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Five Praised For Exploits in Baseball

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By Benjamin Hochman
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The old-timers and the kids with autograph books united Thursday in a juxtaposition of generations, all to celebrate baseball in New Orleans -- sure enough, in late January.

The Zephyrs hosted their annual "Evening with the Zephyrs -- Past, Present and Future" at the Pontchartrain Center, an evening with, more accurately, inductees to the Greater New Orleans Baseball Hall of Fame, a handful of Zephyrs coaches and management and some hard-core baseball fans, many wearing suits and dresses, others in jerseys and caps.

"You get to visit with people, see the support for the team, look forward to a great year and get a lot of excitement going," said Charlie Corbell, the Zephyrs' pitching coach.

The Zephyrs inducted five inaugural members into the Hall of Fame. They were former Boston Red Sox pitcher Mel Parnell and four others posthumously -- Henry "Zeke" Bonura, Larry Gilbert, Alexander Julius Heinemann and Mel Ott, who happens to be enshrined in another Hall of Fame in upstate New York.

The inductions were touching, emceed by New Orleans baseball historian S. Derby Gisclair. He pulled out all the favorite stories.

There was the one about the Chicago White Sox's Bonura, who was famous for stealing home in the 15th inning of a game to beat the New York Yankees. Then, years later, he repeated the feat in a game, this time to the surprise of many. Turned out that ol' Zeke did in fact get the steal sign -- except he got it, mindlessly, from the opposing dugout.

And there was Heinemann, a savvy businessman who disguised himself as a buffoon on game days. He would prance around the grandstands in a shabby alpaca jacket, a battered straw hat and a juicy cigar, catching the attention of jeering fans. His close friend, Gilbert, later said Heinemann would go out of his way to make a scene when the Pelicans were losing, so the fans would pay less attention to the hapless ball club.

The stories were genuine and heartfelt, as were the applause and standing ovation for Parnell, a New Orleanian and winningest left-hander in Red Sox history.

"I thought it was a great affair, really," Parnell said of the evening. "To be mentioned with the great names was a real tribute to me. I was proud to be with them."

Notables in attendance included Kirk Bullinger, a former New Orleans pitcher who now is in the Pittsburgh organization, and Roy Corcoran, a former LSU pitcher who could be found in the Zephyrs' bullpen this season, though there is a possibility he could be in the pen for the Nationals in Washington.

Longtime baseball enthusiast Arthur Schott also was honored with a community service award that will bear his name.

The Zephyrs coaches took the microphone in front of the nearly 200 in attendance to pump up the prospects who, before the first game, all seemed to have "a great swing" or a "plus arm." When it came to talking about goals for the season, Floridian Mike Hart, the hitting coach, looked at his newfound friends in Louisiana and said, "My goal is to have somebody help me out peeling crawdads."