

Lambeth Man Represented Canada in Majors

By John M. Milner

WHEN IT comes to his days in professional baseball, Tom Burgess says his fondest memory is his major league debut. "Putting that uniform on for the St. Louis Cardinals is the best memory I can bring down," the Lambeth resident says now.

Burgess took exceptional pride in suiting up that day "because there were no other Canadians (in the majors)." Burgess goes on to say that he's happy there are more Canadians in the majors today.

"I'm happy to see Canadians getting their opportunities simply because there's more teams," Burgess explains, "there was only eight teams in the National League when I got there (and) 26 farm clubs so I had to weave my way all the way through to get (to the majors). There's only five farm clubs (for each) major league club now: two rookie clubs, A, AA, AAA."

Burgess almost became a hockey player. Bob Davidson of the Toronto Maple Leafs approached his parents about the possibility of Tom playing for the Toronto Marlboroughs. His mother said "no" to that, only to have Burgess leave a year later to play baseball. "She was thinking of the education," Burgess says.

Introduced to the game of baseball while staying at an uncle and aunt's home in Philadelphia, Burgess began playing baseball when he came home, first playing in a local baseball league called the Canadian Corps. "And that's how I got started in baseball, and then the next year went to playground," Burgess remembers.

"Bill Farquharson was the... instrumental person in my development as a ballplayer because he ran the playgrounds and then, of course, he eventually owned London Majors. He was the supervisor of all the playgrounds and he started baseball, so he basically had a farm system within the city," Burgess remembers, "And all of a sudden I'm playing for the London Majors, and I'm not even 14 years old."

Although later an outfielder, Burgess was also a left-handed pitcher for the Majors in 1945, when the team became Intercounty and Ontario Champions. "(I) could throw, couldn't find the park," Burgess admits.

A year later, at the age of 15,

Burgess signed a pro contract and became part of the St. Louis Cardinals farm system. "I was playing ball every day, so naturally I was improving," Burgess recalls, "That's all I was thinking about, I wasn't thinking about the major leagues. Nobody thought about the major leagues in those days."

Burgess remembers, though, that his introduction to professional baseball wasn't always easy. "I cried my first year...because here I am in spring training with people who had just come out of the Second World War and I mean they were big," Burgess recalls, "Thank God they took me under their wing because I was a fuzzy-cheeked kid at that time and (they) got me through the pains of starting as a professional, because I had never really seen a curve ball."

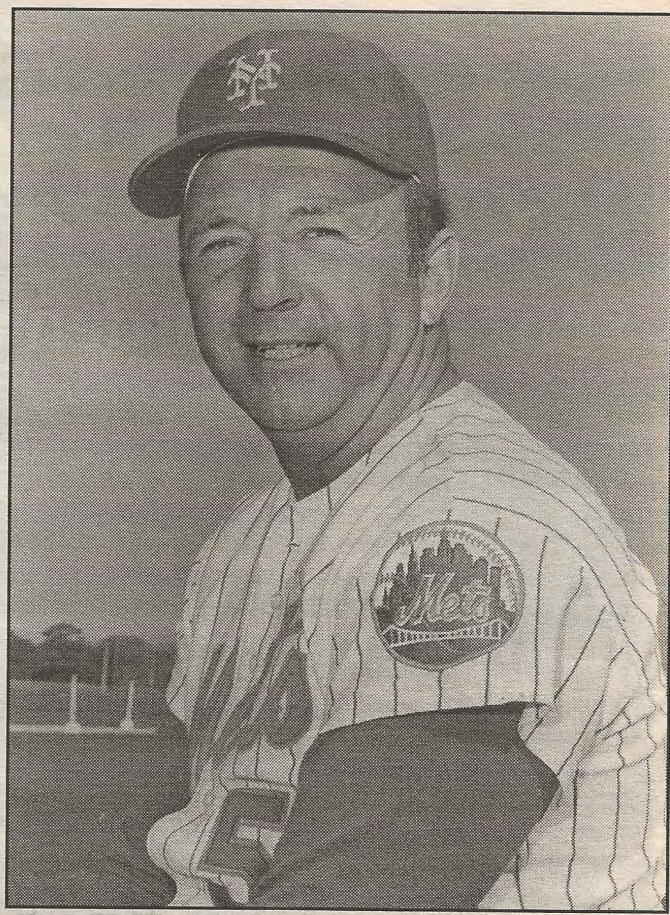
Burgess, however, would persevere because "I disciplined myself very strongly and became a good hitter" winning several batting titles. "I just don't believe (players) can hit curveballs, so I learned how to hit fastballs."

Burgess broke into the majors on April 17th, 1954, when the Cardinals lost 23-13 to the Cubs on Opening Day at Sportsman Park. "In the major leagues," Burgess explains, "I was the only (Canadian) at that particular time. That was a remarkable thing. I'm here from Lambeth, Ontario making the Major Leagues." Burgess played 17 games for the Cardinals in 1954.

"I saw Stan Musial have his greatest day in baseball in a double-header against the New York Giants," Burgess recalls. On that day, Musial hit five home runs and a player by the name of Willie Mays took two more home runs away, "so that was the greatest day that I (witnessed) as a spectator, basically."

The next year, Burgess was with the Rochester Red Wings. "I had a great first half," Burgess recalls, "and then a pitcher broke my wrist, so that was the end of '55." Burgess continued to play well in Rochester, before being traded to the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1959.

Burgess would return to the majors in 1962 with the Los Angeles Angels, playing 87 games in the majors that year but yearned to return to his family in Lambeth. Meanwhile, Burgess was told "you



TOM BURGESS

know the game of baseball, we want you to become one of the coaches". Burgess was interested until he found out that his first assignment would be in Hawaii.

He continued to play baseball, rather than coach just yet. Optioned to Richmond in 1963, "I hurt my leg and called it a day" as far as his playing days was concerned, Burgess recalls. However, that was far from the end of Burgess's story in baseball. He became a coach for the St. Louis Cardinals beginning in the fall of 1967. "So I go to Sarasota and taught the Cardinal way of playing," Burgess says, adding "there were a lot of good ball players signed by the Cardinals in those days...and I got a bunch of good ball players, developed them because they wanted to play...and I sent them up through the organization."

The Cardinals were so impressed with Burgess's coaching skills that they made him a manager in their minor league system. In 1972, Burgess found himself coaching in Modesto, California.

"The Cardinals sent teams out there for 20 years and never won. My team won," Burgess recalls, adding that he had many "good ball players, so they made me look good as a manager." The Modesto Reds, the Cardinals' Class A affiliate, won the California League Champions that year.

Burgess would also manage the minor league teams for the New York Mets, the Atlanta Braves, the Texas Rangers and the Detroit Tigers. Although he would never manage at the Major League level, Burgess

would serve as the Major League third base coach for both the Mets (1977) and the Braves (1978).

In 1987, Burgess became the hitting coordinator for the Kansas City Royals. "There were a lot of good ball players (there)," Burgess remembers, many of whom remain in contact.

"I was influential in developing a tremendous amount of ballplayers who went on to play at the major league level," Burgess says of his coaching and managing career.

After returning to Lambeth in 1996, Burgess continued to teach players, many of whom are currently playing for universities, one of whom is A.J. Reed, the son of a neighbour. "I got him a scholarship at Indian Hills (Community College)...just tore the league up for two years." A former London Badger, Reed is currently playing second base for the University of North Alabama Lions.

"I can teach hitting. I can teach the other game, but hitting is my thing," Burgess says.

Burgess can also add a stint as Assistant Coach for the Canadian Junior Team to an impressive career that has led him to four Hall of Fames: the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame (inducted in 1992), the Rochester Red Wings Hall of Fame (inducted in 1992), the London Sports Hall of Fame (inducted in 2003) and even the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

"It was nice to be chosen by your peers, to be recognized," Burgess says of the honours.