

OBITUARIES

Ed Charles, Infield Sage of the Miracle Mets, Is Dead at 84

By GEORGE VECSEY MARCH 15, 2018

Ed Charles, the heart and soul of the Miracle Mets of 1969, died on Thursday at his home in East Elmhurst, Queens. He was 84.

His daughter-in-law, Tomika Charles, confirmed the death, saying he had been ill for several years.

Charles was a vital member of the Mets team that suddenly jelled during the 1969 season, winning the World Series in one of the most surprising surges in baseball history and endearing themselves forever to fans who had suffered through the team's wretched play since its beginning, just seven years earlier.

The Mets' players relied on the smile and the wisdom of Charles, who was then 36.

"Ed Charles was this guy, you wanted to sit on his knee and hear how he made it," Ron Swoboda, the right fielder on the 1969 team, said in a telephone interview on Thursday. He added: "He had a physical and emotional grace that most of us didn't seem to feel. He would say, 'Don't wrestle with what looks like complexity.'"

Edwin Douglas Charles was born in Daytona Beach, Fla., on April 29, 1933,

a time of racial segregation in Florida. But he took heart as a teenager when he spotted Jackie Robinson in town as a Montreal Royal farmhand during spring training in 1946. Robinson was expected to become the 20th century's first black player in the major leagues.

Charles dropped out of school in his teens but returned as a football and baseball star, attracting scholarship offers. He hoped to play in the Negro leagues, but in the emerging age of integration he got a tryout with the Boston Braves.

George McQuinn, the manager of the Braves' Quebec City farm team, took him north, to cold weather and the odd experience of rooming with a white family.

Charles's way to the majors was blocked by Eddie Mathews, the Braves' future Hall of Fame third baseman, but he also saw lesser infielders called up.

He made it to the majors after being traded to the Kansas City Athletics in 1962.

At 34, Charles was traded to the Mets in 1967, when they were still staggering along at the bottom of the league.

In a game weeks after joining the team, he went to his left and snagged a hard shot before it could go past him, impressing the rookie left-handed pitcher Jerry Koosman so much that Koosman walked toward third base.

"He was sort of flabbergasted that I'd made the play," Charles recalled in 2009. "He said, 'You sort of glide to the ball. That's it. You're the Glider from now on.'"

The nickname did indeed stick.

In 1968, the Mets brought in Gil Hodges, the old Brooklyn favorite, as manager. Setting an example by accepting his role as a platoon player, playing mainly against left-handed pitchers, Charles hit .207 in 61 games in 1969. But he had several crucial hits as the Mets won their division, the first league championship series (instituted after the league expanded), and then beat the

powerful Baltimore Orioles in the World Series in five games.

As the final out settled into the glove of Cleon Jones in left field at Shea Stadium, Charles raced toward the mound and leapt in the air, a beatific smile on his face.

Charles was known to write and recite poetry, and as part of the Mets' celebration in Bryant Park in Manhattan, he read a prayer-poem he had written while stuck in the minors in 1961. Part of it went, "Grateful to You I'll always be/ For exploiting my talents for the world to see."

But he never played in the majors again. The Mets released him after the '69 season and offered him a job in promotions, but after a dispute over \$5,000 for moving expenses he returned home to Kansas City. Eventually moving to New York, he worked in various jobs and patched things up with the Mets, scouting and coaching for them in the minor leagues.

He passed a Civil Service test in 1985 and worked with troubled youth at a home in the Bronx.

"You'd see a kid trying to hurt himself, banging his head against the wall because somebody embarrassed him," Charles said. "You'd see a kid who wouldn't want to admit he can't write. The department teaches us to pick up the phone and call for help."

In his spare time, Charles settled into the role of beloved former Met, sometimes representing the club at baseball conventions and autograph shows, showing up for old-timers' days and at the emerging fantasy camps, and even taking part in an academic conference at Hofstra University in 2012.

Moving to Queens, he took care of an elderly cousin, Sarah Lou Parker, then inherited her apartment, where he died.

Charles, who was divorced, is survived by his longtime companion, Lavonnie Brinkley; two sons, Edwin and Eric; a sister, Virginia Charles; and a brother, Charlie.

Charles was always eager to talk about his brushes with Jackie Robinson,

starting with the sighting in Daytona Beach in 1946.

Charles also recounted a story of how he later spotted Robinson, who was by then on the Brooklyn Dodgers' roster, on a train.

The Dodgers were in Florida playing an exhibition, and Charles and several friends "peered through openings in the fence," he recalled in "Carrying Jackie's Torch: The Players Who Integrated Baseball — and America," by Steve Jacobson (2007).

After the game, the Dodgers prepared to leave from the railroad station.

"So now we're walking down the platform, looking in the windows trying to see where Jackie was seated," Charles said. "Finally we come to the right coach, and there is Jackie, playing cards. We waved and, you know, he waved back to us."

"Then the train starts pulling out," he went on, "and we start slowly walking with it, just waving to Jackie. The train picked up speed. We kept running and waving till the train got out of sight."

"Things like that, you know, I can recall so vividly," he said, "because they were very special moments in my life and in the life of the country. It was like the Messiah had come."

Correction: March 16, 2018

An earlier version of this obituary erroneously attributed a distinction to Charles. He received no votes for the American League Rookie of the Year award in 1962; he did not finish second. The earlier version also misstated his relationship to Sarah Lou Parker, a relative whose apartment in Queens he inherited. She was a cousin, not an aunt. And because of an editing error, it misstated the given name of Charles's brother, who survives him. It is Charlie, not Elder.

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