

Big league baseball comes to Montreal



by Peter Desbarats

Lise is a young make-up girl who works in the Montreal television studios of Radio-Canada. Born and educated in a small manufacturing centre about 40 miles from the city, she speaks very little English. Her favorite newspapers, radio and TV programs, movie stars, rock groups, magazines and books are French, made-in-Quebec with a seasoning of European imports. She has never read the *New York Times*, never seen "Easy Rider," never listened to Walter Cronkite and barely heard of Hugh Hefner.

But surprisingly, she knows her baseball.

Part of the reason is the fact that she was the only girl in a vast *Québécois* family of male baseball addicts. She spent most of her childhood, according to her own recollection, standing at first base with an enormous glove on her fist and fear in her heart. But it also has something to do with her age. Lise was born just in time to witness the golden years of baseball in French Canada.

In 1946 and 1948, the Montreal Royals, in the International League since 1917 (one of their owners in the 1930's was the father of Prime Minister Trudeau) fielded teams that could have held their own in the majors.

Led by such stars as Don Newcombe, Carl Erskine, Sam Jethroe and Jackie Robinson—organized baseball's color line was broken when Branch Rickey sent him to Montreal in 1946—the Royals swept pennants, playoffs and Little World Series, and drew more than 600,000 fans to a season's play at dear, departed Delormier Stadium.

In those years, baseball fever spread throughout the French-speaking province of Quebec. Even small centres such as Drummondville supported professional teams and imported players from the United States. Lise still remembers the day when the first black import walked into her father's restaurant. Eventually, "Lad" White brought his large family to Drummondville from Oklahoma, worked in a factory there during the off-season, sent his children to school and produced several of the most looked-at babies ever to arrive at

the local hospital. By the time they returned to the United States, the older children were fluently bilingual.

My own favourite image of baseball in Montreal is a painting done in 1959 by Montreal artist and baseball addict John Little. It shows a street of tenements on a summer evening overlooking the brilliantly lit stadium in the distance. In the foreground, the typical outdoor staircases and baroque balconies of eastend Montreal are crowded with people, most of them equipped with binoculars and quart bottles of Molson's or Black Horse ale.

Within a year, television had emptied the balconies and driven the Royals from Delormier Stadium. Organized baseball disappeared from Montreal for almost a decade, leaving a clear field to Canadian football, played mainly by U.S. imports, and hockey, where Canada returns the compliment by exporting players to the south.

Was baseball dead or merely dormant? Dead, thought most people. "Crazy!" they sneered in 1969 when local businessmen headed by Charles Bronfman of the Seagram distilling dynasty purchased the first major league franchise ever to go outside the United States. But the armchair experts were wrong. Despite playing in a park that was small by league standards (28,456 seats) the Expos drew more than 1.2 million spectators last year, topping the attendance figures of nine other major league clubs.

The Expos proved that nothing succeeds like failure. They spent virtually the whole season in the cellar but as the total of defeats mounted, so did the enthusiasm of the crowds. Newspaper ads deliberately baited the team's masochistic fans: "*Si les premiers seront les derniers, serions-nous donc les premiers?* (If the first shall be last, won't that make us first?)" For a game against the New York Mets: "We're playing Number 1—but trying harder."

The season proved that there were thousands of *Québécois* like the make-up girl who considered baseball a natural part of French-Canadian life. Fans in San Francisco might have thought it exotic when a Montreal announcer gave the batting order in French. (A letter received by the

Expos' shortstop from a San Francisco fan was addressed to "Mister *Arrêt-court*.") But for French-speaking Canadians, it was only one of innumerable examples of their ability to adapt North American life to their own culture and customs.

Another of the Expos' newspaper ads illustrates this. In the city's English-language newspapers, it read: "Take a client to lunch at Jarry Park." The French version was more than a literal translation: "*Sortez un client ou votre petite amie. . .* (Take a client or your girlfriend. . .)".

What major league team in the United States would advertise "*La fine fleur du printemps, c'est un circuit de Rusty*" (The loveliest springtime blossom is a home-run by Rusty)? Rusty Staub, also known as '*Le Grand Orange*' to his adoring Montreal fans, is the Expos' long-ball hitting right fielder. Where else in the baseball world is a knuckle ball transformed into a thing of beauty: *une balle papillon* (butterfly)?

Although local fans represented 62 per cent of the Expos' total attendance last season, thousands of out-of-town visitors were attracted by the special ambiance of a game at Jarry Park on the Expo '67 site. There were regular excursions from cities and towns in upper New York state and Vermont as Montreal became the baseball city, and the Expos the home team, of a large number of U.S. fans. A charter group of baseball *à la française*.

But the most encouraging sign, as far as the team was concerned, was a bull market for baseball equipment throughout Quebec in 1969 and an increase in the number of baseball teams registered in the province from 222 in 1968 to 430. More than 27,000 young *Québécois* in Drummondville and other centres were playing organized baseball last summer. With any luck, some of them will be hammering out *circuits* for the Expos when Montreal's baseball renaissance flowers into (*ce n'est pas impossible!*) Canada's first World Series.

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