

Sparky Anderson, Catholic Hall of Fame manager

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Nov. 8, 2010



(CNS photo/Brendan McDermid, Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- George Lee "Sparky" Anderson, the Hall of Fame manager who managed three World Series-winning teams, died Nov. 4. He was 76.

Just two days before, his family issued a statement that Anderson, a Catholic, was in hospice care as he was suffering from the complications of dementia.

When he retired from managing following the 1995 season, he was third all-time in the number of wins he had managed, at 2,194.

He was the first manager to guide teams to 100-win seasons in both the American and National leagues, first with the Cincinnati Reds in 1970, 1975 and 1976 and the Detroit Tigers in 1984.

Anderson also was the first manager to win the World Series in each league, first with the Reds - winning consecutive World Series titles in 1975 and 1976, and with the Tigers in 1984.

Known to most people inside and outside of baseball as Sparky, Anderson led the "Big Red Machine" to eight winning seasons in nine years, four NL pennants, two World Series championships and a .596 winning percentage.

Anderson's Tigers teams grew mediocre during the last seven years of his 17-season tenure, but he became only the second manager in history -- after Miller Huggins' 1927 "Murderers Row" New York Yankees -- to keep his team in first place from the start to the end of the season, as the 1984 Tigers got off to a still-record 35-5 start.

Anderson became a Catholic, he told Catholic News Service in a 1996 interview, so he could still get to church on the Sundays when he was playing ball.

"I was a Methodist. And the Methodist church (service) starts at 11 o'clock. And we always played doubleheaders on Sunday -- in those days. Always. I never could go to church," he recalled.

"But my roommates, it seemed like every roommate I had was Catholic. I would go to church with them. I'd just

go to church with them. God, I did that for at least eight, nine years. And then when I was in Toronto, Father (Charles) Prance -- I got the lessons from Father Prance. I'd go over in the evenings. And he baptized me in Toronto, in 1964," his first year as a manager, Anderson said.

Born Feb. 22, 1934 in South Dakota, Anderson went to high school in Los Angeles. After graduation, he spent six years playing minor league baseball.

Anderson then spent just one year in the majors, as the starting second baseman for a poor Philadelphia Phillies team, hitting .218 with no home runs in 1959. But after being returned to the minors, he decided he would try his hand at managing.

He flourished as a minor league manager, got a job as a coach with the expansion San Diego Padres in 1969, then signed on to manage the Reds in 1970, taking them to the World Series in his first year.

Fired after nine seasons in Cincinnati, he was hired in June 1979 by the Tigers, promising to deliver a World Series to the city in five years. Exactly five years later, Anderson and the Tigers delivered.

One story told about the 1984 World Series is that Anderson stopped into St. Aloysius Church in downtown Detroit to light candles prior to Game Five of the World Series, which could clinch the championship for the Tigers.

Told that Dick Williams, manager of the rival San Diego Padres, had stopped in earlier to light candles, Anderson asked how many candles Williams had lit. When the answer came back that Williams had lit four, Anderson declared that he was going to light twice as many candles.

The final score of Game Five: Tigers 8, Padres 4; each team scored as many runs as their respective managers had lit candles.

In 1987, Anderson gained AL Manager of the Year honors for the second time when he took an overachieving Tigers team to the AL playoffs. Two weeks before the end of that season, he and Tigers first-base coach Dick Tracewski got up early, as did tens of thousands of other Catholics, and met Pope John Paul II during the pontiff's Detroit stop on his U.S. pastoral visit.

In the early 1990s, Anderson scored a coup in getting Pope John Paul to sign a baseball.

Anderson was a big believer in helping charities. At a 2002 fundraising banquet in Connecticut to benefit the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, he said, "Always be nice to people. Because when it's all over, you will have a wonderful feeling for what you did," He added that everyone should remember just how much God has given. "He gave me so much; I feel I must give five times back," Anderson said.

While in Detroit in 1987, Anderson founded CATCH, an acronym for Caring Athletes Team for Children's and Henry Ford Hospitals, appearing at all sort of benefits for the charity over the past two decades.

The family announced that, at Anderson's request, no memorial service was planned, and that in lieu of flowers, people could contribute to the charity of their choice or to CATCH.

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