

Former Cardinals manager Rapp, 87, dies



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Vern Rapp, former Cardinals manager and the man who made Al Hrabosky shave his famous facial hair, died Thursday. He was 87.

The coroner's office of Adams and Broomfield County in Colorado confirmed Rapp's death but declined to give the cause. Attempts on Thursday to reach Rapp's family were unsuccessful. The Denver Post reported in 2008 that Rapp lived about 90 miles outside of Denver.

Rapp, who was born in St. Louis in May 1928 and attended Cleveland High School, signed his first playing contract with the Cardinals in 1945.

"I signed for \$100 a month, but I was young and excited," he told the Denver Post in 2008.

The right-handed catcher who paused his career to serve in the Korean War in 1951 and 1952 never made it beyond the Class AAA level as a player, but the two decades he spent as a minor league player and manager led to a major-league return to his hometown.

The Cardinals hired him before the 1977 season as the managerial replacement to Red Schoendienst.

Rapp, then 49, led the Redbirds to an 83-79 record, a third-place finish that marked an 11-game improvement from 1976. But the hard-nosed managerial tactics he formed in the minors didn't always mesh with his new players.

"With Vern, it was such a big transition," former Cardinals pitcher Bob Forsch once told the Post-Dispatch. "From laid-back Red to Vern. Vern was more military, where he'd say, 'I'll even tell you how to dress.' He stood (coach) Sonny Ruberto on a trunk in spring training and said, 'This is how to wear your uniforms.'"

Tension entered the clubhouse. An argument with star catcher Ted Simmons went public. Rapp was fired after the Cardinals started the 1978 season 6-11.

"The climax could have been averted, but it did appear more or less inevitable," Cardinals general manager Bing Devine said at the time.

Rapp's second stint as a major league manager came with Cincinnati in 1984. The Reds started 51-70 before he was replaced by a player-manager named Pete Rose.

Perhaps Rapp's defining moment, in the eyes of Cardinal Nation, came when he made Hrabosky, nicknamed the "The Mad Hungarian", shave his beloved Fu Manchu mustache. Hrabosky complied, but later said he felt like a soldier without a rifle.