

## **Pitching Pinch Hitters**

by Mark Lucius

I was twenty-five that June of 1977, still in journalism graduate school. I knew not one single thing about public relations. I knew little more about Manpower, which called itself the world's largest temporary help firm. My new boss there, a couple years older than me and far better dressed, looked past my ignorance of his "profession." As Director of PR, he liked my writing and hired me part-time.

A little before noon my first day in the company's Milwaukee headquarters, with my PR experience at three hours and counting, my boss called me into his office. He posed a question that surprised me, because I could answer it with a certain authority.

"Have you ever heard of the Roloids award for relief pitchers?"

"Yeah," I said, "I do know about that award."

He asked for details, perhaps to test me, perhaps to educate himself. It turned out he was not a big baseball fan. I told him that the previous year, 1976, Roloids had teamed up with Major League Baseball to present the inaugural "Roloids Relief Man Awards" to the top relievers in the National and American Leagues. I owned up to what I didn't know, like who actually won the first awards.

Winners, schminners. It was the campaign my boss liked, for the antacid whose slogan claimed to answer the question: "How do you spell relief? "R-O-L-A-I-D-S."

"Here's the thing," he said in a low, conspiratorial tone, leaning forward across the round oak table he used as a desk. "Manpower has a 'Pinch Hitters' campaign for industrial temporary workers, who work in warehouses and the like. We can do the same thing as Roloids. It's a perfect baseball tie-in."

## *Small Bats, Big Balls*

I didn't know it then, but my boss was embellishing by calling Manpower's "Pinch Hitters" a "campaign." The company's advertising and promotional budget was reserved mainly for its expanding office services area. The industrial effort amounted to a few print materials proclaiming such sentiments as "Our 'Pinch Hitters' are good in the clutch." There was also a customer "leave-behind," a five-inch-long wooden pencil shaped like a tiny baseball bat.

The miniscule industrial budget mattered little to my boss. He believed that most ideas born small could be grown big. He was hired, he had allowed, "To put Manpower on the map." Although a product of journalism school himself, he resembled an old-fashioned publicist. In his previous job, he had promoted such events as "The World's Tallest Man in the World's Shortest Parade."

I took him at his word when he told me Manpower would introduce a "Pinch Hitter of the Year" award that summer. With or *without* the cooperation of Major League Baseball. And he wanted me to work on it.

That afternoon, we got down to business. Why, he asked, would we have a "Pinch Hitter of the Year" contest if Manpower couldn't stage the presentation at the World Series? I held my tongue. The World Series seemed a reach, but it was my first day. I made a note to put the World Series into a plan. When I reminded my boss that Major League Baseball at that time had four divisions, two in each league, he quickly decided we'd present awards to the best pinch hitter in each division.

More brainstorming. He wanted a contest with both statistics *and* judges. The stats would determine the four divisional awards. The judges would choose the "ultimate" Pinch Hitter of the Year. If it seemed excessive to round up a posse of judges to determine what the stats would likely reveal, my boss was unperturbed.

At our next meeting, I shared my concern about obtaining pinch-hitting statistics. No problem, he said. "If we can't get them from Bowie Kuhn (then Commissioner of Baseball), we'll get them someplace. I know a lot of people."

I didn't "know a lot of people," but I knew baseball. If we were to have judges, we would have to include great pinch hitters or risk losing credibility. He told me to find some.

I pored through books and records, made calls, began to know a few people.

To represent the National League, my research turned up “Smoky” Burgess. I knew the name well. While playing for five teams from the late 1940s into the 1960s, Ol’ Smoky accumulated 145 career pinch hits—then the most in major league history. For the American League, I selected a lesser-known baseball journeyman named Dave Philley, who had set a record of his own. In 1958 and 1959, playing for the conveniently named Philadelphia Phillies, Dave Philley knocked pinch hits in nine straight at-bats. Nine different games, nine consecutive hits.

I tracked down the addresses of both players and wrote oh-so-enthusiastic letters of invitation. “We would like you to attend the World Series at our expense and help present the 1977 Manpower Pinch Hitter of the Year!” When I followed up by phone, I found Burgess coaching for a minor league team in North Carolina and Philley in his hometown of Paris, Texas. Both were reserved, polite and delighted at the prospect of an all-expense-paid trip to the World Series.

All this was fine with my boss. Almost. “Those guys are good,” he said. “But we need big names.”

### *Make No Little Plans*

“Big names” were different. With rare exceptions, big names are not pinch hitters. I went looking for times when a big name might have hit a pinch-hit home run, say, in an All-Star game.

And I found one. In 1971, representing the Oakland Athletics, Reggie Jackson clubbed a pinch-hit home run 539 feet, the longest in All-Star history. The ball slammed into a light tower on the roof of Tiger Stadium in Detroit. But now, in 1977, Reggie was an active member of the New York Yankees. It appeared he might play in that year’s World Series. (Famously, he did.)

With no other options, I decided that our judges wouldn’t have to be pinch hitters at all. They could just be *all-time* great hitters. By then, I didn’t even ask my boss. I knew he would approve.

Over the next few weeks, I went after names that even casual baseball fans would recognize, players whose statues were, or someday would be, in the baseball Hall of Fame. As a college reporter, I'd found it intimidating to pick up the phone and ask someone a question I feared might not be well-received. But there was something freeing about following the trail to find Ted Williams, Willie Mays, or Stan Musial. Who would expect me to reach them?

Ted Williams's phone number wasn't in any book. I called the Boston Red Sox, where Williams had spent his entire career. One contact led to another, and to another, and then...

Someone told me that to reach Ted Williams, you had to leave a message with one of his fishing buddies. Somehow, I got a number, and somehow, left a message. A week later, the fishing buddy called back from a boat off the coast of Nova Scotia. With the background sounds of the ocean, wind, and a clamorous motor, I shouted an invitation. Something like, "To all our friends in the North Atlantic, it would be our great pleasure if Mr. Ted Williams would help us salute pinch hitters." Another week later, the fishing buddy called back and declined on Mr. Williams's behalf.

I never did reach Willie Mays. Stan Musial, though, wasn't difficult. I learned that to track down Mr. Musial, you sent a letter to a St. Louis restaurant named Biggie's. Musial was a co-owner.

"Did you hear from 'Stan the Man'?" My boss must have asked that question a hundred times. He loved saying "Stan the Man." Sadly, I later received a formal letter on Biggie's stationery informing me that "Stan the Man" had other October plans.

There were many other declinations and dead ends. Then one day, purely on impulse, I lit a cigarette, a nicotine boost for courage, and called the Atlanta Braves. I asked to speak to Henry Aaron. Aaron had retired at the end of the 1976 season after spending the final two years of his career as a Milwaukee Brewer. I'd read he had begun working for the Braves in their Atlanta front office.

An assistant put me on hold. Then I heard a voice I knew by heart.

"Hello."

"Hi, is...is this Mr. Aaron?"

"Yes." His tone, no-nonsense.

I stammered from the adrenaline surge. I was talking to the man who had broken Babe Ruth's career home-run record, the man I'd grown up idolizing when the Braves played in Milwaukee before moving to Atlanta. I explained the reason for my call in greater detail than necessary.

"As you know, Manpower is located in Milwaukee, and we were really hoping, that is, as one of the greatest hitters of all time..." (Should I have said "greatest hitter of all time?") "Uh, we would be honored if you would help us judge our 'Pinch Hitter of the Year' contest."

I held my breath, hoping Henry Aaron would not detect my nerves. After a moment, he said, "I'd really like to do it if it works." He sounded more subdued than excited, but I told Henry Aaron I would call him back when we had more details. He said that would be fine.

A tentative "yes" from a "big name."

### *Another Brush with Fame*

As my boss was leaving his office, I caught him and told him about Henry Aaron. By then I knew to follow him for a meeting on the run. My boss often dashed from one appointment to the next as if he was trying to steal second and third at the same time. When those short meetings ran long, we walked in circles for a while.

He was impressed by Henry Aaron, but by then had moved beyond judges to awards. He told me we needed something way cooler than a trophy or plaque to present to our ultimate "Pinch Hitter." What would I think, he wondered, about a painting by Leroy Neiman?

Another big name. Neiman was then one of the world's most popular painters, certainly the most prominent sports artist. Some of his works sold for tens of thousands of dollars. He seemed out of our league. But as long as we were brainstorming, why not add another flight of fancy?

Neiman's fame, or infamy according to many art critics, stemmed from his instantly recognizable style. His explosions of color lit up *Sports Illustrated*, *Time* and other

publications. He was the official artist of the Olympics five times. You really weren't anybody in sports unless Neiman painted you.

I wrote to Neiman and shared our proposal. My boss and I even offered a concept. "We hoped your painting would include all four nominees for 'Pinch Hitters of the Year,' with the winner featured with the greatest prominence."

Whatever else Neiman was, he was a nice man when I reached him by phone a week or so later. I could picture him in his New York City studio, with his long handlebar mustache that ventured into Salvador Dali territory, and his even longer cigar. I asked Neiman what he thought of our proposal, and well, how much would it cost?

"I do things for friendly prices sometimes," he said. He indicated what we had in mind would cost about \$1,000. But he also pointed out, more gently than he might have, that my boss and I didn't know much about art.

"It's just a bad artistic concept," he said about placing multiple pinch hitters in the same frame. "What I'd do is paint you a portrait of the winner."

And then I could envision Manpower's "Pinch Hitter of the Year," in slashing and garish hues—reds, blues, purples, yellows, greens and who knows how many color combinations. Neiman's painting would hang on a wall in the winner's house for the rest of his life.

Leroy Neiman was a resounding "yes." And we could get him for a mere thousand dollars? Maybe I could tell my boss I had negotiated.

### *Damned Lies and Statistics*

The Elias Sports Bureau has been official statistician for Major League Baseball since World War I. So it was in 1916, so it was in 1977, and so it is today. Elias considers its baseball data proprietary and rarely shares it with anyone but Major League Baseball. Because the use of baseball analytics has increased dramatically over time, teams and researchers now assemble their own databases. But in 1977, Elias was the only game around.

I'm not sure how my boss ever believed that Major League Baseball's statistical vault would open sesame to a couple young PR guys bent on a guerilla award

presentation. Whatever I said when I called the Elias representative, it probably came across like this: “Yeah, this is a man from Manpower, the world’s largest temporary help firm. We’d like to steal a few stats that you compile for your best client to present an award without the knowledge or approval of that best client—until reports of the award show up in the sports pages of every U.S. newspaper. Is that something you could help us with?”

Don’t let the doors to the vault hit you on the way out.

### *Late Innings*

It was late August 1977. I’d been working on the “Pinch Hitters” award for more than two months. By then, I’d become a full-time Manpower PR staff member.

I wish I could say that as the summer wound down, reality hit a wicked-hop ground ball we could not handle. Truth is, reality arrived in the form of a fly ball that had been hanging in the sky all summer. As that ball began falling, we were in no position to snag it. Reality said, “The World Series is a few weeks away. Do you have tickets? Do you have accommodations? Will you build tents in the bullpens for your pinch hitters and judges? And what about your judges? Do you have contracts with Smoky, Dave, and Henry? Matter of fact, who are your damn winners? Their names may not be solidified until the final day of the season. How are you going to get *people* you don’t yet know to *places* you don’t yet know on short notice? Your boss can call all the ‘people’ he knows or wants, but unless you’re going to stage a D-Day invasion of the Elias Sports Bureau, unless you’re going to kidnap Bowie Kuhn, you’re standing on the mound like the relief pitcher who’s given up five runs and his manager keeps him out there only because he doesn’t want to waste a good arm in a losing game.”

So, my boss determined that Manpower’s “Pinch Hitter of the Year” award would be postponed until 1978. Because Manpower was then owned by the Parker Pen Company, my letters of regret to Burgess, Philley, Aaron, and Neiman included expensive top-of-the-line pens. I don’t recall if we also sent each man a five-inch wooden Manpower “pencil bat,” but we probably couldn’t resist.

It was time for a different approach. My boss ordered me to call Major League Baseball to gauge their interest in our idea. I talked with Seth Abraham, who then

managed promotions for Commissioner Kuhn. Soon, my boss received a courteous letter confirming our meeting with Mr. Abraham for the morning of Monday, November 28, 1977, in New York City. My boss forwarded me a copy of the letter, with his familiar handwriting.

“Let’s go to the Big Apple!”

I was to learn that even more than he loved saying “Stan the Man,” my boss loved saying the “Big Apple.”

### *The Final Pitch*

We entered the offices of Major League Baseball in downtown Manhattan for a meeting my boss had not wanted. He had craved a ceremony he could stage without the blessing of Bowie Kuhn or Seth Abraham, the man who greeted us that November morning with a countenance as sober as an umpire. Abraham and my boss talked directly to each other from chairs positioned on each side of Abraham’s desk. My boss scribbled notes furiously. I was, more or less, a bystander.

Though the subject was baseball, I watched a slowly unfolding tennis match between the two men. Questions were lobbed, statements volleyed. What if Manpower did this? Well then, Major League Baseball might do that. But the match point remained unasked. How much would this cost?

After thirty uninspiring minutes, we parted with nothing decided. Seth Abraham returned to his real work. My boss and I went to FAO Schwartz to buy Christmas gifts for his four-year-old son.

On the flight home, we sat in adjoining seats and discussed the meeting.

“What are the chances we might actually do something like that?” I asked, referring to the pinch hitter award.

“Probably not good,” said my boss.

I’m not sure when he gave up the pinch-hitter ghost. Was it after that meeting or earlier? I know now that seasoned PR people would have told us that “putting Manpower on the map” with such a campaign was, at best, ill-conceived. There was Manpower’s



CEO, investing millions of dollars to fill U.S. offices with temporary *office* workers. And here was his PR team, building an award program promoting temporary *factory* workers.

Maybe my boss was just trying to impress his own boss, the VP of Marketing. Look, Walt, see what we can do—with no money! Or maybe he was testing me. How big could I grow this small idea?

Even with my lack of experience, I knew my boss was unconventional. Manpower employees often would roll their eyes whenever he sprung a new idea. But looking back, I was damn lucky to start my career working for such an unconventional guy.

Would a more conventional boss have given me a germ of an idea (on my first day!) and time to develop it, without even a dot or jot of a plan?

Would a more conventional boss have pushed me to progress, as much as I could then, from ignorance to confidence? And without looking over my shoulder, let me represent the company by reaching out to a well-known artist and athlete? Would I have learned the valuable lesson I did, that you can ask just about anyone for just about anything? They might say no...but they might say yes.

And maybe the most important question of all. Would a more conventional boss have hired me, a guy with long hair, mismatched dress clothes, and no experience in PR, in the first place?

When he finally told me the campaign was kaput, I was neither surprised nor disappointed. In a way, I was relieved. You see, Manpower had already consummated a successful award program at the end of the 1977 baseball season. At least it had in my mind.

### *Fantasy Baseball*

*At the awards ceremony in the “Big Apple,” just before the first game of the 1977 World Series between the Yankees and Los Angeles Dodgers, Henry Aaron wore a fine suit and reached out to shake my hand. Later, over beers, he recounted for me his story of the night in September 1957 when his home run clinched the National League pennant for the long-ago Milwaukee Braves. The team carried him off the field. The city of Milwaukee went crazy.*

*Then Smoky Burgess, with a pouch of his favorite tobacco within easy reach, recalled another night at Milwaukee County Stadium. On May 26, 1959, on the mound against the Braves, Harvey Haddix of the Pittsburgh Pirates pitched the most historic “perfect game” of all time. Twelve consecutive innings, no hits, no walks, no hit batters, no errors. “You caught that game?” I asked. “Every pitch,” Burgess said. And then he added, shaking his head sadly, how the game was still tied, 0-0, after those twelve innings. While he wedged another pinch of tobacco between his cheek and gum, Aaron picked up the story. Aaron recalled how he reached first base when the perfect game finally ended in the thirteenth inning. The Braves’ Joe Adcock hit a home run that sent Haddix to a bitter defeat.*

*Dave Philley, well, he thanked me, in his distinctive Texas twang, for including him in the festivities.*

*The winning Pinch Hitter of the Year at first seemed hesitant, but he warmed up considerably when we presented him with Leroy Neiman’s portrait and told him it would appear in color in the next issue of Sports Illustrated.*

For a few years into the 1980s, I sought out reports of winners of the Roloids “Relief Man Awards.” But until I decided to preserve these memories, I missed the fact that the award disappeared after 2012. A French company bought the Roloids brand from Johnson & Johnson and retired the award.

I worked in public relations for forty-five years. But I never again would be engaged in anything quite as fanciful as Manpower’s “Pinch Hitter of the Year.”

Which is why I recall today, with a mix of embarrassment and pleasure, the first PR campaign I worked on: when a rookie PR guy played an early version of Fantasy Baseball.

At work.



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