

Joe Cronin, Hall of Fame Player, Exec

1906-1984

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"Baseball," Joe Cronin once said, "is a game of disappointments. The .300 hitter is a man who is disappointed seven times out of 10."

Very early in a bottom-to-top career that spanned nearly half a century, Cronin learned not to dwell on the disappointing aspects of his profession.

That philosophy was to serve him well in good times and bad—from his San Francisco sandlot beginnings to the Hall of Fame, from his days as an iron-gloved young infielder to one of the finest shortstops in American League history, from lean days as a playing manager to the ecstasy of beating out the New York Yankees in a pennant race.

It followed him into the office of president of the American League, the final stop on an up-through-the-ranks career that ended with his retirement in 1973.

And it sustained him during the final months of his life, when, terminally ill with cancer, he continued to follow baseball. He managed to pay a brief, guarded visit to the All-Star Game on the 50th anniversary of the Great Hubbell Accomplishment in which he had been a participant, only a few months before his death at the age of 77 at his home in Osterville, Mass., a small town on Cape Cod, on September 7.

If anything eluded Cronin during his lifetime, it was a World Series title, for which he scrapped diligently as a player, manager and general manager. Or perhaps that highest of baseball offices, the commissionership, which he never really sought, but may have secretly coveted. ("The man doesn't seek the office," he once said in answer to a question about his possible candidacy. "The office seeks the man.")

There was little in the way of success that did not come Cronin's way during his 20-year playing career. It didn't just happen; rather it was a combination of good fortune, Irish tenacity and natural talent.

Born in San Francisco in the year of the Great Quake (1906), Cronin showed athletic promise as a youngster and bypassed college and a possible career in law to sign off the baseball sandlots with Pittsburgh in 1925. He batted .313 for Johnstown in the Mid-Atlantic League that first summer, but his work with the glove was nothing to write home about.

But circumstances found him in Pittsburgh late in 1926, a spare infielder who didn't generate much power with his 152-pound frame when he did get the opportunity to swing the bat.

The Pirates kept him on the roster in 1927, but Cronin sat and watched mostly, appearing in only 12 games as relief for Glenn Wright and watching from the bench as the Yankees wiped out Pittsburgh in four straight games in the World Series.

Cronin had kept his eyes and ears open, however, and one of the lessons he had learned was that the big guys hit the ball better and farther. He vowed to add some weight and muscle.

Before Cronin could set about doing that, however, his brief National League career ended when the Pirates sold his contract to the Kansas City Blues, then a farm club of the Washington Senators. At midseason in 1928, Cronin was batting .245, an average that had him ticketed for Wichita.

Here, the luck of the Irish asserted itself. Instead of ending up in the Western League, Cronin found himself on the Washington roster—all because Senators outfielder Goose Goslin had played around as a shot-putter during spring training. Goslin's arm was so sore when the season opened that he could not lift it, much less throw a baseball. But he got away to a quick start with the bat and Manager Bucky Harris decided he couldn't put a .400 hitter on the bench. So he assigned shortstop Bobby Reeves the job as Goslin's caddy. Reeves raced into the outfield any time a ball was hit to Goslin, took the outfielder's underhanded toss and made the return throw to the infield. By mid-July, Reeves' arm was in bad shape, too, and he was 20 pounds under his playing weight. The Senators needed a replacement in a hurry, and Cronin was the man.

Joe Engel, who comprised the Senators' entire scouting staff at that time, paid the Blues \$7,500 for Cronin's contract, and the suddenly promoted infielder found himself in the lineup as soon as he reached Washington. Cronin hit just .243 over the last months of the 1928 season, but made believers of second baseman Harris, the playing manager, and first baseman Joe Judge with his defensive play, after a shaky start. "He's smart, he handles himself well, has a great arm and he'll start hitting one of these days," predicted Judge.

"One of these days" turned out to be 1929. Almost dealt to Boston over the winter by Owner Clark Griffith for considerably less than the Senators had paid for him, Cronin remained



Clockwise from top right: Joe Cronin as A.L. president in 1970; as Red Sox player/manager in early 1940s; as Senators shortstop in 1932; at oldtimers game in 1978.



a Senator, probably because of pleas by Harris.

Cronin repaid Harris by batting .281 and driving in 61 runs that summer, but it was 1930 when the shortstop really came into his own. The previous winter, he had built himself up to a muscular 180 pounds, primarily by chopping wood at his home in the Black Hills. His average zoomed to .346 in 1930 and he drove in 126 runs and scored 127 in 154 games. The sudden surge earned him Most Valuable Player honors.

Prior to the 1933 campaign, Cronin was named playing manager of the Senators at the tender age of 26. He was selected to play on the A.L. team in the first All-Star Game that summer, and the Senators surprised everybody, themselves included, by taking the A.L. pennant by a seven-game margin over the favored Yankees.

As manager of the defending A.L. champions, Cronin was given the duty of managing the junior circuit's club in the 1934 All-Star Game, and he also played in the game at shortstop. He became part of All-Star history as Carl Hubbell's fifth straight strikeout victim—following Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jimmie Foxx and Al Simmons. "People forget that we won," Cronin, the last survivor among the five, recalled years later. The score was 9-7, and Cronin went 2-for-5 and had eight assists.

The 1934 Senators didn't win often. Injury-free in 1933, they became the league's walking wounded in '34 and fell out of contention early. Cronin escaped until late in the season, when he suffered a broken arm in a collision at first base.

The year wasn't a total loss, however. Joe married the boss' niece and adopted daughter, Mildred Robertson, at the end of the season. They honeymooned with Cronin's arm still in a cast.

The honeymoon was over for Joe and the Senators, though. Griffith startled the baseball world in October 1934 by selling his son-in-law's contract to the Boston Red Sox for a record \$250,000 and a player, slick-fielding shortstop Lyn Lary.

Cronin contended that Griffith, in his initial conversations with new Red Sox Owner Tom Yawkey, had no intention of peddling his shortstop. "Mr. Yawkey asked Griff if he could buy me," Cronin recalled, "and Griff said, 'Of course not . . . he'd cost too much.' So Tom asked, 'How much?' and Griff said, 'What difference does it make? . . . Let's say a quarter of a million dollars,' and Yawkey produced a checkbook.

"I understand that Griff looked at Mr. Yawkey and said, 'You can't be serious,' while Tom was filling in the blanks. When he shoved it (the check) across the desk, Griff couldn't believe it. He still said, 'You must be wrong,' but there was the dough, and I went."

Yawkey, accused of making the deal for Cronin and a number of other veteran players in a bid for an instant pennant, named Joe playing manager prior to the opening of the 1935 season.

It was quite a task for a young man of 29, and Cronin learned diplomacy while trying to ride herd on a collection of temperamental players and oddballs. Joe fined them when he was forced to, but usually gave back the money later on some pretext or other. The cast of characters included Wes Ferrell, who wanted to pitch only when his astrological chart said the stars were right, aging Lefty Grove, who went on a silence strike after he'd lost a tough game; Ben Chapman, who openly criticized his manager's decisions on the bench between innings, and, later, Ted Williams, who would sometimes stand at his outfield position during a game and take practice swings with an imaginary bat.

When the Red Sox finally won a pennant for Yawkey in 1946, however, six of the key players with the club—Williams, Dom DiMaggio, Bobby Doerr, Johnny Pesky, Tex Hughson and Dave Ferriss—had played their entire major league careers under Cronin.

Cronin, in fact, had insisted that Boston sign DiMaggio, who was being shunned by other organizations because he wore eyeglasses.

But Joe's World Series luck remained all bad. Boston lost to St. Louis in seven games, thanks to Enos Slaughter's first-to-home dash on a routine double in the eighth inning of the deciding game.

Cronin had suffered a fractured leg in the first series of 1945 and he retired as a player with a .301 career average, a .468 slugging percentage and 2,285 hits in 2,124 big league games. After managing the Red Sox through the 1947 season, he was promoted to general manager.

He continued to work with Yawkey in that capacity and as vice-president and treasurer, and was voted into the Hall of Fame as a player in 1956, together with Hank Greenberg.

American League club owners knocked on his door later in January 1959 with an offer Cronin couldn't refuse. League President Will Harridge was retiring, and Cronin, then 52, was the unanimous choice of the seven-man A.L. screening committee to succeed him.

Cronin assumed his new duties in February of 1959, and his first act was to move the league office from Chicago, where it had been located for 59 years, to his adopted Boston.

Good luck followed Cronin to the new job. American League attendance had been falling off for several seasons because of the dominance of the Yankees. But in 1959 there was a pennant race, which went eventually to the Chicago White Sox, and increased interest at ball parks around the league.

Cronin did not originate the designated hitter idea, but he was one of its strongest boosters when the rule proposal was made.

He happily presided over adoption of the DH by the American League in 1973, and never did understand why it was not adopted by the National League.

He also was a strong supporter of divisional playoffs, another change in the baseball format that came about during his tenure as A.L. president. "The playoffs stimulate September," he said succinctly.

Cronin also oversaw expansion, and in the final years of his job was a strong advocate for the establishment of three leagues of eight clubs each, and possible interleague play.

He spoke out against further expansion, but it occurred anyway when the A.L. went to 14 clubs in 1977. He left office at the end of 1973, prior to the expiration of his contract, turning the presidency over to Lee MacPhail, former general manager of the Yankees.

Cronin was given the title of chairman of the board, a more or less honorary title, and retired with his wife to a winter home in Apopka, Fla., near Orlando, and a summer residence at Osterville, Mass.

The man who set a record by hitting five pinch homers in a single season (1943) did not forget baseball and was a familiar face at Red Sox old-timers' games and at the All-Star Game following his retirement.

Baseball did not forget Cronin, either, naming him honorary captain of the American League team for the 50th All-Star Game in Chicago in 1983.