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Odd man out

Banned from baseball, Buck Weaver was no snitch. His niece is stepping up the fight to clear his name

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By Mark J. Konkol
Staff writer

Too frail to walk a picket line, 89-year-old Marjorie Follett nonetheless intends to protest this year's All-Star Game in Chicago to draw attention to what she calls Major League Baseball's greatest mistake.

That's the banishment of her uncle, White Sox infielder George "Buck" Weaver, from the game he loved.

Weaver was an All-Star before there was such a thing. Called a "natural ball player of natural ball players" by the Saturday Evening Post, he played a sparkling third base for the White Sox in 1919 when his team conspired to throw the World Series.

A year later, a jury found Weaver and seven teammates innocent of the plot, but Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, baseball's first commissioner, set aside the verdict and banned them for life for their part in a scandal that nearly ruined the sport and etched their place in infamy.

Forever, they are the "Black Sox."

Follett religiously has written letters to commissioner Allan "Bud" Selig and his predecessors, taking up Weaver's fight with working-class gumption and small-town manners.

For more than 30 years, the Pontiac grandmother never received much of a response.

"I've been writing to Mr. Selig since he came in, and I wrote to the (commissioner) before him, but I didn't put any force in it," she said.

Follett hopes to change that July 15 by bringing her protest to Chicago and the All-Star

Game's national stage. She will stand in the parking lot, where third base was in the old Comiskey Park, and protest with the help of friend David Fletcher.

Fletcher is a downstate doctor engrossed in the Weaver story and dedicated to seeing baseball history rewritten.

"I knew Marge was out there promoting Buck's reinstatement, and I wrote to tell her I would carry the torch for her. ... I know she has a passion for this, and I have a passion for this," Fletcher said. "Weaver went to his grave proclaiming his innocence, and he's still influencing people such as myself to stand up for him. Standing up for a guy's good name is worth the fight."

Weaver died of a 'broken heart'

In issuing the lifetime bans, Landis lumped Weaver in with his teammates, saying the infielder knew about plans to throw the game and collect money from gamblers. Weaver never took a dime, but he didn't speak up either.

The judge denied Weaver's request for a separate trial and a chance to testify on his own behalf.

For the 36 years after his ouster from the league, Weaver made plea after unsuccessful plea to Landis for a separate hearing to clear his name.

On January's last day in 1956, Weaver clutched his chest, fell to the ground at 71st Street and Ashland Avenue and never got up.

Doctors said he died of a heart attack at age 65, but Follett says they're only half right.

"He was broken-hearted. That's right. He died on Chicago's streets of a broken heart. I've always said that. He loved Chicago. He loved baseball. (Getting kicked out of baseball) killed him," she said.

Fletcher has traveled the country researching Weaver's life story for a screenplay. He wants Selig to consider his research. Fletcher believes "the facts" show Weaver wasn't a cheat and didn't deserve baseball's ultimate penalty.

Follett, who will be joined by her 76-year-old cousin Patricia Anderson at the game, is hoping to look Selig in the eye and repeat what she's said in letters for decades — "Uncle Buck is an innocent man."

If the commissioner would give her the time, she'd talk with Selig about the 84-year-old evidence: Weaver took no money, he made no errors, he batted .324 in the nine-game series won by Cincinnati five games to three.

"How do you throw a game when you make no errors?" Follett wonders out loud.

In a letter to Fletcher, Selig indicated he does "not have time" to meet with Weaver's niece in Chicago. "However, I am very sensitive to the concerns Marge Follett has raised," Selig wrote.

Still, Follett hopes for a chance encounter where she can ask one question of Selig — whose tenure has been marked by the 1994 strike, last year's decisions to call the All-Star Game a draw and his premature announcement of league contraction that never happened.

"Wouldn't (you) rather be known as the man who cleared Buck Weaver?"

'I fight because I owe him'

The protest will start at the scene of the crime — on the asphalt where Comiskey Park once stood.

It's where the White Sox won a World Series title in 1917 and gave one away in 1919. It's where the first All-Star Game was played in 1933, and for Fletcher, the home plate altar where he got married in 1988.

"Ever since they tore down that building ... I feel the old grounds are haunted, that Buck Weaver's spirit still lingers there. Buck has unfinished business. I don't believe in ghosts, but I can feel his presence, that enthusiastic spirit. ... All he tried to accomplish all his life was to clear his name," Fletcher said.

Flanked by Weaver's kin, Fletcher plans to bring the protest to the spot where Comiskey Park's third base, Buck's base, was once anchored to the infield dirt.

They'll hand out fliers explaining why Weaver deserves to have his name cleared after so many years.

And then they'll hold posters and watch the game from 10th-row seats behind the third base dugout at U.S. Cellular Field, not far from where Selig will sit. They hope game analysts will talk about the issue on the national television broadcast.

"We want to get some acknowledgment. The more people know about (Buck Weaver), they'll be interested and maybe Selig will really start to pay attention," said Anderson, who along with her sister Betty Lou Scanlon was raised by Weaver and his wife, vaudevillian star Helen Cook, after the girls' father died.

It's a protest that Follett and Anderson, 77, say they have to make.

"I fight because I owe him. I owe him because he paid attention to me growing up. He always sent me to Marshall Field's, and I would pick out three dresses, black patent-leather shoes and white anklets. I always loved him," Follett said.

Now is the perfect time for Selig to make it right, Fletcher said.

"There is more public awareness, especially in light of talk about Pete Rose being reinstated and this Sammy Sosa (corked bat scandal). Buck Weaver did not cheat. ... Selig can clear him with the stroke of a pen, and that's all he has to do," he said.

Fletcher even talks about filing a lawsuit demanding that Major League Baseball conduct a posthumous hearing to determine if Weaver, whom baseball Hall of Famer Ty Cobb called the "best third baseman ever born," got a raw deal.

Follett doesn't want to talk about going to court and doesn't care if Uncle Buck is ever honored by the league.

"I don't want the Hall of Fame. I just want his name cleared because he's innocent. He was a good man, and he was crucified."

Hiding his hurt

Despite the death of his professional baseball career, Weaver lived a mostly happy life.

He was the only member of the Black Sox to remain in Chicago, living in a three-flat at 7814 S. Winchester Ave. He bankrolled his brother-in-law's drug stores, worked a ticket window at Sportsman Park and took a city job laying tile.

He played in some semi-pro baseball leagues and coached a women's softball team but didn't talk much about his days as a White Sox star once it was clear he was too old to return to the big leagues. He harbored hope that he could one day return to baseball, maybe as a coach.

He was always smiling and never pouted about banishment while trying to clear his name, Anderson said.

"I'd walk to work with him and jabber at him along the way. Everyone knew him. They'd say, 'Hi Buck. Hi Buck,' and he'd say, 'Hi kid,' because he didn't remember every name," Anderson said.

"And every dog in every yard or dog tied to a tree knew who he was because he always had a bunch of scraps with him. He loved animals and people. He just had a way about him."

And that way was to hide his hurt from the rest of the world behind a friendly grin and an easy demeanor, family member say.

Or as he told a group of friends and well-wishers long after he was too old to return to the ball diamond: "I only know how to play ball to win. There's a little saying I know. ... You play your own game while here on Earth. You are called at the bat on the day of your birth. And whoever you are, you must stand at the plate and take what is served by the pitcher called Fate."

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