

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

At 84, Hemond leads nostalgia league in stamina

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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CINCINNATI — The Bill Veeck apple doesn't fall far from the tree with Roland Hemond.

Here, it was a typically warm, humid early-summer night in The Queen City of America's Rhineland. The clock kept advancing on 9:30, 10, 10:30 and finally 11 p.m. at the Green Diamond Gallery, one of the most sensational sports museums in the country. And there was Hemond, one of the most enduring baseball executives of our era, holding court without regard for time or any flagging energy on his part.

Consider the scene when Hemond is 84 and doesn't act his age.

Hemond received his boot-camp training in baseball on late nights from Veeck between 1975 and 1980 in the old Bards Room at Comiskey Park or Miller's Pub on Wabash Street on the other side of the Palmer House hotel, in downtown Chicago. Gabbing about baseball and life as only Baseball's Barnum could, Veeck trained his listening party to fight sleep and start the day fresh. Hemond had no choice but to learn as his eyelids grew heavy as Veeck's trusted White Sox general manager. Veeck would finally break up the bull sessions in the wee hours and show up at 35th and Shields promptly at 9 a.m. — expecting Hemond to do the same — to begin another business day.

Some 35 years later, here is Hemond, doing his scheduled 7 p.m. oral history for the members of Green Diamond Gallery. Finishing about 8:20 at the podium, the man who traces his front-office career back to 1951 at Hartford of the Eastern League then broke off to enthrall smaller groups, time-tripping and selling the game Veeck-style. And he kept going and going and going, even forgetting to sample the buffet Green Diamond owner Bob Crotty had provided. One of Crotty's aides had to cobble together leftovers from the spread into a plastic container for Hemond, who finally nibbled at the vittles around 10:30 as he sat down.

Somewhere, there has to be a permanent honor in the Hall of Fame for Hemond, three-time American League Executive of the Year (twice with the Sox), for long and meritori-



George Castle

ous service to baseball. Better yet, an honor for his PhD in the art of storytelling, which sets baseball apart from any other sport.

The only aspect of baseball on which Hemond traditionally was closed-mouths were forthcoming trades during his GM days. He was no leaker, even in the more cozy days of baseball honcho-beat writer relationships. He excelled in the art of the deal, and any advance publicity could kill a transaction. Otherwise, there is no better recanter of persons, places and things in baseball than Hemond.

Storytelling starts at breakfast

On this day, he started early and finished late. Veeck would nod knowingly if he was here. Hemond began with stories sitting around a hotel lobby at 8:30 a.m. Arriving at Green Diamond 2½ hours later, he emptied his mental files for a video crew for a number of hours. The museum staff took him out to lunch at 2 p.m., and he regaled his table with more stories.

The only time Hemond wasn't on "duty" was about an hour period at 5 p.m. when he took a catnap on a bench near the museum's front door. Working for Veeck, Hemond learned to grab 40 winks wherever he could. Even as early arrivals for his program walked past, Hemond snoozed. That's all he needed to re-charge. Awakened, he was ready to go.



Roland Hemond (right) gets a tour of Green Diamond Gallery exhibits from owner Bob Crotty.

Five hours later, everyone who talked to Hemond walked away in amazement. They had never met a baseball character like him, even with a schedule of Cooperstown enshrinees ranging from Mike Schmidt to Andre Dawson who have appeared at Green Diamond. The museum has drawn the Hall of Fame's praise for its astounding memorabilia collection and displays from Crotty's personal collection. Hemond was similarly impressed.

"I love Cooperstown," he said, "but this is beyond description...Seventy-five percent of these exhibits, in some way I'm (historically) involved."

Fortunately, no one asked Hemond to perform body English in the manner that Veeck once did. With the then-June 15 trade deadline coming up fast, Veeck asked Hemond to perform something dramatic. Armed with a completed deal to announce to writers,

he entered the Bards Room and slid (feet first, of course) into a waiting *Chicago Sun-Times* scribe Joe Goddard.

Hemond has done everything in baseball except helm a World Series winner. That won't be held against him, given the sheer odds each year of any team going all the way.

He signed on to farm system front-office work for the Boston Braves in 1952 in time to draft Hank Aaron's first pro contract. Moving to Milwaukee with the franchise in 1953, Hemond began to win friends and influence people. Then he continued his upward mobility by running the farm and scouting systems with the expansion Los Angeles Angels in their first season in 1961.

His best work, of course, came with the Sox from 1970 to 1985. As the only Chicago GM to work through three different ownerships, he helped save the Sox for Chicago under team bossman John Allyn in the early 1970s with a series of good trades. Most impactful was Tommy John-for-Dick Allen. With limited funds from Veeck, he assembled the beloved "South Side Hit Men" in 1977. He promoted Tony La Russa, just 34, from Triple-A to his first managerial job in 1979. With a greater budget from Jerry Reinsdorf and Eddie Einhorn starting in 1981, he assembled an instant contender that culminated in the 99-win "Winning Ugly" team in 1983.

Only some byzantine politics within the Sox ownership group in 1985 ended his Chicago run as Hawk Harrelson took over for him for one disastrous season. Hemond still served longer than any other GM on either side of town besides Harry Grabiner with the Sox and John Holland with the Cubs.

Hemond put up with off-the-field craziness

He's to be commended for putting up with more than any GM should bear with the Sox. Allen quit on him near the end of the 1974 season. A year later, financially-strapped owner Allyn was in danger of missing his final payroll, then fired announcer Harry Caray live on Johnny Morris' early-evening WBBM-TV sportscast. A re-hired Caray teamed with Jimmy Piersall as broadcast team under Veeck, roasting players and Mary Frances Veeck alike. Veeck dressed players in shorts for one 1976 game.

Disco Demolition Night in 1979 needs no introduction. Piersall's career as a part-time Sox coach ended when he tried to choke sportswriter Rob Gallas. Then, in 1982, La



A video crew empties Roland Hemond's mental file of stories at the Green Diamond Gallery.

Russa – tired of Piersall’s post-game video jabs – took his coaches to confront the certifiably-nuts announcer at SportsVision’s studios late one night. Jim Leyland got so worked up he tore at his shirt. Cooler heads soon prevailed and no punches were thrown.

Hemond survived by taking Veeck’s advice: “Take your job seriously. Don’t take yourself seriously.”

You want stories? The man whose daughter walked around the Executive House hotel in downtown Chicago with her pet snake draped around her shoulders will more than oblige.

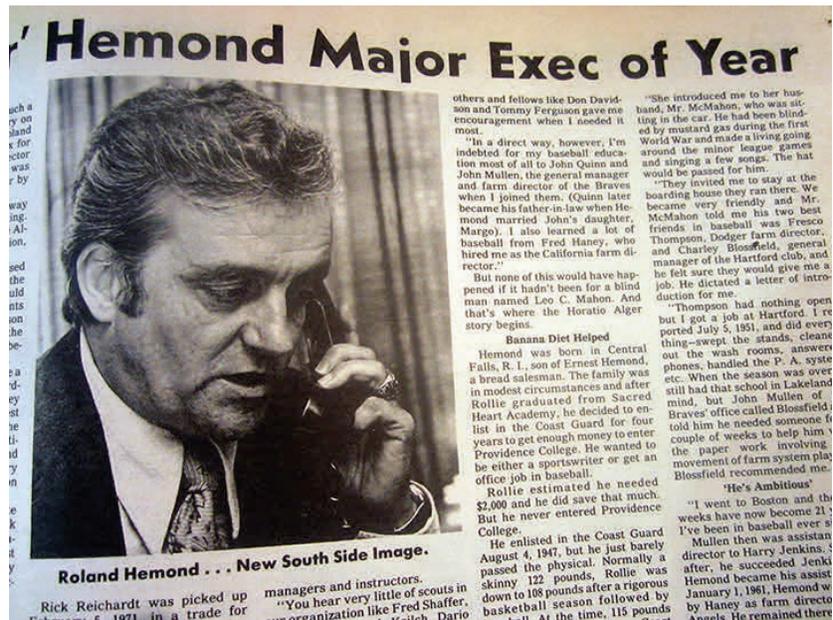
- Cheapskates who didn’t want to pick up the dinner/drinks/expenses tab? Hemond mentioned Paul Richards and Tommy Lasorda. One night Richards’ party decided to call him out on his thriftiness. As they all walked to catch a cab, everyone else quickly ducked out, leaving Richards to get into the taxi and being forced to pay the bill.

- Fergie Jenkins a Sox? Sure, Hemond wanted Jenkins to win his 300th game on the South Side. He claimed him off waivers for the Cubs, angering Dallas Green. To settle things, Jenkins stayed for one last season in Wrigley Field with Scott Fletcher and Dick Tidrow traded to the Sox.

- Improve communication among his scouts at the winter meetings in the pre-cell phone days? Hemond equipped his men with walkie-talkies. Good concept, but the incoming conversation could be overheard by all within earshot, so there was no privacy. Remember, this is an era when Hemond had to find a gas station or other store with a pay phone to contact other GMs while out and about.

- Acquire the young Buddy Bell for the Sox? Hemond tried, but failed, he told Bell nephew Dan Bell, who manages Green Diamond Gallery for Crotty. Better late than never. Buddy Bell is now the Sox’s assistant GM.

- How to explain away the Orioles season-opening 21-loss streak in 1988, Hemond’s first year as Baltimore GM? Just explain these stumble-bums were just not his players. Hemond eventu-



A bound Sporting News story, from the Jerome Holtzman Library, detailing Roland Hemond's first Executive of the Year Award in 1972 was displayed at the Green Diamond Gallery.

ally built the last consistent run of Orioles baseball before meddlesome owner Peter Angelos drove him nuts.

Hemond will always be in my personal Hall of Fame. After Gordon Goldsberry, Dallas Green's player development guru, was disgustingly canned by failed Cubs-GM Jim Frey, Hemond hired Goldsberry as a senior advisor in Baltimore. Two good baseball men could now put their heads together. Unfortunately, it was not in Chicago.

In the end, though, we can't claim Hemond just for ourselves in the Windy City. He's so good, so enduring, he has to be shared with all of baseball.