Kevin Joseph Aloysius “Chuck” Connors (April 10, 1921 – November

10, 1992) was an American actor, writer and professional basketball and

baseball player. He is one of only 12 athletes in the history of American

professional sports to have played both Major League Baseball and in the

National Basketball Association. With a 40-year film and television career,

he is best known for his five-year role as Lucas McCain in the highly rated

ABC series The Rifleman (1958–63).[1]

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Early life

Connors was born Kevin Joseph Aloysius Connors on April 10, 1921 in

Brooklyn, New York, the elder child of two children born to Marcella (née

Londrigan) and Alban Francis "Allan" Connors, immigrants of Irish descent

from Newfoundland and Labrador.

[2]

He had one sibling, his younger sister,

Gloria, two years his junior,

[2][3]

According to the federal census of 1930,

his father and mother and both sets of his grandparents were natives of

Newfoundland, Canada.

[2]

That same census also records that his father had become a citizen of the

United States in 1914 and was working in Brooklyn in 1930 as a

longshoreman. His mother had also attained her U.S. citizenship in 1917.[2]

Raised Roman Catholic, he served as an altar boy at the Basilica of Our

Lady of Perpetual Help in Brooklyn.

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Faith Quabius

(1977–80)

(divorced)

Children 4

Chuck Connors

Chuck Connors as a Brooklyn Dodger.

First baseman

Born: April 10, 1921

Died: November 10, 1992 (aged 71)

Batted: Left Threw: Left

MLB debut

May 1, 1949, for the Brooklyn Dodgers

Last MLB appearance

September 30, 1951, for the Chicago

Cubs

Connors was a devoted, avid fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers despite their

losing record during the 1930s, and he hoped to join the team one day. A

gifted athlete, he earned a scholarship to the Adelphi Academy, a

preparatory school in Brooklyn, where he graduated in 1939. He received

additional offers for athletic scholarships from more than two dozen

colleges and universities.[4]

From those offers he chose to attend Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey. There he played both

basketball and baseball for the school, and it was there too where he changed his name. Since childhood Connors

had disliked his first name Kevin, and he had sought another one. He tried using "Lefty" and "Stretch" before

finally settling on "Chuck".[3]

The name derived from his time as a player on Seton Hall's baseball team. He would

repeatedly yell to the pitcher from his position on first base, "Chuck it to me, baby, chuck it to me!" The rest of his

teammates and spectators at the university's games soon caught on, and the nickname stuck.[4]

Connors, though, left Seton Hall after two years to accept a contract to play professional baseball with the New

York Yankees.

[4]

That opportunity lasted only one season, for he joined the United States Army following

America's entrance into World War II. During most of the war, he served as a tank-warfare instructor at Fort

Campbell, located on the Kentucky-Tennessee border, and later at West Point in New York.[3]

Sports career

During his Army service, Connors moonlighted as a professional basketball

player, joining the Rochester Royals and helping to lead them to the 1946

National Basketball League championship.[5]

Following his military

discharge in 1946, he joined the newly formed Boston Celtics of the

Basketball Association of America becoming the first professional

basketball player to be credited with breaking a backboard. Connors took a

shot that caught the front of the rim of an improperly installed glass

backboard during the Celtics' warm up at Boston Arena on November 5,

1946.[6]

Connors left the team for spring training with Major League Baseball's

Brooklyn Dodgers. He played for numerous minor league teams before

joining the Dodgers in 1949, for whom he played in only one game. He

joined the Chicago Cubs in 1951, playing in 66 games as a first baseman

and occasional pinch hitter.

[7]

In 1952, he was sent to the minor leagues

again to play for the Cubs' top farm team, the Los Angeles Angels.

He was drafted into American Football by the NFL's Chicago Bears, but

never suited up for the team.

In 1966, Connors played an off-field role by helping to end the celebrated

holdout (see Reserve clause) by Los Angeles Dodgers pitchers Don

Drysdale and Sandy Koufax when he acted as an intermediary during

negotiations between management and the players.[8]

Connors can be seen

in the Associated Press photo with Drysdale, Koufax and Dodgers general

manager Buzzie Bavasi announcing the pitchers' new contracts.[9]

Connors was listed as 6 foot 5 inches when he played baseball, and 6 foot 6

inches when he played basketball.[10]

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MLB statistics

Batting average .238

Home runs 2

Runs batted in 18

Teams

Brooklyn Dodgers (1949)

Chicago Cubs (1951)

Acting career

Connors realized that he would not make a career in professional sports, so

he decided to pursue an acting career. Playing baseball near Hollywood

proved fortunate, as he was spotted by an MGM casting director and

subsequently signed for the 1952 Tracy–Hepburn film Pat and Mike. In

1953, he starred opposite Burt Lancaster as a rebellious Marine private in

the film South Sea Woman and opposite John Wayne in Trouble Along the

Way as a football coach.

Television roles

Connors had a rare comedic role in a 1955 episode ("Flight to the North") of Adventures of Superman. He

portrayed Sylvester J. Superman, a lanky rustic yokel who shared the same name as the title character of the series.

Connors was cast as Lou Brissie, a former professional baseball player wounded during World War II, in the 1956

episode "The Comeback" of the religion anthology series Crossroads. Don DeFore portrayed the Reverend C. E.

"Stoney" Jackson, who offered the spiritual insight to assist Brissie's recovery so that he could return to the game.

Grant Withers was cast as Coach Whitey Martin; Crossroads regular Robert Carson also played a coach in this

episode. Edd Byrnes, Rhys Williams, and Robert Fuller played former soldiers. X Brands is cast as a baseball

player.

In 1957, Connors was cast in the Walt Disney film Old Yeller in the role of Burn Sanderson. That same year, he costarred

in The Hired Gun.

[11]

Character actor

Connors acted in feature films including The Big Country with Gregory

Peck and Charlton Heston, Move Over Darling with Doris Day and James

Garner, Soylent Green with Charlton Heston and Edward G. Robinson, and

Airplane II: The Sequel.

He also became a lovable television character actor, guest-starring in

dozens of shows. His guest-starring debut was on an episode of NBC's

Dear Phoebe. He played in two episodes, one as the bandit Sam Bass, on

Dale Robertson's NBC western Tales of Wells Fargo.

Other television appearances were on Hey, Jeannie!, The Loretta Young

Show, Schlitz Playhouse, Screen Directors Playhouse, Four Star

Playhouse, Matinee Theatre, Cavalcade of America, Gunsmoke, The Gale

Storm Show, The West Point Story, The Millionaire, General Electric

Theater hosted by Ronald Reagan, Wagon Train, The Restless Gun with

John Payne, Murder, She Wrote, Date with the Angels with Betty White,

The DuPont Show with June Allyson, The Virginian, Night Gallery hosted

by Rod Serling, Here's Lucy with Lucille Ball, and many others.

The Rifleman

Connors beat 40 other actors for the lead on The Rifleman, portraying Lucas McCain, a widowed rancher known for

his skill with a customized Winchester rifle. This ABC Western series, which aired from 1958 to 1963, was also the

first show to feature a widowed father raising a young child.[11]

Connors said in a 1959 interview with TV Guide

With Pippa Scott in 1960

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that the producers of Four Star Television (Dick Powell, Charles Boyer, Ida Lupino

and David Niven) must have been looking at 40–50 thirty-something males. At the

time, the producers offered a certain amount of money to do 39 episodes for the

1958–59 season. The offer turned out to be less than Connors was making doing

freelance acting, so he turned it down. A few days later, the producers of The

Rifleman took their own children to watch Old Yeller in which Connors played a

strong father figure. After the producers watched him in the movie, they decided

they should cast Connors in the role of Lucas McCain and make him a better offer,

including a five-percent ownership of the show.

The Rifleman was an immediate hit, ranking No. 4 in the Nielsen ratings in 1958–

59, behind three other Westerns – Gunsmoke, Wagon Train, and Have Gun – Will

Travel. Johnny Crawford, an unfamiliar actor at the time, former Mousketeer,

baseball fan and Western buff, beat 40 other young stars to play the role of Lucas's

son, Mark. Crawford remained on the series from 1958 until its cancellation in

1963. The Rifleman landed high in the Nielsen ratings until the last season in 1962–

63, when it was opposite the highly rated return to television of Lucille Ball on The Lucy Show and ratings began to

drop. The show was cancelled in 1963 after five seasons and 168 episodes.

Johnny Crawford said of his relationship with Connors: "I was very fond of Chuck,

and we were very good friends right from the start. I admired him tremendously."

Crawford also said about the same sport that Connors had played: "I was a big

baseball fan when we started the show, and when I found out that Chuck had been a

professional baseball player, I was especially in awe of him. I would bring my

baseball and a bat and a couple of gloves whenever we went on location, and at

lunchtime I would get a baseball game going, hoping that Chuck would join us.

And he did, but after he came to bat, we would always have trouble finding the ball.

It would be out in the brush somewhere or in a ravine, and so that would end the

game."

Crawford stayed in touch with Connors until his death in 1992. "We remained

friends throughout the rest of his life. He was always interested in what I was doing

and ready with advice, and anxious to help in any way that he could ... He was a

great guy, a lot of fun, great sense of humor, bigger than life, and he absolutely

loved people. He was very gregarious and friendly, and not at all bashful ... I

learned a great deal from him about acting, and he was a tremendous influence on me. He was just my hero." He

and Connors reprised their roles as the McCains in a television western movie, The Gambler Returns: The Luck of

the Draw.

The rifle

There were three rifles made for the show. Two identical 44–40 Winchester model 1892 rifles, one that was used on

the show and one for backup, and a Spanish version called an El Tigre used in the saddle holster.

[12]

The rifle levers

were modified from the round type to a more "D" shaped in later episodes.[13]

Two rifles were made for Chuck Connors personally by Maurice "Moe" Hunt that were never used on the show. He

was a fan of the show and gave them to Connors. Arnold Palmer, a friend and Honorary Chairman of the annual

Chuck Connors charity golf event, was given one of the personal rifles[14]

by Connors and it was on display at The

World Golf Hall of Fame.

[15]

Publicity still of Connors for

The Rifleman, 1962

Connors with Johnny

Crawford, 1960

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The popularity of the show led to tie-in products, such as toy models of the

Rifleman's rifle, with the twirl-around-the-trigger lever-action that made the

customized rifle a match for any six-shooter hand-gun used by villains.

Also a Milton Bradley board game, called The Rifleman Game, had two

players each competing to move their herd of cattle from a Start to a Finish,

across a prairie landscape, with a river-crossing and other hazards. The

cattle were represented by die-cut cardboard cattle-pieces mounted in

plastic counters, red or blue for either player.

Typecasting/other TV roles

In 1963, Connors appeared in the film

Flipper. He also appeared opposite James

Garner and Doris Day in the comedy Move

Over, Darling in the role earlier played by

Randolph Scott in the original 1940 Irene

Dunne/Cary Grant version entitled My

Favorite Wife.

As Connors was strongly typecast for playing the firearmed rancher-turned-singlefather,

he then starred in several short-lived series, including: ABC's Arrest and

Trial (1963–64), an early forerunner of Law and Order featuring two young actors

Ben Gazzara and Don Galloway, NBC's post-Civil War-era series Branded (1965–

1966) and the 1967–1968 ABC series Cowboy in Africa, alongside British actor

Ronald Howard and Tom Nardini. Connors guest-starred in a last-season episode of

Night Gallery titled "The Ring With the Red Velvet Ropes". In 1973 and 1974 he

hosted a television series called Thrill Seekers.

He had a key role against type as a slave owner in

the 1977 miniseries Roots, and was nominated for an Emmy Award for his

performance.[1]

Connors hosted a number of episodes of Family Theater on the Mutual Radio

Network. This series was aimed at promoting prayer as a path to world peace and

stronger families, with the motto, "The family which prays together stays together."

In 1983, Connors joined Sam Elliott, Cybill Shepherd, Ken Curtis and Noah Beery,

Jr. in the short-lived NBC series The Yellow Rose, about a modern Texas ranching

family. In 1985, he guest-starred as "King Powers" in the ABC TV series Spenser:

For Hire, starring Robert Urich. In 1987, he co-starred in the Fox series Werewolf,

as drifter Janos Skorzeny. In 1988, he guest-starred as "Gideon" in the TV series

Paradise, starring Lee Horsley.

In 1991, Connors was inducted into the Western Performers Hall of Fame at the

National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City.

Personal life

Connors was married three times. He met his first wife, Elizabeth Jane Riddell Connors, at one of his baseball

games, and married her on October 1, 1948. They had four sons, Michael (1950-2017), Jeffrey (1952–2014),[16]

Steven (born 1953), and Kevin (1956–2005), but divorced in 1961.

Rifle and Rifleman

Connors opposite Broderick

Crawford in Arrest and Trial,

1963

Connors in Branded, 1965

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Connors married Kamala Devi (1963) the year after co-starring with her in

Geronimo. She also acted with Connors in Branded, Broken Sabre and Cowboy in

Africa. They were divorced in 1973.

Connors played in Soylent Green (1973), as Tab Fielding, and Faith Quabius played

an attendant. They were married in 1977 and divorced in 1979.[17]

Connors was a supporter of the Republican Party and attended several fundraisers

for campaigns for U.S. President Richard M. Nixon. He campaigned for Ronald

Reagan, a personal friend, and marched in support of the Vietnam War in 1967.[18]

Connors was introduced to Leonid Brezhnev, the

leader of the Soviet Union, at a party given by

Nixon at the Western White House in San

Clemente, California, in June 1973. Connors

presented Brezhnev with a pair of Colt Single

Action Army "Six-Shooters" (revolvers) which

Brezhnev liked greatly. Upon boarding his airplane

bound for Moscow, Brezhnev noticed Connors in

the crowd and went back to him to shake hands,

and jokingly jumped up into Connors' towering hug. The Rifleman was one of the

few American shows allowed on Russian television at that time; that was because it

was Brezhnev's favorite. Connors and Brezhnev got along so well that Connors

traveled to the Soviet Union in December 1973. In 1982, Connors expressed an

interest in traveling to the Soviet Union for Brezhnev's funeral, but the U.S.

government would not allow him to be part of the official delegation.

Coincidentally, Connors and Brezhnev died on the same day, ten years apart.

Charity

Connors hosted the annual Chuck Connors Charitable Invitational Golf

Tournament, through the Chuck Connors Charitable Foundation, at the Canyon Country Club in Palm Springs,

California. Proceeds went directly to the Angel View Crippled Children's Foundation and over $400,000.00 was

raised.[19]

Death

Connors had started smoking in 1940. For many years, he smoked three packs of Camel cigarettes a day until he

quit the habit in the mid-1970s, though he occasionally resumed smoking afterwards. He died on November 10,

1992 at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles at the age of 71 of pneumonia stemming from lung cancer. At

the time of his death, his companion was Rose Mary Grumley. He was interred in the San Fernando Mission

Cemetery in Los Angeles.[1]

Filmography