

Whitey Herzog

November 9, 1931-April 15, 2024

Fort Leonard Wood (MO) Hilltoppers 1953

Springfield (MO) Generals 1954

One of the most successful MLB managers of the 1970s and 1980s, Dorrel Herzog was born in New Athens, Illinois, in 1931. Nicknamed "Whitey" for his light blonde hair, he loved the game of baseball, and specifically, the St Louis Cardinals and Stan Musial, from a very young age, to the point that he sometimes would skip school and hitchhike to see them play at Sportsman's Park over 30 miles away. He once said of copying Stan the Man's batting stance, "I've been in a slump ever since." That statement certainly wasn't true in his amateur playing days, though. He led his high school team to the state finals in his junior year in 1948 with a .584 average playing centerfield and first base as well as pitcher with the southpaw even throwing a no-hitter that season. When he wasn't on the diamond, he also excelled as a guard on the school's basketball team, attracting some interest from local colleges. Herzog bypassed continuing his basketball career along with going to college after high school, and instead signed an amateur contract with the New York Yankees in June 1949. He hit .351 with 4 HRs in 1950, his first full season in the minors, while playing centerfield, but the Yankees had also signed Mickey Mantle in the same month as him, and Mantle hit .383 with 26 HRs that same year, so the rest was history for Whitey's chances of ever playing centerfield in the Bronx.

After two more years in the minors, with the Korean War ongoing, Herzog joined the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. He quickly became a star on the outfits baseball team, the Hilltoppers, and led them to Wichita in 1953, where they would go a perfect 7-0, winning the NBC. Herzog hit .435 with one home run in the series and was named to the All-Tournament team.

Following the 1953 National, founder Hap Dumont decided that military club teams would no longer be allowed to play as units due to the high influx of active-duty teams gaining entries, as they were well stocked with professional ball players getting drafted because of the War. For Whitey, though, this is where the fun really began.

Herzog's first managerial experience came in 1954 with Hilltoppers, and he led them to a very successful campaign, possibly as strong as an 86-5 record while also playing first base for them. Along with three others from his team, Herzog moonlighted with the Springfield Generals from Illinois when they arrived in Wichita for the 1954 tournament. Herzog was even better than

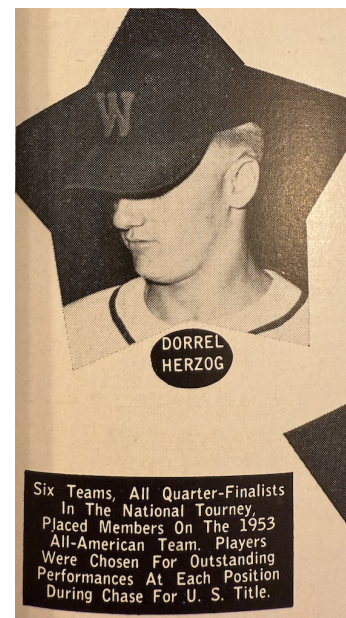


the year before as the tournament got underway with the Generals starting 3-0 before Herzog's military commitment came into play.

Five hundred miles away in Fort Carson, Colorado, his Hilltoppers were about to start play in the 5th Army Baseball Tournament, and as manager, and more importantly, an employee of Uncle Sam, Whitey had no choice but to prioritize playing in Colorado. He arrived there on Wednesday, September 1st, and led the Hilltoppers to victory that night as well as Thursday afternoon, and then flew to Wichita in time to make the Generals game in the 5th inning that evening and homer in an 8-0 win. He then flew back to Colorado the next day for what has to be one of the craziest feats in baseball history.

On Saturday, September 4th, 1954, Whitey Herzog started the scoring for the Hilltoppers with a 3-run HR in the first inning of what would turn into a 24-3 rout under his tutelage, before flying back to Wichita in time for the matchup between the only remaining unbeaten teams at the NBC. Herzog opened the scoring in that game as well with a HR in the second inning, and the Generals defeated the Boeing (Wichita) Bombers 7-2. A home run hit in separate tournaments in different states on the same day, while not only playing in both games but managing one of the teams as well, is incredible and possibly unmatched anywhere else to this day!

Sunday would see Herzog flying back to Colorado only to be told upon landing that the game was rained out, and he immediately flew back to Wichita and recorded a hit as Springfield clinched a spot in the championship game on Tuesday. The story repeated itself the following day back in Colorado as Whitey had a single in a semifinal triumph over a team that featured the Yankees' Billy Martin, who was away from the majors at the time, serving in the Army at Fort Carson. Back in Kansas, in the championship game at the NBC on Tuesday, Herzog homered twice, but the Bombers won 7-6, giving the Generals their first loss. As both teams now had one loss in the double elimination format, this meant there would be a rematch to determine the tournament winner the following night. Years later, Herzog said he had pleaded with Dumont to postpone the game a day, "He (Dumont) refused. I've always felt he wouldn't give us a break so that the local team would win." Other accounts showed that the finals in Colorado were originally scheduled for Thursday, which would've allowed him to play the extra game in Wichita on Wednesday, but for some unknown reason got moved up a day at the last minute. Herzog ended up leading his Army team to a title, while at the same time, the depleted Generals got blown out 24-6, and the Bombers won the 1954 NBC. Overall, that year, Herzog hit .478 with 6HRs (a single tournament record that stood until 1988) for the Generals and was named to All-Tournament teams in BOTH Wichita and Fort Carson.



Herzog clearly left his mark in his short two-year stint at the NBC. In the 14 games he played in, his teams went 13-1, as he hit .457 (21/46), 7HRs, and 21 runs scored. All-Tournament team honors in both years, along with a title and runner-up. The deciding game in 1954 was the only game he did not play in during his entire career in Wichita.

Upon his discharge from the Army, he spent the 1955 season in the minors before being traded to the Washington Senators in the offseason, where he would make his major league debut that spring. He bounced around the majors with four teams over eight seasons, but never had the offensive success that he had achieved in his pre-major league days, and Herzog called it quits after hitting .151 for the Detroit Tigers in 1963. He would spend the next decade preparing for his real calling while working in various coaching, scouting, and front office roles, before finally being hired as the manager of the Texas Rangers for the 1973 season. His style clashed with the Rangers over controlling owner Bob Short, who only ever wanted Billy Martin to manage, so when that opportunity came in September, Herzog was fired. After four games as interim manager of the California Angels in 1974, the Kansas City Royals hired him full time and he would lead that organization to their first 3 division titles before moving on to manage his favorite team as a child, the Cardinals, in 1980. In almost 11 seasons with them, the Cardinals won 3 National League Pennants and a World Series crown in 1982. He was named manager of the year twice and was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 2010. Beloved in St Louis long after his managing days were over in 1990, the Cardinals bestowed their ultimate honor upon him, retiring his number a week after he was enshrined in Cooperstown.

Whitey never forgot his time in Wichita and once said about Dumont, "I do know talent. Dumont had it, and the National Baseball Congress is a living tribute to his memory."

Herzog passed away at 92 in 2024.