
Bill McKechnie's World Champion Reds

by Robert P. Domanski

The eleven years from 1927 to 1937 were the worst in the annals of the Cincinnati Reds, a team which had already made history back in 1869 when it stepped upon the diamond as the nation's first professional baseball club. The Depression years were as ill-fortuned for the Reds as they were for the whole country. In this decade, the club never rose above the second division, and finished an ignominious last in five of eleven seasons. Even changes in personnel – new owners, new presidents, new general managers, new managers, new players – didn't help, though there were a few dim rays of hope. Under Manager Charlie Dressen the team moved from last place in 1934 to sixth in 1935. When they moved up to fifth in 1936 and acquired a promising young general manager, Warren C. Giles, expectations were high for the 1937 season, but to the disappointment of Cincinnati fans the Reds fell back into the basement.

How those lowly Reds climbed from the doldrums of eighth place in the National League to heights attained by no other Cincinnati team before or since is an exciting story indeed. The start of the new era was marked by the arrival of Bill McKechnie, the manager who was to lead the Reds to two pennants and a world championship within the next three years. Credit for acquiring McKechnie is due primarily to General Manager Giles, who had come to know McKechnie in 1929 when they both were associated with Rochester of the International League. Giles told Powel Crosley, Jr., then president and owner of the Reds, "There's no question in my mind that McKechnie is the smartest manager in baseball today. He knows the game, and above all, how to handle men." Crosley answered, "If it's money that will make the difference, go to the limit to get him."¹ Since four other major league clubs were bidding for McKechnie's services, Giles did have to go to the limit. The new manager signed a two-year contract which called for a salary of \$25,000 a year plus a possible bonus of \$5,000 if the home attendance exceeded the low 1937 figure of 450,000, or if the Reds finished in the first division.²

William Boyd McKechnie was born on August 7, 1887, in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania. He had had an undistinguished thirteen-year career as a third baseman with several major league clubs. In 1922 he became manager of the Pittsburgh Pirates and brought Pittsburgh the National League pennant in 1925. His Pirates went on to defeat the Washington Senators in the World

Series. The following season the Pirates dropped back to third, for the fourth time in McKechnie's five years with the club. In 1928 McKechnie moved on to manage the St. Louis Cardinals and promptly led that team to a National League championship. He was fired by the club, however, because the team lost the World Series to the Yankees in four straight games. The Cardinals realized their mistake and rehired McKechnie in the middle of 1929, but Bill was disenchanted with the St. Louis organization and decided to accept the challenge of managing the lowly Boston Braves.

Many baseball fans believe that in Boston McKechnie did the best managing of his career.³ This club was perennially picked by sportswriters to finish seventh or eighth, but in his eight seasons with the Braves McKechnie's teams consistently came in fourth or fifth, bringing Boston its only two first-division places in more than a decade. Boston's fifth-place finish in 1937 with a team almost devoid of talent won for McKechnie the *Sporting News* award as Manager of the Year in the National League.

McKechnie's nickname, "the Deacon," suited him perfectly, not only because of his church activities but also because of his air of dignity and his entire way of life. Very religious, a man of great character, McKechnie was an elder in his Methodist church and sang in the church choir. Quiet and studious off the field, the conservative McKechnie nearly always played percentage baseball. He once said:

*This is a percentage game. If you play it according to the odds, you're bound to do all right. The only thing we can do is play a percentage that has been established over a period of years. That way we make our own breaks and take them when they come.*⁴

Under McKechnie the Reds jumped all the way to fourth place in 1938. Important trades that year added new players to the club such as second baseman Lonnie Frey, catcher Willard Hershberger, and pitcher Bucky Walters. Rookies Frank McCormick (first base) and Harry Craft (center field) joined returning regulars – Ernie Lombardi (catcher), Billy Myers (shortstop), Ival Goodman (right field), and Paul Derringer (pitcher). McCormick won Rookie of the Year honors and Lombardi was named Most Valuable Player in the National League, but the sustained performances of both these stars were overshadowed by the most spectacular of all pitching feats, Johnny Vander Meer's back-to-back no-hitters.

Early in the 1939 season sportswriters recognized the potential of the Reds, especially after the acquisition of third baseman Bill Werber from the Philadelphia Athletics, and most predicted the Cincinnati team would win the pennant. Bucky Walters, who finished the season with a 27-11 pitching record, joined Lombardi from the previous year in being named Most Valuable Player in the league. Few people were surprised when the Reds clinched the 1939

The three strategists who realized the glory of a world championship—Bill McKechnie, left, master of managerial psychology; Powel Crosley, Jr., below, astute president; Warren Giles, bottom, far-seeing general manager.



pennant in a thrilling four-game series with the St. Louis Cardinals in the last week of the season. Thus Bill McKechnie became the only manager ever to win three pennants in three different cities: Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Cincinnati.

It was then the Reds' misfortune to face the powerful New York Yankees in the 1939 World Series. The American League champions completely humiliated the Reds, not only by capturing the series in four straight games but also by winning the final game with a come-from-behind victory highlighted by Ernie Lombardi's "dying swan act." This bizarre play, one of the most famous in the history of baseball, occurred in the tenth inning when Charlie Keller, scoring on a single by Joe DiMaggio, collided with the Reds' catcher at home-plate. Lombardi dropped the ball and as he lay prostrate on the ground DiMaggio circled the bases and scored the run which ended the series.⁵

Following the humiliating defeat by the Yankees, rumors were rife that many Reds would soon be traded. Commenting on those rumors, most of them unfounded, Giles said, "It's funny to get back [from a hunting trip in Canada] and find that while I've been gone, all the bleacher coaches have traded my team away. Hope none of 'em made a bad deal!"⁶ The most obvious target of the rumors was "Snooze" Lombardi.⁷ One of the major reasons Lombardi was not traded was his considerable popular following, which probably stemmed from the days when he was the only Red who gave the fans something to cheer about.⁸ A Cincinnati baseball writer conducted his own poll on whether the Reds should trade Lombardi, and the response was 945 to 23 to keep him. A letter signed by fifty employees of a local firm stated in part:

*We not only want to see Lombardi on the 1940 Redleg team, but we demand it. It is the consensus of opinion that Lombardi is the best catcher in the National league [sic]—not 'one of the best.'*⁹

Bill McKechnie knew some changes were needed, but he diplomatically called it building up the team, not tearing it down. He especially wanted another dependable pitcher to back up Bucky Walters and a consistent outfielder to replace the aging Wally Berger. The pitcher he chose was Joe Beggs, who had a record of 3-2 with the Yankees the year before. "I saw Beggs pitch in Newark in 1938," stated McKechnie, "and I like his curve ball. I don't care what his record is. I like his style and stuff."¹⁰ To get Beggs the Reds had to give up Lee Grissom, who had a record of 9-7 in 1939. Two other additions to the Reds' mound staff were Jim Turner, whom the Reds got from the Boston Bees for first baseman Les Scarsella, and Elmer Riddle, a rookie southpaw who would one day become the ace of the Reds' staff.

As the season approached it became more and more apparent that the best prospect for left field was Mike McCormick, a young rookie from the Reds' Indianapolis farm club. McCormick was an example of how beneficial a team's farm club could be. In January of 1940, Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain

Landis tried to get rid of the farm system because it was “evil and . . . imperiling players’ essential rights.”¹¹ Judge Landis did not succeed, largely due to the efforts of Warren Giles, who admitted the system could be abused but who also realized that:

Through the medium of the farm system alone are thousands of players given opportunities each year. For every one player whose advancement may be retarded because of some abuse of the farm system, there are, I believe, ten who are given an opportunity to advance solely because their services are controlled by clubs of common ownership. The independently operated club can retard the player’s advancement by placing an unreasonably high price-tag on his services.¹²

As usual, Ernie Lombardi was a salary contract holdout in the spring of 1940.¹³ He was joined by shortstop Billy Myers, who threatened to quit baseball altogether unless the Reds increased their original offer. Both eventually signed, Myers with the comment, “I got what I wanted.” Lombardi made up for time lost by working hardest in spring training camp; the dying swan had something to prove. Nevertheless, the press would not let the incident of the past October be forgotten. As the Reds returned to Crosley Field from the South, headlines on the sports pages read, “Lombardi Returns to Spot Where He Took Nap.”

In the spring of 1940 McKechnie dared to say, “We are definitely the club to beat for the pennant.”¹⁴ Most sports writers disagreed, calculating the Reds would finish second behind the St. Louis Cardinals, the Reds’ formidable opposition in 1939. No National League team had ever lost four straight in a World Series and made a comeback the following year.

The Reds won their opening-day game from the Cubs, 2 to 1, their first opening-day victory in nine years. Throughout the first half of the season the lead bounced back and fourth among the Reds, the Giants, and the Dodgers. Bucky Walters kept the Reds in the thick of the race by winning his first nine games in a row, much to the surprise of those who had predicted he would falter after his fabulous 27-11 record in 1939. Johnny Vander Meer experienced more arm trouble, and late in June he was sent to the farm club to try to regain his old form.

By the All-Star game the Reds were out in front to stay, though their lead was too slim for them to know it at the time. That 1940 All-Star exhibition was the first shut-out in the eight-year history of the mid-season classic, and, surprisingly, it was the National League which whitewashed the American. Bill McKechnie was the winning manager and the big four of his men — Paul Derringer, Bucky Walters, Ernie Lombardi, and Frank McCormick — played for the victorious team.

On August 3, 1940, the baseball world was shocked by the news that Willard

Hershberger, the Reds' popular substitute catcher, had committed suicide in a Boston hotel. Although his family had a history of suicides, Hershberger's death was as puzzling as it was shocking, because it was completely unexpected.¹⁵ He had been playing more and more regularly, and his batting average was a respectable .309 when he took his life. The only reasonable explanation for the tragedy was that Hershberger was more sensitive than was generally known, and he blamed himself, quite unfairly, for two recent losses, one when he called for a pitch that was hit for a game-winning home run, and one when he went hitless in five at-bats. The Reds were noticeably shaken by the loss of their teammate, but they maintained their hold on first place and vowed to "win for Hershy."¹⁶

In early September Vander Meer came back to the Reds and won several important games, including the one which clinched the pennant. When the team had secured the pennant in 1939 the whole city joined in the celebration, but in 1940 they were ahead by eleven games and the event was accepted with relative calmness, despite the fact that the pennant-clinching game was won in the thirteenth inning.

Many factors enabled the Cincinnati Reds to gain that second consecutive pennant, one being the great balance and depth of the club, even greater than in 1939. The Reds' pitching staff of Walters, Derringer, Turner, and Beggs came through with outstanding performances all year.¹⁷ The 1940 team had the same talented infield as in the previous season: Frank McCormick, Lonnie Frey, Bill Werber, and Billy Myers. Eddie Joost, the fine utility man, could fill in anywhere. In September Ernie Lombardi sprained his ankle, and without Willard Hershberger, the catching chores fell to Jimmy Wilson, the forty-year-old coach whose playing days were long behind him. The position which gave McKechnie more problems than all others combined was left field. After much juggling of positions and player trades, McKechnie finally found the solution when he got Jimmy Ripple from the Dodgers. Ripple's contract was purchased for the waiver price of \$7,500 — a steal considering that the Reds had already spent approximately \$200,000 in the past two years trying to find a capable left fielder.¹⁸

In 1940 the Reds had phenomenal success in double-headers and in close ball games. Several games were rained out in the first few weeks of the campaign, forcing more double-headers than usual. By July the Reds had won ten twin-bills and split the other four for an incredible record of 24-4. In 1938 the Reds had lost the pennant because they could not win many close games, but by 1940 the same players were veterans, and thanks to great pitching, great defense, and "punch in the pinch," the Reds won forty-one of their one hundred victories by one run.¹⁹ They lost only seventeen one-run games.²⁰ Between August 25 and September 4, in the heart of their drive for the pennant, the Reds won ten games, nine of them by the margin of one run. McKechnie's strategy of playing for one run is shown by the fact that the Reds used the



The 1939 pennant triumph was the last hurrah for the Reds that season. After the series Ernie Lombardi, everybody's favorite, was dubbed the "dying swan."

sacrifice bunt 125 times in 1940, 38 more times than any other club.

The Reds captured the pennant in 1940 by the widest margin in the National League since 1931 (twelve games), despite the fact that they finished fifth in team batting. Lombardi (.319), Frank McCormick (.309), and Mike McCormick (.300) were the only regulars who batted .300 or better. The Reds allowed the fewest runs in the league and their fielding percentage of .981 was the highest in the league's history. Their total of 117 errors was eighteen less than any other team had ever made in the National League.

Ohio fans wanted to see an all-Ohio World Series between the Reds and the Cleveland Indians – many felt it would pit Derringer's control against Bob Feller's speed – but the Detroit Tigers finished one game ahead of the Indians. The Tigers were formidable foes with stars such as Hank Greenberg, Bobo Newsom, Charlie Gehringer, Rudy York, and Pinky Higgins.

The Reds were strengthened by the return of Johnny Vander Meer but were weakened at two other key spots by injuries to Lonnie Frey and Ernie Lombardi. Eddie Joost replaced Frey at second, and for catcher McKechnie had to choose between the forty-year-old Jimmy Wilson and two rookies, Bill Baker and Dick West. He chose to go with the veteran and Wilson met the challenge. A near-tragedy was averted in the last week of the regular season when Billy Myers announced that he was quitting the team for personal reasons and would not play in the World Series. Warren Giles pleaded, cajoled, and threatened, and finally Myers rejoined the team.²¹

Paul Derringer was McKechnie's choice to start the opening game in Cincinnati – but the game was over almost as soon as it started, when the Tigers jumped on Derringer for five runs in the second inning and went on to win, 7 to 2. The game marked McKechnie's ninth World Series loss in a row, counting four with the Pirates in 1928 and the four the Reds lost to the Yankees in 1939. The winning pitcher was the colorful and controversial Bobo Newsom, who had compiled a 21-5 record in 1940, the best of his long career.

Bucky Walters restored the confidence of Reds fans when he tossed a three-hitter to win the second game, 5 to 3. The margin of victory was Jimmy Ripple's two-run homer in the third inning. The only player on either side to get two hits was Jimmy Wilson.

The team went on to Detroit for the third game, and the Tigers delighted their fans with a 7 to 4 victory. Tommy Bridges was the winning pitcher and Jim Turner was the loser.

Derringer won the first World Series victory of his career as the Reds took the fourth game, 5 to 2. The Reds scored two runs in the first inning and were led to victory by the first four men in their lineup – Werber, Mike McCormick, Goodman, and Frank McCormick – who collected two hits each.

Bobo Newsom opposed Gene Thompson in the fifth game. The Reds managed to get only three singles, and the Tigers won the game, 8 to 0.

Thus the series returned to Cincinnati with the Reds down, three games to

two, but with their aces, Walters and Derringer, well rested to pitch the last two games. The sixth game was all Bucky Walters as he pitched a five-hitter and scored the game's lone home run. The Reds tied the series with a 4 to 0 victory, setting up the seventh and final game.

The players were understandably tense before the final game, sitting around the clubhouse pounding the pockets of their gloves with their fists. It was in that situation that Bill McKechnie came up with one of his masterpieces of psychology. Instead of giving his players a detailed game plan, McKechnie leisurely leaned against a post in the clubhouse and told them, "Fellas, this is the last game and you deserve the difference between winning and losing. Let's go out and get it."²²

It was up to Paul Derringer in that final game. His opponent was Bobo Newsom, who had already pitched two masterful victories for the Tigers, but who was pitching with only two days' rest. It looked like Newsom was headed for his third win of the series after the Tigers scored an unearned run in the third on Werber's throwing error. Then came the bottom of the seventh inning, with Frank McCormick sending a double to left. Jimmy Ripple then hit a drive to right-center which Bruce Campbell, the Tiger right fielder, almost caught. McCormick, who had to wait to see if the ball would be caught, was almost thrown out at the plate. Dick Bartell, the Detroit shortstop, handled the relay, but the crowd was yelling so loudly that Bartell couldn't hear his teammates hollering to throw the ball home. Jimmy Wilson sacrificed Ripple to third, and a moment later Ripple scored the winning run on Billy Myers' sacrifice to deep center field. Derringer bore down in the eighth and ninth innings, and after twenty-one years the Reds again were world champions. The 2 to 1 victory in the final game gave the National League its first World Series winner since the St. Louis Gashouse Gang's triumph of 1934.

Immediately after the final out, the fans in Cincinnati let loose in spontaneous and uninhibited celebration. Streetcars were overturned, traffic came to a standstill, and people danced in the streets. Several were thrown into the Tyler Davidson Fountain, and according to some of the oldest bartenders in Cincinnati more liquor was consumed in the Queen City that night than at any other time in the city's history.

There was widespread debate concerning the real hero of the series. Should it be Derringer, who won two games, including the final one? Should it be Bucky Walters, who won the other two games with a three-hitter and a five-hitter? Bill Werber's .370 batting average was the highest on either team, and his fielding was spectacular. Jimmy Ripple batted .333, hit a home run, and led the Reds in runs-batted-in with six. One sports editor nominated the fans whose vociferous yelling prevented Dick Bartell from hearing his teammates' pleas to throw the ball to home.²³ But the real hero had to be Jimmy Wilson, whose performance in the 1940 World Series won for him the admiration of all baseball fans. Wilson ached all over and limped on both legs, yet he was

The 44 victories of Paul Derringer, left, and Bucky Walters, right, had aroused Cincinnati's enthusiasm for the 1940 encounter with the Tigers.



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able to catch six of the seven games, thanks to yards of tape and several kinds of liniment.²⁴ Wilson batted .353 for the entire series, but he was especially invaluable in the last game when he went two-for-two, sacrificed the winning run to third base, and at forty years of age stole the only base of the series.²⁵ Knowing that Wilson, bothered by two charley horses in his right leg, was playing at his peak, Bill McKechnie remarked during one game, "Just look at him. What if a manager had a whole team of players with hearts like Jimmy's?"²⁶

The Reds realized a net profit of \$135,000 from the World Series after \$45,000 in expenses had been paid. Joseph S. Turner, manager of the Greater Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce convention department, estimated the city realized at least one million dollars from the series.²⁷

Bill McKechnie was generous in praising his associates after the 1940 season. He mentioned the scouting of Jewel Ens as an important contribution to the victory over the Tigers, and credited Warren Giles: "You must have champions in your organization to have a championship team. Mr. Giles furnished the champions."²⁸

For years one of the major criticisms of Bill McKechnie was his inflexibility: he almost always went by the book and his actions were almost completely predictable.²⁹ But experts in the hot stove league praised McKechnie for varying his usual practice of percentage playing, in the seventh inning of the World Series. After Frank McCormick led off the bottom of the seventh with a double, everyone figured McKechnie would have Jimmy Ripple sacrifice McCormick to third. McKechnie, expecting a high pitch which is difficult to bunt, remembered that earlier in the series Ripple had hit a home run on a high pitch. Accordingly, he instructed him to slug the ball. Ripple doubled home the tying run, was sent to third by Wilson's sacrifice, and scored the winning run on Myers' sacrifice fly.

After the season the Reds dominated the votes for the Most Valuable Player award in the National League. Frank McCormick won the award, Bucky Walters came in third, and Paul Derringer was fourth.³⁰ The season had not been McCormick's best offensively, but his excellent defense and general leadership gave him the nod. McCormick was the best defensive first baseman in the league, and he batted .309 and had 127 runs batted in. McCormick led the National League in hits for the third year in a row (191), led in doubles (44), and stretched his string of consecutive games to 462.³¹ For the first time in the history of the National League, members of the same team won the Most Valuable Player award for three consecutive years — Lombardi in 1938, Walters in 1939, and McCormick in 1940. Jimmy Wilson was named comeback athlete of the year. The Associated Press sports editors voted the Reds' pennant and World Series victories as the outstanding team performance of 1940, usurping this honor from the New York Yankees who had won the award for the past four years.

Despite the team's performance, Crosley Field attendance in 1940 had dropped to 850,180, a decrease of 131,263 from 1939. The big lead which the Reds captured early and maintained throughout the season was probably the cause for this lack of interest. The Reds realized a net profit of \$274,051 in 1940, less than the year before, but enough to pay off the remainder of their pre-1938 debts and still have some left.³² President Powel Crosley, Jr., declared a dividend of twelve dollars per share on the baseball club's common stock. When some stockholders complained that the dividends should be higher, Crosley countered that it was wiser to keep a reserve fund which would provide funds for new acquisitions, the farm system, and improved scouting.³³

Except for the death of Willard Hershberger, the 1940 season was a highly gratifying one for Reds fans, players, and administrative personnel. A second consecutive pennant was followed by the Reds' first world championship since the Black Sox gave them the 1919 World Series.³⁴ The future of the Reds looked bright indeed as the 1941 campaign approached, but they were never again to enjoy a season as successful and dramatically exciting as 1940.

ROBERT P. DOMANSKI recently completed a Master's thesis on "The McKechnie Era: A History of the Cincinnati Reds, 1938-1946," at Miami University (Ohio).

- (1) Cincinnati *Enquirer*, Oct. 10, 1937, 1.
- (2) Hamilton (Ohio) *Journal*, Jan. 22, 1938, 14; *Ibid.*, June 17, 1938, 12.
- (3) Lee Allen and Tom Meany, *Kings of the Diamond: The Immortal in Baseball's Hall of Fame* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 229.
- (4) Charles B. Cleveland, *The Great Baseball Managers* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1950), 225.
- (5) Actually Lombardi had been kicked in the groin, but the fans thought he had just given up. Interview with Waite Hoyt (May 25, 1968).
- (6) Hamilton *Journal*, Oct. 27, 1939, 14.
- (7) This is a variation of Lombardi's real nickname "Schnozz," and it refers to his "dying swan act."
- (8) Interview with Warren C. Giles (June 28, 1968)
- (9) Hamilton *Journal*, Jan. 22, 1940, 8.
- (10) *Ibid.*, Jan. 5, 1940, 12.
- (11) *Ibid.*, Jan. 18, 1940, 14.
- (12) *Ibid.*
- (13) Baseball has a legal definition of the

- term "holdout"—a player who has not signed his contract by a certain date—but in this study the term refers to a player who refuses to sign the contract which his club offers him.
- (14) Hamilton *Journal*, April 8, 1940, 10.
 - (15) Interview with Si Burick (May 8, 1968).
 - (16) Hamilton *Journal*, Aug. 5, 1940, 8.
 - (17) Paul Derringer (22-12); Jim Turner (14-7); Joe Beggs (12-3); Bucky Walters (22-10) led the National League in 1940 in four departments—earned run average (2.48), most wins (22), most complete games (29), most innings pitched (305).
 - (18) Hamilton *Journal*, Dec. 28, 1940, 10.
 - (19) This broke the former record of 37 set by the Chicago Cubs in 1907 when the dead ball was used and the teams played for one run. *Ibid.*, Nov. 6, 1940, 14.
 - (20) The Reds' winning percentage of .707 in one-run games was also an all-time high. *Ibid.*, Dec. 9, 1940, 10.
 - (21) Interview with Giles.
 - (22) *Ibid.*

- (23) George Hutchinson, *Hamilton Journal*, Oct. 9, 1940, 12.
- (24) Interview with Giles.
- (25) After the game Wilson's wife asked for second base (the one Wilson stole) as a souvenir. The Reds' administration consented, and she took the bag home to Philadelphia. *Hamilton Journal*, Oct. 11, 1940, 14.
- (26) *Ibid.*, Oct. 9, 1940, 12.
- (27) Turner figured the average out-of-town visitor usually spent about twenty-five dollars per day, and since there were 10,000 people staying in local hotels and boarding houses to see the World Series, the amount spent in four days would be approximately one million dollars. Money spent by those who came to town for just the day was not included in the estimate. *Cincinnati Times-Star*, Oct. 10, 1940, 23.
- (28) *Hamilton Journal*, Oct. 16, 23, 1940, 12.
- (29) Interview with Edwin Morgan, former mayor of Oxford, Ohio, and longtime Reds fan (June 25, 1968).
- (30) Johnny Mize was second.
- (31) McCormick had not missed a single game in his three years in the majors.
- (32) Interview with Giles.
- (33) Since Crosley knew very little about baseball, his answer was probably dictated by others in the Reds' front office, especially General Manager Giles, who made it his practice to be as concerned about the future as he was about the present.
- (34) The Reds defeated the Chicago White Sox in the 1919 World Series, but the victory was tainted by scandal.