

JOHN MCNAMARA, 1932-2020

6-time MLB manager learned game in his Sacramento youth

BY JOE DAVIDSON
jdavidson@sacbee.com

John McNamara attended Sacramento Solons games at Edmonds Field in the late 1930s as a 6-year-old with a singular focus.

While his giddy pals raced around the old park in pursuit of foul balls, popcorn or mischief, McNamara could be found camped out in his seat behind home plate, fixated on the action, his glove in his lap.

His baseball journey started there and included an All-City stop at Christian Brothers High School, a 14-year career as a minor league grinder of a catcher and a 19-year career as a manager in the Major Leagues for six teams, including the 1986 Boston Red Sox team that played for, and famously lost, the World Series to the New York Mets.



PETER SOUTHWICK / AP/WIDE WORLD

John McNamara, former MLB manager and coach, was born in Sacramento and attended Christian Brothers High School.

McNamara, who is writing a book about his uncle. "We take solace as a family that almost all the players who played for Johnny didn't hold a grudge, they knew Johnny was absolutely proud of his career."

CHRISTIAN BROTHERS LAUNCHING PAD

McNamara signed out of Christian Brothers with the St. Louis Cardinals in 1951 for \$12,000, which is equivalent to \$121,000 today, with inflation.

He once joked that he "started school so I could learn to write my name so I could sign a baseball contract."

A year before, in 1950, just before his senior season at Christian Brothers, McNamara earned MVP honors in the East-West All-Star game of prep stars. The MVP prize included a free trip to the fall's World Series. That fall, McNamara took a train from Sacramento to New York to watch the Yankees against the Yankees and Phillies.

In Game 3, Hank Bauer hit a towering foul ball that McNamara caught. Some 19 years later, McNamara replaced Bauer as the Oakland A's manager.

OVER

McNamara passionately talked baseball and family right to his final days. He died Tuesday with wife Ellen by his side in their Tennessee home of natural causes. He was 88.

"What a life," said Joe McNamara, nephew of a career baseball man known for decency, grit and intelligence, and, perhaps unfairly, for that 1986 World Series.

Joe McNamara spoke to The Bee while sitting next to his ailing 87-year-old father, Francis "Maggs" McNamara, at Mercy Hospital in Sacramento.

"My dad told me how as kids at Solons games, John would be so locked-in focused into the game. Someone would have to yell his name — John! — to break him out of it. Then he'd go to the library and check out every book he could on baseball. He was a student of the game and he worked harder than anyone."

Joe McNamara added, "I just asked dad if he had something to add about his brother, and he says, 'He was a nice, kind brother, but

very competitive!'"

Competition fueled McNamara but game results did not consume him as a manager. He grew to understand that losses happen. He was the opposite of a raging Tommy Lasorda or a dirt-kicking Billy Martin of his same era.

McNamara was also good friends with those fiery managers. Joe McNamara recalled a story when his uncle was managing the Cincinnati Reds in the early 1980s when he ran into Lasorda, then managing the Dodgers.

"My uncle and Tommy wound up at the same church one day for Mass and sat together," Joe McNamara said. "Johnny lit a candle. Later, in the seventh inning of that night's game, Lasorda yells, 'Hey, McNamara! I blew out your candle!'"

McNamara won 1,167 Major League games over parts of 19 seasons. He won the National League West championship with the Reds in 1979 and was the 1986 American League Manager of the Year with Boston.

The joy of overcoming a 3-1 series deficit to beat the California Angels for

the AL pennant was dulled that season by the Mets in the World Series. Boston, in attempting to win its first championship since 1918, led the Mets 3 games to 2 in the seven-game series and held a 5-3 lead in the 10th inning at Shea Stadium before the wheels fell off.

You likely know the rest. Mookie Wilson's groundball trickled past Bill Buckner at first base, the Mets rallied to win and then took Game 7. Boston fans could not and largely still do not forgive McNamara for not substituting the gimpy Buckner, and for his decision to pull ace Roger Clemens, who went 24-4 that season.

McNamara said as recently as 2015 of regrets: "Not at all. After that ballgame, I said Buckner just didn't get the glove down on the ball. His knees were sore, but not enough to sit him out. I have no remorse about that."

As for pulling Clemens in Game 6, McNamara for years insisted Clemens asked to be pulled, which Clemens has denied.

"The Red Sox had so many opportunities to win that game and series, so it shouldn't have come down to Buckner," said Joe

McNamara spent 14 seasons in the Kansas City A's farm system before the franchise relocated to the Bay Area, nine as a player-manager. He managed a 1966 minor league team that included Rollie Fingers, Dave Duncan and Reggie Jackson, all eventual MLB stars.

Jackson in his autobiography wrote that McNamara helped young Black players deal with racism. "When we'd be on a road trip and we'd stop at a diner for hamburgers or something to eat, McNamara wouldn't compromise. It was simple for him: If they wouldn't serve me, they weren't going to serve anybody. He'd just take the whole team out of the restaurant, we'd get into the bus and we'd keep driving."

McNamara managed the A's in 1969-70, the San Diego Padres from 1974-77, the Reds from 1979-82, the Angels from 1983-84 and in 1996, the Red Sox from 1985-88 and the Cleveland Indians in 1990-91.

McNamara in the 1970s and '80s often returned to Sacramento to talk baseball to kids at elementary schools. He spoke about ups and downs, that it's important to get back up and not stay down.