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Dave Garcia, M.L.B. Manager and Minor League Mainstay, Dies at 97

By Richard Sandomir

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Dave Garcia's long baseball life meandered year after year through minor-league outposts like Wilkes-Barre, Pa.; Sioux City, Iowa; Oshkosh, Wis.; and Mayfield, Ky.

A hard-hitting second baseman in the 1940s and '50s, Garcia managed many of the teams he played for. But Major League Baseball was not calling him. So, with his family growing, he retired as a player-manager and moved into scouting — then returned to managing in the minor leagues, adding Fresno, Calif., and Salt Lake City to his late-1960s travels.

But as he entered his 50th year, the majors finally beckoned. The San Diego Padres hired him as a coach in 1970, a stint that he followed with two managing jobs: first with the California Angels and then with the Cleveland Indians.

Along the way he became a revered elder to generations of players and coaches, and when he died on Monday in San Diego at 97, one of the last links to a bygone era of baseball was gone.

Never a star, Garcia was a lifer who devoted himself to baseball while toiling in obscurity in the minors, as a teammate and manager of future major leaguers like the pitcher Hoyt Wilhelm and Bill White. And finally, when Garcia became a major league manager — one of the first Hispanics to hold the job — his time at the helm of mediocre teams was fleeting. His was a baseball life outside the spotlight but doggedly loyal to the game, to the end.

“His knowledge of the game was second to none,” said Buddy Bell, the former All-Star player who, as the manager of the Colorado Rockies and Kansas City Royals, hired the octogenarian Garcia as a coach in the 2000s. In a telephone interview, he added: “He showed a lot of compassion, and even in his 80s he was still on top of everything.”

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Garcia's death, at an assisted living facility, was confirmed by his son, David.

David Garcia was born on Sept. 15, 1920, in East St. Louis, Ill. His father, Benito, variously worked in a zinc factory, owned a bar and delivered ice. He and his wife, Encarnacion (Menendez) Garcia, were immigrants from Asturias, Spain.

When David was 11, his father died, and his mother went to work in a shirt factory to support her five children. He helped out by selling newspapers in downtown East St. Louis.

Garcia signed a contract with the St. Louis Browns in 1938. Sent to its minor-league team in Springfield, Ill., he was hit in the head by a pitch and did not return to play for more than a year. He subsequently tore up a knee while playing in Lake Charles, La., and broke a leg in Eau Claire, Wis.

After serving in the Army Air Forces during World War II, he reinjured the knee while playing for the Minneapolis Millers, a top Giants farm team. The injuries, along with his three years of military service, may have diminished his chances of rising to the majors.

Finally healthy, he had a strong season in 1947 with the Sioux City Soos, then took on the dual roles of player and manager, first with the Knoxville Smokies in Tennessee 1948 and then the Oshkosh Giants from 1949 to '53.



Garcia with Dodger Juan Pierre before a Padres-Dodgers game at Petco Park in San Diego in 2009. He was a regular at the park in his later years, sitting near the field.

Sandy Huffaker for The New York Times

Like other minor- and major-league ballplayers of his time, Garcia took off-season jobs to supplement his income. While with the Oshkosh team, he sold sporting goods. Before Christmas in 1953, an advertisement in The Oshkosh Northwestern noted, "Dave will be happy to assist you in picking out your sporting equipment from the large selection shown at Dunham-Fulton Gun Co."

After the entire Wisconsin State League folded in 1953, he became a player-manager for several other minor-league teams through 1957.

His son said that all that time in the minor leagues did not frustrate Garcia.

"That wasn't a quality in my dad," David Garcia said in a telephone interview. "He just believed in doing the best job, whatever it was at the time, and life would take care of itself."

In all, Garcia played for 11 minor league teams in 14 seasons.

Once in the majors, he was hired as the third-base coach of the Padres in 1970 and remained in San Diego until 1973, before coaching for the Indians and Angels. He succeeded Norm Sherry as the Angels' manager during the 1977 season. When his appointment was announced, he told reporters, "Frankly, I know a lot of people are going to ask, 'Who the hell is Dave Garcia?'"

He was dismissed the next season and replaced by Jim Fregosi. But when the Indians wanted to replace Manager Jeff Torborg during the 1979 season, they hired Garcia, who remained in Cleveland until 1982.

When it appeared unlikely that he would return after a disappointing 1982 season, Garcia was asked if the Indians should replace him with Billy Martin, the combustible manager who was about to be fired by the Yankees.

"It would be great for Cleveland to get Billy Martin," he told The Plain Dealer. "I think every club should be managed by Martin at least once."

He never managed again but coached for the Milwaukee Brewers, the Royals and the Rockies and continued to scout.

Bell, a senior vice president of the Cincinnati Reds, said Garcia had been an astute judge of ballplayers' skills and clubhouse dynamics.

"He'd always try to find the best in people, but he could pick out a bad teammate in a New York minute," he said.

In addition to his son, who played in the Yankees' minor-league system, Garcia is survived by his daughters Marilyn Haviland and Cathy Ryan; six grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. His wife, Mary Carmen (Menendez), died in 1996. One of his grandsons, Greg Garcia, is an infielder

for the St. Louis Cardinals. Another, Drew Garcia, spent eight seasons in the minor leagues.

In his later years, Garcia was a regular at Padres games at Petco Park, sitting in a seat near the field. He had increasing difficulty seeing the action because of macular degeneration. Yet he was still providing insight to the Chicago Cubs, for whom he was a scout.

“He’s way more of a source than he thinks he is,” Gary Hughes, a special assistant to the Cubs told The New York Times in 2009. “He picks up stuff by accident that people can’t get, because he’s Dave Garcia.”

Correction: May 24, 2018

An earlier version of this obituary misstated the location of Sioux City, where Garcia played in 1947. It is in Iowa, not South Dakota.

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