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Charles O. Finley Obit

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Outrageous. Brilliant. Ignorant. Arrogant. Tasteless. Farsighted. Reactionary. Hilarious. Maddening. Mindless. Creative. Innovative. Destructive. He was all of these. And on Monday when I heard the announcement of his death, I was reminded of how much I enjoyed and how much I was disgusted by Charles Oscar Finley owner of the Kansas City-Oakland Athletics of the American League.

Charles O. Finley made his money writing insurance for doctors. By the mid-1950s he was a multi-millionaire and like so many frustrated major leaguers who get rich, he decided to buy a major league baseball team. When he purchased the Kansas City Athletics in 1960 they were known for their futility, and without expectations he could do whatever he wanted with them. And he did.

Finley began the practice of marketing baseball as entertainment much to the dismay of the purists who still regarded Yankee Stadium as one of America's holy places and Lou Gehrig as a martyr and saint. In 1963 Finley introduced colorful uniforms, the now familiar gold and green. Behind home plate a rabbit popped out of ground to deliver new baseballs to the umpire. Out beyond the fences on the grassy slopes were the sheep and goats, they too sporting the green and gold, while mowing the grass in nature's way. There was even a mule named "Charley O" who was the team mascot and often traveled with his namesake.

In 1968 he took his team from Kansas City to Oakland and within four years he built a championship team, and one of the greatest baseball teams in the post-war period. And make no mistake about it, this was Finley's creation, as he was both owner and general manager of the team now called the A's rather than the Athletics.

The A's championship teams of 1972, '73, and '74 were built largely from the draft and trades at the lower levels. They were built without big money or free agency. Charley O assembled Reggie Jackson, Catfish Hunter, Vida Blue, Blue Moon Odum, Ken Holtzman, Rollie Fingers, Sal Bando, Joe Rudi, Bert Campaneris, Dick Green, Gene Tenace, and many others who made the A's dynasty.

Like their owner the players too were unpredictable and controversial. They brought long hair and facial hair to

baseball, fights to the locker room, and shock to many in baseball. The A's were identified with the counter-culture of the Bay Area, and their World Series with the Cincinnati Reds of short-hair and conservative suits was a melodrama of the early seventies. Middle America was defeated by the longhairs, the counter-culture was superior to the heartland. The A's were one reason many young people came back to the game that was declared in decline with rise of the NFL.

Charley O offered \$300 to any player who would grow a mustache and nearly the whole team did. He put his players in white shoes, gave Hunter the nickname of "Catfish," and even tried to get Vida Blue to legally change his name to "True." Anything to catch the eye or ear of the public.

Finley could be outrageous and reckless. During the 1973 World Series he tried to release Mike Andrews when the second baseman made two errors in the second game against the Mets. Commissioner Kuhn reinstated Andrews and the A's players wore black armbands to protest the actions of their boorish owner. He was booed lustily by the fans and of course the A's won.

He could be infuriating, but you had to love a guy who called Baseball Commissioner Bowie Kuhn "the Village Idiot." This was prompted by Finley's attempt to unload his best players and cut his payroll in 1976. He was the original downsizer, and almost downsized the A's out of existence.

Charles O. Finley will be remembered as a great innovator in the game. It was Finley who brought us night World Series games, which although criticized today, were welcomed amidst great praise in the 70's. It was Finley who championed the Designated Hitter, and even tried the designated runner when he signed trackstar Herb Washington. He advocated orange baseballs for night games and television, and went through managers almost at the same pace as George Steinbrenner.

Finley dismantled the great A's team when agents and free agency took the fun out of the game for him, and when profits were no longer there. In August of 1980, six months after hiring Billy Martin as manager, he sold the A's and left the game. By that time the game he loved was gone, and the great teams he built had faded in memory. His greatest insight was ignored by his fellow owners, when in the face of free-agency he advocated making everyone a free agent, flooding the market, and driving down salaries.

Whether you consider him a farsighted leader or an outrageous buffoon, it is easy to agree that he was one of a kind, and that is either a shame or a blessing for the business and sport of baseball.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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