

Swan Song for Bobby Cox?

Sports

by Jerry Keys



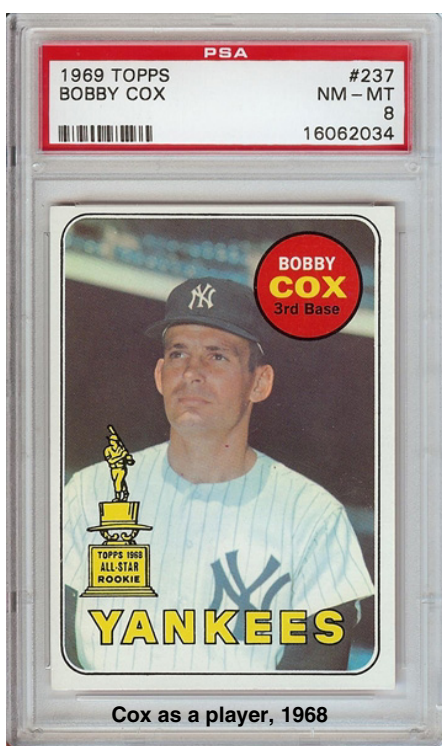
For a number of years we have always saw Bobby Cox as the face of the Atlanta Braves. This past fall he signed a one-year contract extension thru the 2010 season and promptly announced 2010 would be his final year as the face of the Braves. Most people under the age of 45 only remember Cox managing the Braves since 1990. Older baseball fans can recall when he skippered the Braves from 1978-1981. Cox has a backstory most never knew about.

He was signed out of high school by the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1959. He began his minor league career as an infielder and made stops in the Dodger organization at Reno, Panama City, Salem, Great Falls and Albuquerque. He was

drafted by the Chicago Cubs in the November 1964 minor league draft and spent time at Salt Lake City and Tacoma. He was traded to the Braves early in the 1966 season and to the New York Yankees following the 1967 season. He made his major league debut the next season and was teammate of Mickey Mantle and Thurmon Munson. After spending two seasons in the "big," he returned to the minors in 1970. He retired as a player in 1971. Cox was noted to have knee problems and it kept him from retaining a position in the majors. He began his managerial career with the last team he played for, the Fort Lauderdale Yankees. Cox managed West Haven the following year and captured the Eastern League championship. He coached the next four years for the Yankees Triple-A affiliate, the Syracuse Chiefs. After winning the Governors Cup

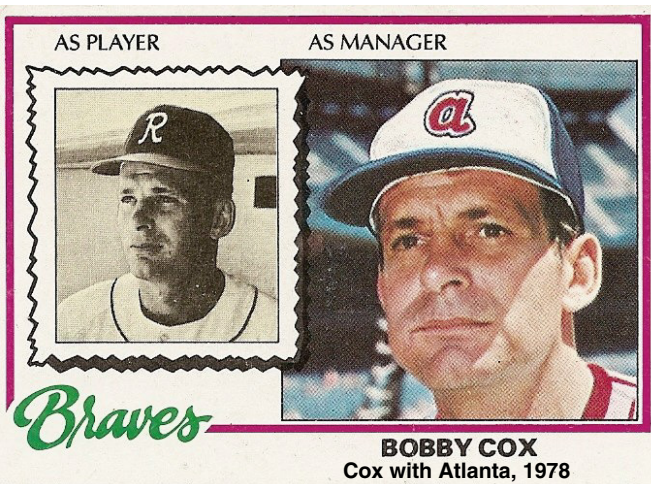
for the Chiefs in 1976, he was promoted to the 1977 Yankees as their first base coach under manager Billy Martin.

Following the Yankees World Series triumph, he was hired by Ted Turner to skipper the Atlanta



Cox as a player, 1968

Braves. His four years in Atlanta were unsuccessful "on paper," his best season was 1980 when the Braves posted an 81-80 mark. Although, he was noted for converting a catcher with "throwing block-trouble simply throwing the ball back to the pitcher" to a



centerfielder (the player was Dale Murphy) and building the team through the minor leagues.

Following his dismissal after the 1981 season, Atlanta won the NL West in

1982 and challenged the Dodgers for the pennant a year later. Cox was hired by the Toronto Blue Jays in 1982 and in his second year as manager guided the Jays to their 1st winning season in team history (expansion team in 1977). The Jays played in the "then" power division, the AL East. The Jays posted an 89-73 mark in '83 and still finished 4th.

Cox won his first pennant in 1985 and fate played an unkind hand to him. From 1969-84, the ALCS was the "best 3 of 5," but starting in 1985 it was expanded to the "best 4 of 7." The Jays held a three games to one lead after four games before losing the last three to the Kansas City Royals. Any year previously, the ALCS would have been concluded after four games.

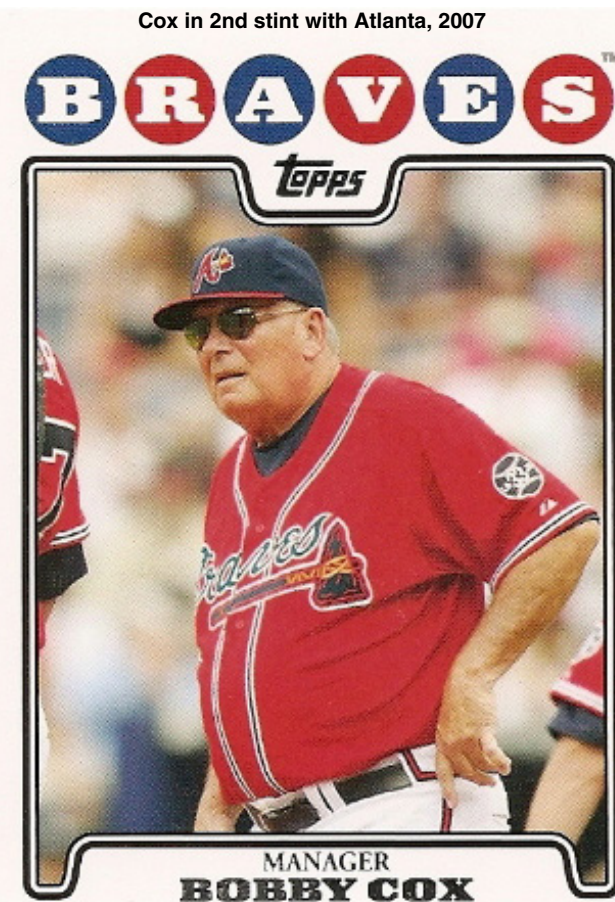
Cox returned to Atlanta in 1986 as the General Manager and began rebuilding the team through the draft. After five dismal seasons by the Braves, Cox fired Russ Nixon in late June 1990 and replaced him as manager. At the start of his return to the bench, Atlanta had already amassed a core nucleus of talent: Tom Glavine, John Smoltz, Steve Avery, Ron

Gant and Dave Justice. Following the key additions of Sid Bream, Otis Nixon and Terry Pendleton, Atlanta began a run of 14 consecutive playoff appearances. Under Cox's

tenure, the Braves were always known for their star-studded starting rotation, sending out the "Big 3" for over a decade, Smoltz, Glavine, and (Greg Mad-

a quality closer. Except for a short period in the 1990s, the Braves never had a "Y a n k e e - t y p e" offense. They won game six of the 1995 World Se-

shot to make the play-offs. The NL East, which they owned for a decade now includes two of the higher spending organizations, the New York Mets and Philadelphia Phillies. The Phillies have appeared in the last two World Series, winning one and losing the other, and the Mets have only one playoff appearance in their last five years (due to two meltdowns during the stretch run, especially the 2007 collapse) but have fielded very talented teams with unlimited potential. Because I decided to end my nearly 30 year love affair with baseball last year, I am not as familiar with some players and their projected outlook for Cox's last run at a title. Pitching is always a question mark for any team with a rash of injuries during the season. The staff has an attractive mix of veterans and up-and-coming youngsters (similar to their early years of their 14-year playoff run) but numerous question marks in the bullpen. Their middle relief is a major question mark and no one is sure Billy Wagner has fully recovered from his shortened 2009 season.



ries 1-0. If you scanned the Braves roster from 2003-05, you would be shocked they even posted a .500 record. The best team Cox assembled that did not make it to the Series was the 1998 squad. Aside from winning 106 games, the team was equipped with five starters with at least 16 wins, a 30-save closer, four players with over 30 homers and several reserve players who would be starters for most other teams. They were derailed in the NLCS, not by the staff ace Kevin Brown or even their 2nd or 3rd starter, it was the #4 starter Sterling Hitchcock. He started two games and won each and finished the series with a 0.90 ERA. He was 9-7 for the 1998 season and his ERA hovered around 4.00 most of the season. In his two NLCS starts, he defeated Atlanta's staff ace and co-ace, Maddux and Glavine. Atlanta will enter the 2010 season as a long-

dux. Atlanta appeared in eight straight NLCS under Cox (and nine overall, the last in 2001) and five World Series. Cox was 5-4 in NLCS, winning the first four of five. He was an abysmal 1-4 in World Series play. On paper, Atlanta should have won at least three of those Series but we all know "on paper" is meaningless. Cox will be remembered for several reasons. Obviously his longevity, lasting 20 years with one team (the longest tenured manager after Cox is Tony LaRussa with the St. Louis Cardinals since 1996) and Cox is 4th on the all-time wins list (behind only Connie Mack, John McGraw and LaRussa). Cox is the all-time leader in being ejected from games. I will remember Cox for getting the most out of the least. The Braves were always gifted in starting pitching, but always had difficulty having

Offensively Atlanta lacks power in the 3-4-5 places in the batting order. Compared to the Phillies and Mets line-up, the Braves have several weaknesses. Although, the same thing was said about this team five years ago and they still won the NL East. If anyone can pull off a magic trick and make a swan song it would be Bobby. In a poetic way it would be nice to see a return to Atlanta by Smoltz, and an unretirement of Glavine and Smoltz for a last run.

Storybook endings do occur from time to time, but I am not sure this one will. A wild-card entry is a long-shot but who knows? Cox may have one more magic trick in his pocket. Either way it goes, thanks Bobby for the memories and making it fun to watch the Atlanta Braves.