

SPORTS

LV Entertainer Becomes Big League Boss

MAURY WILLS REACHES TOP

By JOE CROSS

The world of sports sure does change. After all, how often does a former Las Vegas lounge entertainer become a major league baseball manager?

Lordy me, think of what that could mean. All those frustrated jocks who would give their eye teeth to be able to turn from the stage of the Caesars, the Rivas and the like, to become pro athletes now have their chance. The door's been opened.

Soon people like Roy Clark will dig his old baseball glove out and play catch on stage between songs just waiting for a call from the Yankees. Or you'll be seeing Rod Stewart rolling a soccer ball around as he sings. Or

Don Rickles wearing an ump's chest protector hoping Bowie Kuhn will be in the audience.

Rickles as an umpire? What else? Hell, he 'n Lasorda would draw millions.

Anyhow, that former Vegas entertainer turned manager who opened the door, so to speak, is no less than Maury Wills, the new head man up there in the Seattle Kingdom.

There is a touch of irony in Wills getting his first shot as a manager with Seattle's expansion Mariners. That's the city where he nearly ended his baseball career before it ever really got off the ground.

In fact, were it not for the first round of major league "expansion" — moving the sport from

coast to coast, that is — Wills quite easily would have never made it to the bigs, let alone become a super star and, eventually, a Vegas lounge attraction.

The year was 1958 when the Dodgers and Giants moved west. As a result, the Pacific Coast League had to do some realigning and the Dodgers moved one of their AAA farm teams to Spokane.

Unfortunately, they may have moved the franchise but they sent their good ball players to their other two triple-A clubs in Montreal and, if memory serves, St. Paul.

That same year, the Dodgers loaned Wills to Seattle because they owed the Rainiers' parent team a favor. In baseball, that usually

means they'll send you a loaner who they don't really feel will ever make it in their organization.

At any rate, soon after the season started, the general manager of the Spokane team, Spencer Harris, raised hell about Wills playing for a cross-state rival. The Dodgers responded and sent Wills to Spokane.

A couple of months into the season, Spokane fired its manager, Goldie Holt, and brought in Bobby Bragan. Now it didn't take Bragan, who is very familiar baseball name in his own right for his aggressive brand of play, long to realize Wills had a lot more potential than many people realized.

Wills was quicker 'n a turpentine cat, that was for sure. Well, one day Bragan asked Wills if he'd ever batted left

handed. No, Wills replied, but he was willing to give it a try.

So for the rest of that summer, you could find manager Bragan and player Wills out on the field at the Fairgrounds almost every morning when the team was in town working on converting Wills into a switch hitter.

Bragan must have thrown a million batting practice like pitches to Wills — who probably missed the first quarter million of them.

Eventually, though, Wills started to come around. By the end of the season, he was laying down bunts, hitting to the off field and smashing line drives from the other side of the plate.

The rest, as they say, is history. Bragan kept

the big club informed on the progress and when they called up Wills, he became an instant superstar.

That's the baseball side. One night after a game, Wills dropped by a tavern in Spokane where they have live music and heard this guy playing a banjo like you wouldn't believe.

It really turned Wills on and he got talking to the picker. Before long, the guy offered to give Wills lessons and he spent the rest of that summer hitting baseballs "backwards" during the day and picking up the art of strummin' in the evenings.

As anyone who ever heard him play here in Las Vegas knows, Wills was as good a student of the banjo as he was the baseball bat.

Local Sports Roundup

Heavyweight contender Ernie Shavers, who last week lost in his comeback effort against undefeated Randall "Tex" Cobb, Philadelphia, predicts that Muhammad Ali will fall in his comeback effort against Larry Holmes at Caesars Palace on Oct. 2.

"There are guys around Ali could beat, but Holmes isn't one of them," Shavers said. "Holmes is too young,

too strong and too fast."

Shavers, 36, who lost a disputed decision to Ali in 1977, was defeated twice by Holmes in 1978 and 1979.

The third annual Muscular Dystrophy Golf Tournament is set for Aug. 22 at the Dunes Country Club.

Entry is open to the public and an established handicap is not necessary. A donation includes 18 holes of tour-

namment play with shotgun start, on course refreshments, golf carts, dinner, and trophies and prizes. Proceeds from the tournament will go to the 1980 Muscular Dystrophy Drive.

Golfers interested in participating are requested to contact Mike Basaric or Mike Nethery at the 7-Eleven offices at 4045 S. Eastern Ave.

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