

Opinion

CHARLIE MANUEL: A class act who will be missed

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I have a confession to make. When my wife and I adopted a dog earlier this year from the Delaware County SPCA, we named him Charlie.

That's Charlie, as in Charlie Manuel. We named the fluffy little fellow after the outgoing Phillies manager not only because I wanted to name him after a man I admire, but also because Charlie the dog and Charlie the person had some interesting similarities.

Both are extremely friendly. Both have happy personalities. Both like being with people. And both seem to enjoy life and its surroundings.

Now, Charlie the manager is headed in another direction. The Phillies announced Friday that he has been relieved of his duties after nearly nine years on the job. Manuel's departure marks the end of what should be considered the greatest era in Phillies history.

Under Manuel, the Phillies made five straight post-season appearances. That's a first in Phillies history. The team played in back-to-back World Series. No Phillies team ever did that before. The 2008 Phillies were only the second team in club history to win a World Series. Between 2005 and 2012, the Phillies posted the best record of any team in the National League, while setting a club record with 102 wins in 2011.

Having reached 1000 wins during his managerial career, Manuel departs as the winningest skipper in Phillies history. He also leaves as the oldest pilot in Phils annals. Only Harry Wright back in the late 1800s managed the club for more years than Charlie.

Manuel, though, was more than a manager with a glowing record. When he took over the Phillies in 2005, he inherited a club that was overrun with tension. The clubhouse was tight, nervous, stiff. Players were always looking over their shoulders for approaching trouble. To them, the game seemed like a tedious chore.

The new manger changed all that. He made the game fun again. He gained the respect and admiration of his players. He built their confidence. There was no screaming at players in the clubhouse. The tension disappeared, and a much looser atmosphere prevailed.

Manuel was sometimes criticized for his managerial moves — or lack thereof. He had a core of detractors who liked to focus on his mistakes. And with his southern accent, frequent grammatical errors, and the way he bobbed and weaved when he walked, he was sometimes portrayed as a bit of a hillbilly.

But beneath that country-boy exterior was a guy who knew how to manage. Of course, during most of his years, he had an outstanding roster that paved the way for his success. Despite the last two seasons when injuries, complacency, and particularly this year, a weak pitching staff anchored by an atrocious bullpen, produced teams that were vastly inferior to his earlier clubs, Manuel was still a master at running the team and making the right decisions.

Manuel was also extremely modest. Whenever he was asked about his managerial success, he would pass the credit on to his players. "It's not me, it's the players," he would say. "They're the reason I won all these games.

Several times, I asked Manuel if he would agree to my writing a book about him. He has lived a fascinating life. But he always declined the invitation, claiming that there wouldn't be much to write about, and besides, a book about the Phillies' Golden Era should be about the players, not him.

Yet, Manuel would go out of his way to help. Without any coaxing, he agreeably wrote a back-cover blurb for one of my books. He was always there when you needed some information or a good quote. And, unlike any coach from the other Philadelphia pro sports teams, he attended the annual banquet of the Philadelphia Sports Writers' Association every year, and during the evening, always gave a talk laced with good humor.

Manuel was a nice man. He was honest. And he was a classy guy, whose appearance at the very press conference where his dismissal was announced spoke volumes about his strength and character. Indeed, as general manager Ruben Amaro's emotional announcement of the skipper's severance suggested, Manuel was regarded as a very special person in a sport that can sometimes be rough and nasty.

A classic example of Manuel's good-heartedness was ably demonstrated when I took Delco legend Mickey Vernon down to the Phillies clubhouse to say hello to the manager soon after he'd joined the Phillies. Vernon had been the batting coach with the Los Angeles Dodgers when Manuel played briefly for that team. The two hadn't been together for a long time, and Mickey was anxious to see his former student.

When Manuel spotted Vernon, he rushed over to the former American League star, and the two embraced in a scene that was absolutely beautiful to watch. Then they engaged in a lengthy chat, and as they did, players noticed the joyful exchange and crowded around the two to hear what they were saying. "Who is that guy?" Cole Hamels asked me. When I explained that he was a great former player and a two-time American League batting champion, Hamels' interest and respect was a most rewarding sight.

During the remaining few years of Vernon's life, whenever I saw Manuel, he'd say, "How's Mickey doing?" And it was asked in a way that demonstrated the real goodness of a man who during his years as the Phillies manager became enormously popular with the fans, as well as with his players and the media.

Manuel is moving on now to another chapter in his life. The region has suffered a disheartening loss. I'll miss him, and so will a lot of others.

Rich Westcott is a baseball writer and historian, and the author of 23 books, including eight on the Phillies. He once spent seven years as a sports writer with the Daily Times.

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