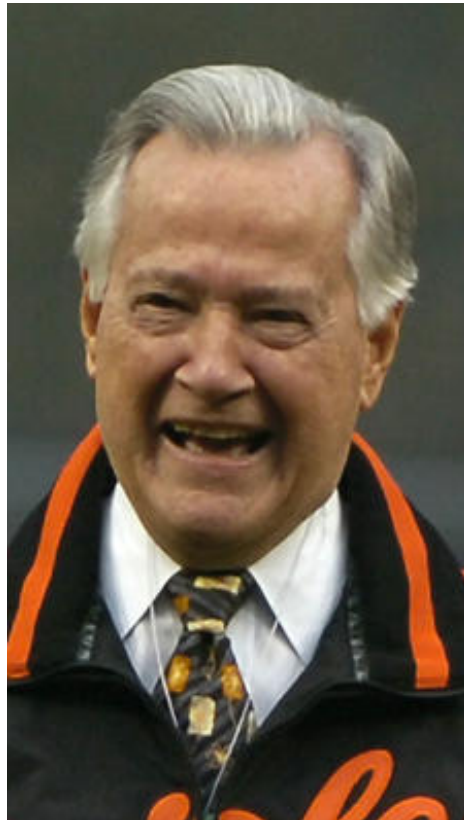


Hank Peters, former Orioles GM, dies at 90



Former Orioles GM Hank Peters threw out the first pitch on Opening Day 2008 before the Orioles played the Tampa Bay Rays. (Lloyd Fox, Baltimore Sun)

By **Mike Klingaman**

The Baltimore Sun

JANUARY 4, 2015, 6:11 PM

Not one to show emotion, Orioles general manager Hank Peters whooped it up one mid-October day in 1983. That afternoon, Baltimore clinched the World Series with a 5-0 victory over the Philadelphia Phillies. That evening, Peters learned that his first grandson, Christopher, had been born one hour after the game.

"When I finally reached my dad — and these were the days before cellphones — I said, 'Congratulations, you have a World Series baby,'" Steve Peters said. "I don't recall just what he said but, boy, was he happy that night."

Mr. Peters, architect of the last Orioles team to win a World Series, died Sunday morning of complications from a recent stroke at Hospice By The Sea in Boca Raton, Fla. Mr. Peters, who lived in Highland Beach, Fla., was 90.

Patient and unflappable, Mr. Peters in December 1975 took over a team with a storied past and, for much of the next 12 years, sustained that success.

In his first 10 years — a tumultuous decade marked by the advent of free agency and a 1981 players' strike — the Orioles averaged 90 victories and won two American League championships. In 1979, they lost a seven-game World Series to the Pittsburgh Pirates; four years later, the Orioles defeated the Phillies in five games.

"Hank maintained the continuity of what the Orioles had always done — develop good players, bring them up and win lots of ball games," Hall of Fame pitcher Jim Palmer said.

All the while, Mr. Peters lay low as others shared the spotlight. The Baltimore Sun likened his laid-back persona to that of "a rubber tree plant in an insurance office."

The Orioles knew different. In his first year, Mr. Peters engineered a 10-player deal with the New York Yankees, landing catcher Rick Dempsey and pitchers Scott McGregor and Tippy Martinez, standouts all.

"That trade really cemented our future," said Mr. Palmer, who played nine years with Mr. Peters at the helm.

"Hank was one of the best people in baseball that anyone could play for," said Mr. Dempsey, Most Valuable Player of the 1983 World Series. "He was mild-mannered, straightforward and very easy to talk to. I wasn't a great player but Hank, who understood the intangibles of the game, helped me feel part of the Orioles family."

In a statement released Sunday by the team, principal owner Peter G. Angelos called Mr. Peters "an integral part of the Orioles' winning tradition ... a man of integrity and great character. His impact was felt by multiple organizations in his 40-year baseball career, and he will be missed by all who knew him."

Even players' agents respected Mr. Peters.

"Nobody in baseball taught me more than Hank did," said Ron Shapiro, longtime Baltimore sports agent. "Through negotiations, he taught me the value of listening and of keeping one's perspective and balance in relationship with the other side.

"His soft-spokenness reflected his ego-free personality. Hank was an astute baseball man and a quiet doer of good things. He negotiated early, and without breaking the bank, to retain players rather than see them escape to the marketplace. He never sought to be noticed and rarely was noticed or fully appreciated. And he did things so quietly that others got disproportionate credit for what he did. He put together the roster that allowed [manager] **Earl Weaver** to win an [A.L.] championship."

Born Sept. 16, 1924, in St. Louis, Mo., Henry John Peters began his baseball career in 1946 with the St. Louis Browns after answering a newspaper ad for a job in their farm department. He refused to go East in 1954 when the Browns moved to Baltimore and, a year later, became farm director for the Kansas City Athletics. In 1966, he took a job with the Cleveland Indians as vice president of player personnel until 1971, when he became president of the National Association of Professional Baseball (minor) Leagues.

Mr. Peters joined the Orioles in December 1975, replacing Frank Cashen as executive vice president and general manager. Meticulous and analytical, he led the team to 10 straight winning seasons before it slumped in 1986 and 1987.

"I'm tuned in to winning," Mr. Peters once said. "I like to think I've combined baseball and business."

On his watch, the Orioles drafted infielder **Cal Ripken Jr.** and pitchers Mike Boddicker and Storm Davis, dealt for outfielder Gary Roenicke and snatched outfielder John Lowenstein off waivers from the Texas Rangers. All were integral parts of the 1983 champs.

Even the worst trade he made — sending promising outfielder Don Baylor and 20-game winner Mike Torrez to Oakland in 1976 for outfielder Reggie Jackson, who skipped town after one season — failed to ruffle Mr. Peters.

"I know I didn't get smart overnight and I didn't get dumb overnight, either," he said.

Colleagues called him even-keeled to a fault.

"I never heard him use an explicit word," said Tom Giordano, the Orioles' scouting director during most of Mr. Peters' reign. "His way of getting teed off was to say, 'I don't understand why this happened. Look into it and keep me posted.' And we did. He was so fair-minded that whenever he spoke, everyone listened."

Mr. Peters was old-school in many ways, those who knew him said. Players wore coats and ties on road trips. Beards were forbidden. And Mr. Peters railed against multiyear contracts because, he said, "I don't think players play with the intensity they should. A player knows what he does this year will not affect tomorrow. He is already protected."

Twice named the Sporting News Executive of the Year (1979 and 1983), he was fired in 1987 by owner Edward Bennett Williams when the latter chose to take a more active role in the team.

Hired that same year by Cleveland, Mr. Peters served as general manager until his retirement in 1992. He is credited with laying the groundwork for the Indians' streak of five consecutive division titles from 1995 through 1999.

"Hank was a very stable, steady influence, to the extent that when he did get upset, it made *you* feel bad," Indians manager Mike Hargrove once said, "You'd think, 'I need to do something to make him feel better.' "

Throughout his career, Mr. Peters surrounded himself with a cadre of baseball experts.

"He had a real tree of quality people," said John Hart, president of baseball operations for the Atlanta Braves. It was Mr. Peters who hired Hart as a minor league manager for the Orioles in 1982, and it was Mr. Hart who succeeded Mr. Peters as Cleveland's general manager 10 years later.

"Hank has been the most influential individual in my professional career," Mr. Hart said. "I've never known a man with more integrity, energy or passion. This is a tough time, a sad time."

Mr. Giordano, 89, visited Peters last week at Boca Raton Regional Hospital and said they talked of old times for almost an hour.

"He was weak but responsive," Mr. Giordano said. "Then Hank said, 'I am ready to go.' He had made up his mind and, just like at work, nobody could change it.

"I have lost my best friend in baseball."

Besides his son Steve, of Boynton Beach, Fla., Peters is survived by a daughter, Sharon Peters of Delray Beach, Fla., and two grandchildren. His wife of 59 years, the former Dorothy Kleimeier, died in 2010.

A memorial service will be held at 11 a.m. Wednesday at the Glick Family Funeral Home, 3600 N. Federal Highway in Boca Raton.

mike.klingaman@baltsun.com

twitter.com/MikeKlingaman

Copyright © 2015, The Baltimore Sun
