

“The Royals of Sir Cedric”

by Steve Treder of The Hardball Times

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At its inception, the most successful expansion franchise in pre-free agency baseball history didn't impress many observers. The Kansas City Royals devoted most of their expansion draft picks to unproven young players, in distinct contrast to the approach taken by their companion A.L. expansion team, the Seattle Pilots. Take a look at the first ten choices of each club, noting each player's age and major league experience as of the October 15, 1968 draft:

Royals:

Player Age ML Seasons ML Experience

1. Roger Nelson 24 2 78 innings
 2. Joe Foy 25 3 1,515 at-bats
 3. Jim Rooker 26 1 5 innings
 4. Joe Keough 22 1 98 at-bats
 5. Steve Jones 27 2 36 innings
 6. Jon Warden 22 1 37 innings
 7. Ellie Rodriguez 22 1 24 at-bats
 8. Dave Morehead 25 6 665 innings
 9. Mike Fiore 24 1 19 at-bats
 10. Bob Oliver 25 1 2 at-bats
- Average Age - 24.2 Average ML Seasons - 1.9
Average ML Experience - 332 at-bats, 164 innings

Pilots:

Player Age ML Seasons ML Experience

1. Don Mincher 30 9 2,476 at-bats
 2. Tommy Harper 28 7 2,547 at-bats
 3. Ray Oyler 30 4 986 at-bats
 4. Gerry McNertney 32 4 537 at-bats
 5. Buzz Stephen 24 1 11 innings
 6. Chico Salmon 27 5 1,304 at-bats
 7. Diego Segui 31 7 889 innings
 8. Tommy Davis 29 10 4,032 at-bats
 9. Marty Pattin 25 1 84 innings
 10. Gerry Schoen 21 1 4 innings
- Average Age - 27.6 Average ML Seasons - 4.9
Average ML Experience - 1,980 at-bats, 247 innings

And so it went all through the 30-round draft. The one biggest “name” veteran picked by the Royals in later rounds, Hoyt Wilhelm, was immediately traded for two young players.

Viewing this, the consensus among pundits was that the Pilots would likely be reasonably competitive in 1969, but the Royals would really struggle. Robert Kalich in The Baseball Rating Handbook from that year summed up his outlook for Seattle as, “In all, the Pilots might get off the ground.”

Meanwhile, discussing the Royals, Kalich observed, “Everyone around from the draft is young, inexperienced, and unproven. [Specific young players] will be given long looks. If the looks are blurred by [manager Joe] Gordon’s tears, trades and more money will be his only recourse.”

Then They Played the Actual Games

But the 1969 maiden voyage didn’t turn out so badly for the Royals at all. In the 1970 Sporting News Baseball Guide, Joe McGuff described it this way:

“... the Royals turned out to be surprisingly successful ... The Kansas City management concentrated on young players in the expansion draft. As a result, the Royals were generally picked to finish last in the American League West division. Instead, they finished fourth and won 69 games. The Royals finished one game ahead of the established White Sox and five games ahead of Seattle ... Not only did the Royals do better than expected, but their Omaha farm club won the pennant in the American Association.”

On the eve of Opening Day in 1969, the two A.L. expansion teams had engaged in a trade that might have served as a portent. The Royals sent two 25-year-olds with limited major league experience -- outfielder Steve Whitaker and pitcher John Gelnar -- to Seattle in exchange for another 25-year-old with even more limited major league experience: outfielder Lou Piniella. Whitaker and Gelnar would prove to be mediocrities, and both would disappear from the majors within a couple of years. Piniella would win the 1969 American League Rookie of the Year Award, and play in the majors for fifteen more years.

Clearly, someone in Kansas City was unafraid to take risks with unproven players, and had an extraordinarily sharp eye for young talent. That someone was Cedric Tallis, the organization’s Executive Vice-President. The Royals didn’t have an office of General Manager in those years, but Tallis was performing that function as we commonly understand it. He had spent the 1960s in the Angels’ organization, as Business Manager for their first few years, and then as Vice President in Charge of Operations, under VP and GM Fred Haney. When Kansas City owner Ewing Kauffman hired him in 1968 to construct the Royals, it was his first opportunity to run the show.

Tallis didn’t stand pat with his pleasant-surprise first-year ball club. In December of 1969, he traded Joe Foy - his 26-year-old third baseman who had led the team in at-bats, runs, and RBI, and was second in hits, walks and stolen bases - to the New York Mets. He received in return Amos Otis, a 22-year-old outfielder with a major league average of .191, with no homers and 5 RBI in 152 at-bats, and Bob Johnson, a 26-year-old right-hander who had just 2 innings of major league experience, and moreover only 56 innings of Triple-A experience, in which he had gone 1-4 with a 5.63 ERA.

This remarkable gamble turned out as follows:

- Otis in 1970 stepped in as the Royals’ regular center fielder and made the All-Star team, leading the league in doubles, and leading the team in

at-bats, runs, hits, triples, and OBP. He would prove to be a five-time All-Star, a three-time Gold Glove center fielder, and play in the majors through 1984.

- Johnson in 1970 logged 214 innings for the Royals, substantially more than he had ever thrown in any minor league season. He finished third in the league in strikeouts, tenth in ERA, seventh in ERA+, fourth in hits allowed per inning, and second in strikeouts per inning.

- Foy in 1970 flopped for the Mets, was let go the following winter in the minor league draft, and was gone from the majors by early 1971.

Maybe It Was Just Beginner's Luck

But despite the splendid contributions of Otis and Johnson, the Royals remained in fourth place in their division in 1970, and indeed regressed a bit to 65 wins. Tallis moved boldly again in that year's Winter Meetings: he traded Johnson.

Along with his primary shortstop (Jackie Hernandez) and his third-string catcher (Jim Campanis), Tallis sent his most successful pitcher to the Pittsburgh Pirates. In exchange the Royals picked up two journeymen, pitcher Bruce Dal Canton and catcher Jerry May, and 26-year-old shortstop Freddie Patek. The 5-foot-5 Patek had been something of a disappointment in Pittsburgh: he had impressed everyone with his blazing speed, but he had been unable to make consistent contact and hit for average, and had lost the starting job.

With Kansas City in 1971, Patek enjoyed a breakthrough season, hitting a career-high .267, leading the league with 11 triples, and stealing 49 bases. He finished sixth in the 1971 AL MVP vote. While his hitting would regress in subsequent seasons, Patek's outstanding speed and defense would allow him to remain the Royals' regular shortstop through 1979, and he was a three-time All-Star. Meanwhile, Johnson did all right for the Pirates, but he was never again nearly as good as he had been in 1970, and would be back in the minors by mid-1974.

Patek's 1971 breakthrough mirrored that of the entire Royals' ball club. They surged to 85 wins and a second place finish in the division, while their three 1969 expansion counterparts - the Brewers, Expos, and Padres - were respectively winning 69, 71, and 61 games. The Sporting News named Cedric Tallis the Major League Executive of the Year.

Okay, But Let's See Him Keep it Up

Among the keys to his team's 1971 improvement had been the excellent rookie year from 23-year-old relief pitcher Jim York. A Royals' farm system product, the extremely hard-throwing York had enjoyed nothing but startling success. In 1969, his minor league ERA was 0.78, with 70 strikeouts in 46 innings. In 1970, he blazed through Double-A and Triple-A to the tune of

13-5 in 55 games, with a 2.65 ERA and 101 strikeouts in 102 innings. In '71 he stepped up to the major league bullpen and went 5-5, 2.90 in 53 games, striking out 103 in 93 innings.

Tallis sent this next-Ryne-Duren packing (along with a 24-year-old minor league southpaw, Lance Clemons) to the Houston Astros. Coming to Kansas City was John Mayberry, a left-handed-hitting first baseman just shy of his 23rd birthday. The big, strong Mayberry had been a ballyhooed Houston prospect for several years, and had hit consistently well in the minors, but had yet to master the challenge of power hitting in the Astrodome: in 298 major league at-bats, he had hit 12 homers, but with just 3 doubles, 68 strikeouts, and a .191 batting average.

York immediately came down with a sore arm in Houston and was never an effective major league pitcher again. Clemons never had a major league career of any significance. Mayberry immediately blossomed as one of the premier power hitters in the A.L., at or among the league leaders in homers, RBIs, walks, OBP, and slugging. By 1975 he had twice been in the top ten in A.L. MVP votes.

Well, There's Just No Way He Can Do it AGAIN

Despite Mayberry's contribution, Kansas City fell back a bit in 1972, to 76-78, fourth place. But two Royals in addition to Mayberry emerged with standout performances:

- Right-hander Roger Nelson had been their number-one expansion draft pick, but had spent most of the time since on the sidelines with arm trouble. In 1972, at age 28, he broke through brilliantly, going 11-6 with 6 shutouts, finishing fifth in the league in ERA, sixth in strikeouts per inning, and best in the league in fewest hits-plus-walks per inning.

- Coming into 1972, 29-year-old switch-hitting outfielder Richie Scheinblum had struggled for two different organizations, managing just a .208 average with 1 homer and 28 RBI in 370 major league at-bats. With the Royals in '72, he suddenly blossomed, making the All-Star team, finishing sixth in the league in average, and fifth in OBP.

Tallis traded both of these 1972 stars to the Cincinnati Reds that autumn. From the Reds he got two young players who had flashed promise, but been unable to establish themselves. Twenty-four-year-old right-hander Wayne Simpson had been a sensational first-half rookie in 1970, but ever since had struggled with chronic arm trouble. Twenty-six-year-old Hal McRae had arrived in the majors in 1968 as a second baseman, but injuries and defensive limitations had since moved him to the outfield. He had shown good power, but by 1972 his status had been reduced to pinch-hitting specialist.

Nelson's arm miseries returned, and he never was able to have another full season in the majors after 1972. Scheinblum failed to hit in Cincinnati, and the Reds dumped him in June of 1973. Simpson didn't pan out in Kansas City,

either. But McRae, after one struggling season in 1973, blossomed under the tutelage of hitting coach Charlie Lau: he became a three-time All-Star, was twice in the top ten MVP voting, and played for the Royals until 1987 before retiring with a .290 career average and over 2,000 hits.

That's Just Uncanny

The Royals in 1973 (under young rookie manager Jack McKeon) rebounded to second place, at 88-74. They were now widely seen as ready to step forth as a legitimate challenger to the Oakland A's for dominance of the American League West. In the 1973-74 off-season, for the first time, Tallis didn't swing another established-talent-for-potential-talent trade. Instead, he picked up several veterans targeted to fill roles in the expected strongly-contending campaign: pitchers Marty Pattin, Nelson Briles, and Lindy McDaniel, and outfielder Vada Pinson.

It didn't work out. In the 1975 Sporting News Baseball Guide, Joe McGuff's season-in-review article was entitled "For the Royals: 1974 a Year to Forget." McGuff explains:

"Instead of a season of triumph the fans experienced a year of turmoil, bickering and failure... Coming into mid-June the Royals were hovering around the .500 mark. At this stage of the season Ewing Kauffman, the Royals' owner, made a shocking move. He discharged Cedric Tallis, his executive vice-president and general manager, the man whose trades and astute evaluation of talent had made it possible for the Royals to become competitive in a remarkably short period of time following their start as an expansion team in 1969. The explanation for the dismissal was vague and the move angered the public. From a public relations standpoint it was Kauffman's first major mistake in the six seasons he has owned the club." Riding Into the Sunset (In Shining Armor)

Tallis was replaced in the role by Joe Burke. Under Burke, the Royals developed into stars two young talents who'd been drafted and signed under the Tallis regime: George Brett and Dennis Leonard. Joining the core that Tallis had acquired via trade - Otis, Patek, Mayberry, and McRae - the Royals rebounded to second in 1975. They were division champs in 1976, '77, and '78, and brought Kansas City its first major league pennant in 1980. Tallis spent those years in New York, as an Executive Vice-President for George Steinbrenner's Yankees - the team that defeated the Royals in the ALCS in '76, '77, and '78.

The expansion draft and the sequence of trades Cedric Tallis pulled off for the Royals in 1968-72, gambling away known performance for unproven potential time after time, and coming out way ahead in the exchange time after time, was simply amazing. What was so remarkable wasn't only Tallis's capacity to foresee the development that would occur in the youngsters he acquired (Piniella, Otis, Johnson, Patek, Mayberry, and McRae), but also his apparent prescience in anticipating the imminent decline in the talents he

surrendered: Foy, Johnson, York, Nelson, and Scheinblum. These deals weren't win-win fair exchanges. They were out-and-out swindles: time and again, Tallis plucked a budding blossom from a rival while giving a stink bomb in return. He played "Buy Low, Sell High" like Isaac Stern on a Stradivarius.

Few GMs have ever had such a run. For some reason, Tallis seems to be little remembered today. But his accomplishment is highly deserving of honor; he ought to be always considered among the most bold and noble of jousting GMs. May we dub him Sir Cedric.