

# Q&A

## BOBBY COX

Interview by CHARLES BETHEA

### BOBBY COX HAS BEEN TO EUROPE ONLY ONCE

and wasn't terribly impressed. He says "Gah-dawgit" and pulls off his cap to muss his hair when a memory eludes him. He uses long silences to make a point about as often as he uses an obscenity that rhymes with the surname of former Phillies first baseman and familiar nemesis John Kruk. A plug of Skoal hidden in his lower lip receives most of his attention. At spring training in Florida, the Braves manager humors clubhouse interviews with his cleats off, one foot propped on his desk, in a startlingly empty office. There's not a trace of photographic evidence of Sid Bream's slide or Otis Nixon's catch. Indeed, there's nothing on the bare white walls that a lifelong Braves fan might consult to divine the mystic psyche of the great old skipper who will retire after this season.

¶ Cox was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, but grew up in Fresno, California. A third baseman with a good glove, if light bat, he was selected by the Cubs in the 1964 minor league draft, then traded to the Braves in 1966. But his major league debut came in 1968 with the Yankees, where he played for two years before his knees gave out and he became manager of their Class A club. By 1977, Cox was the Yankees' first-base coach. He was hired away to manage Ted Turner's cellar-dwelling Braves the following year. Fired in 1981, he returned as general manager in 1986, then in 1990 became manager—a position where, as history will note, he stayed and flourished. ¶ If Tom Glavine was an accountant and Greg Maddux a surgeon, Cox was, and remains, a plumber, pure and simple. The sixty-eight-year-old makes a point of shuffling right on ahead, bad knees and all, into the ball fields of the future: "I can't remember half the stuff that went on," he says. "I've never let myself really look back." If he did, he'd recall, among other things, fifteen division titles (including a record fourteen in a row), five national league pennants, a World Series ring, and, along the way, 2,413 wins—the fourth most of any manager in the history of America's game. The records mean nothing; all he wants is one more deep playoff run. And so it is that the man who led the Braves from worst to first back in a prior millennium grunts this on his last first day of spring training: "All you want is a crack. And we've got a good crack at it."

For such an illustrious career, it's pretty empty in here. I've got a few pictures in Atlanta, in the clubhouse. Maddux, Glavine, and [John] Smoltz in one big one. Lots of coaches' pictures.

**What's your favorite time of year as a manager: spring or fall?** Spring training and going down the stretch in a pennant race are the two best experiences you can have.

**And this is your last spring in cleats. How does that feel?** It hasn't really hit me yet that this is gonna be the last year being in uniform, and probably won't hit me until right at the end of the season. I haven't honestly given any thought to it at all. It's business as usual—trying to do the best job I can and win a World Series. Sounds like a simple answer, but it's the truth.

**Why end now?** No particular reason, no madness to it. [Braves management and I] had talked about it for four or five years and just decided that, you know, I'm almost

Continued on page 88

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## Bobby Cox Q&A

Continued from page 74

seventy and it might be time for a younger guy to come in here and do something. You can't do it forever. That's the conclusion I came to. The only way I could make myself do it is go ahead and announce it. Now it's out there and done with.

**What will you do when it's over?** It's been a way of life for a long time—fifty-some years of putting on a uniform. It'll be different once I don't, I'm sure. But I'll be coming to spring training next year a little bit, helping [President] John [Schuerholz] and [General Manager] Frank [Wren] out. I'll get on the minor league side of it a little bit, stay out of their hair as much as I can. I was kinda worried that if I was separated completely, what the heck would I do? This makes it easier, knowing that you're still gonna be around the game some. That they want me around. I'll help as much as I can, work as hard as I can. Whatever they want me to do.

**How important is the outcome of this final season?** Everybody would like going out as a winner, but you know, there's only one winner. We're in the running for that, for sure. And that's all you want. You want a crack, and we've got a good crack at it. We almost pulled it off last year, right at the end. I thought we were gonna make it. You never know; you get in the playoffs, you could go all the way. I always said that some of the teams that didn't make the playoffs, if they had, they could have gone all the way.

**Did any of those 1990s Braves teams slip away?** 1996, probably. We went up and just killed the Yankees up there in New York—multiple runs in each of the first two games [of the World Series]. Then we came home and scored zero in one of them. Game five, I think. I don't know if it got away, though. We did the best we could. I remember Charlie Hayes's chopped ball we couldn't make a play on in front of home plate. The umpire got in the way of Jermaine Dye in right field for the third out. They went on to score runs, that kind of thing.

**Do you ever think about your place in managerial history? You're pretty high up on some big lists, including total wins and winning percentage.** I haven't really thought about it, honestly. Every year I pass somebody or something, and even my wife asks, "How many times have you won?" I don't know. I can't even get the thousand right . . . one thousand, two thousand, until someone reminds me that you did this or that. It's not that I did it, anyway; the team did it. When you manage as long as I have, you're gonna rack up some wins.

**Really? You don't think about how much you've accomplished?** What difference does it make whether you finish first, second, or third in all-time wins? I can't remember who I passed last time. Nobody's gonna catch Connie Mack [the manager of the Philadelphia Athletics for the first half of the twentieth century, who recorded 3,731 wins and 3,948 losses]. I don't think any managers look at that list, to be honest. I don't. It's nice when you see it somewhere, but I don't think about that. When you have good players, you're gonna have a lot of wins. I've got a big

ego. We all do. We wouldn't be managing if we didn't. But I've never let it get in the way of common sense in things like that. The game is still the players. We can get all the awards and all the accolades as managers, but honestly, without the players you're not gonna go very far. Managers do make a difference, there's no doubt about that. But the game is played by players.

**What's the prevailing retirement advice you've gotten?** I've been asking certain people, and they all say, "Keep going." Almost to the one. Or just, "Don't retire." Outside of baseball people, mostly. We'll see. It'll be fine. The good thing is I get to stick around the club a little bit.

**You must have a vacation or two you'd like to take.** I've been talking to the wife and we haven't come up with anything yet. Just kid around a little bit about going to Wyoming, or somewhere in the States we've never been. Stuff like that, you know. We've never been big vacation people. We go to Mexico—for four or five years we've gone there with a group of people we know, and that's been the extent of the travel. Well, we went to Europe about ten years ago and spent ten days, our first time there. But we've never been huge on vacations. I'm a novice hunter and pretty much a novice fisherman, but I like both. We do have ambitions to maybe go on a photographic safari somewhere. Shoot animals with a camera.

**Who were your idols growing up?** I liked [early 1960s Yankees manager] Ralph Houk a lot. Good guy, honest guy, common-sense guy. Type of guy you really wanted to go out and play hard for all the time. Stan Musial was my baseball idol when I grew up. They had a Cardinal affiliate in Fresno, California, and I used to follow the Cardinals like crazy through the newspapers. No TV, no radio, no nothing. So he became my player. I saw him play a little bit when I was in high school. I got to meet him when I was in the Texas leagues. He was done playing for the Cardinals and roving around all their farm teams and we were playing one of them. A couple of guys in our dugout went over to his dugout and listened to him. I was too embarrassed to open my mouth. He was a positive guy, though. That's why he was such a good hitter, boy. Everything was great.

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**Playing third for the Yankees—what was that like?** 1968, that was Mickey Mantle's last year. I couldn't wait to meet him. First year in the big leagues, get to play alongside Mickey—that was a big thrill. The problem was, I wasn't real good. So I didn't get to stay but a couple years. But they were great. Loved New York and the old stadium. Mantle was from Oklahoma, and I was born in Oklahoma. So he tried to help me as much as he could. The pats on the shoulders after striking out with the winning run at third, you know: "Hang in there. Do that too many more times, you'll be gone." Mickey was great, unlike some of the stuff that's been written about him. Mickey came to play. He was the only guy left on a bad team. We were a .500 team. No Marises, no Yogis, no Whiteys, no Howards. He was the only one with a group of basically triple A guys out there with him. He was everything hitting-wise and running-wise. Even then, he was still the fastest guy on the team.

**What was your most memorable moment with Mantle?** We turned a triple play, the last triple play the Yankees had. [Dooley] Womack to Cox to Mantle. Mickey was playing first. The shot back hit Womack, the pitcher. Throws to third, to me. Cox fires to Mantle. Triple play.

**Do you tell your grandkids stories like that?** There's fourteen of them, from age seventeen on down. I've never really had a chance to sit down with any of them much, to tell stories. The seventeen-year-old is somewhat of a player. We like to talk.

**What do you tell the young guys at spring training?** I told them today: You may not think you have a chance against a sixth-year free agent, but you never know what happens. [Journeyman pitcher] Chris Hammond had no chance of doing anything in baseball, basically, far as the baseball world was concerned, and he ended up leading the league in ERA as a reliever for us in 2002.

**Is it strange to be idolized now?** I haven't had anybody tell me I'm their idol. They might start digging in the past. Some teams have called [to discuss honoring Cox]. It's kind of uncomfortable, but I'm really appreciative of their effort to do something

like that. It's sure nice, but I've never wanted the attention.

**What individual Braves performances stand out in your memory?** I've gotta think about that. Glavine's [one-hitter] against the [Cleveland] Indians in the sixth game of the 1995 World Series, when we clinched. For eight innings. Stuff like that. Lot of great performances from Maddux and Smoltz, too. Those three can stand out pretty easily.

**You've been ejected from games more than any other manager in league history. Do you have a move left to show the umpires?** I don't have any moves. It just depends on the moment. We've had some feisty players over the years. When they get into it, I've gotta get into it. All those ejections are just a matter of longevity.

**How have you liked living in Atlanta?** Atlanta is a great place to live. I came here in the winter of '77. Million and a half people back then. Wasn't many. I think I remember I-75 had two lanes on each side;

now it's six. Lots of sports people here, even from other teams. It's a good town.

**Do you still take early morning walks before games on the road?** I didn't last year. I had my knees done. I intend to this year, though. Early morning walks are great: Get up at six, let's go. I used to walk with Frank Fultz, the [former] strength and conditioning guy. And one of our stat guys. We'd meet and take off. Got to see the cities that way. If you don't do that, it's ballpark to hotel. Hotel to ballpark. Then the airport. We'd walk for an hour, maybe. Used to walk a lot. Central Park and the streets of New York. Chicago was a favorite, too.

**Are you the kind of person who has regrets?** No. I've done the best I could. Given it everything I've got. And that's all I ask my players for. I've never thought about how I'll be remembered. Honest to God. I mean, how would I know? Working hard and being fair, I guess.

**You worked with one of the greatest general managers in the game, John Schuer-**

**holz, throughout most of your managing career. Have you been lucky?** I met John years before we worked together. And we've always hit it off pretty good. We think more or less the same way, and look for the same kind of players: talent, makeup, and professionalism. I was lucky working for John when I first started. Bill Lucas was the guy who gave me my first chance. I've been lucky to have good GMs and good players.

**I understand you've also coached a little softball.** My daughter's team! That was a long time ago. My wife did most of the softball coaching. I was out there, though. I'll go see some of those games around the neighborhood. I still like that. To watch young kids play, girls and boys. It's fun. But watching your kids play is more nerve-racking than the last pitch of the seventh game of the World Series. You'll go through it. You'll see it. Pressure. My kids did good.

**What are you doing after training ends today?** Don't know what I'm doing. Better call the wife and see. Once the games start, it's over. ■

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