's relief, Tris did beat the odds, getting back on his feet in just about a month. He missed opening day at League Park, where for the better part of twenty years he had greeted players and fans with a hearty smile and some words of encouragement. He usually stopped in the radio booth to chat with WHK announcer and ex-teammate Jack Graney. The crowd always expected to see Tris, maybe get a few words with him and an autograph for the kids at home. This year Speaker remained in his hospital bed, catching the play-by-play from old friend Graney.

After what seemed an eternity for Bradley, Slapnicka, Feller, and the rest of the Indians, it was actually time to play ball.