

Major player

Metro among Kitty heros who made the 'bigs'

For Charlie Metro, whose entire adult life has been wrapped around professional baseball, the Kitty League reunion wasn't much of a reunion.

He had never seen Brooks Stadium, built a full decade after his departure from the Class D minor league that was the biggest thing going in western Kentucky sports in the first half of the 20th Century.

And he didn't know anyone there.

"I'm the only guy here from 1939," said Metro, who went on

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to a career as a major league player, manager and scout after helping the Mayfield Browns to the Kitty League championship that year. "But it's nice that the league is remembered. We had a lot of fun playing baseball."

For many future major leaguers, aside from the camaraderie and friendships established with coaches and teammates, the Kitty League was simply another summer spent in the heartland of America.

Yet for Metro, the only Major League alumnus who could make it to this weekend's reunion, his five months spent here turned into a life-altering experience.

Metro met his wife of 62 years, the former Helen Bullock, that summer with their relationship blossoming and his season ending just as Germany's Nazi army invaded Poland to start a European conflict that eventually grew into World War II.

They were married the next summer while Metro played in Texarkana, Texas, on a team in

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Photo supplied by Sam Jackson

First Chiefs: The 1903 Paducah Kitty League team poised for this photo, with manager John S. Jackson at center. Charlie Hall Jackson (front) was team mascot. See a Kitty League timeline, page 4B.

Kitty League

100 years

1903-2003



Still got it: Former Paducah Chief Gene Puckett (above) takes a swing at Adrian Roof's pitch (right) during Friday's home run derby at Brooks Stadium, where the former players poised for a team picture (below).

LANCE DENNEE/The Sun



A Paducah Chiefs uniform was among the memorabilia on display.



Timeline

Kitty League's 7 lives

Information provided by Kevin McCann's kittyleague.com website:

■ **1903-5:** The league's original teams include Paducah, Hopkinsville, Henderson, Owensboro, Cairo, Clarksville and Jackson. After two successful seasons the league's '05 season is shortened by a yellow fever epidemic.

■ **1906:** Attempts to revive the league last just one incomplete season.

■ **1910-14:** The league gets off to a better start, but in the middle of its fourth season disbands.

■ **1916:** Another short life as the league disbands in August after attempts to renew it.

■ **1922-24:** A disputed second half title leads to hard feelings between the teams and closes down the league in a three-year restart.

■ **1935-42:** The Kitty League makes its strongest showing with an 8-year span that is interrupted by wartime travel restrictions and low finances in 1942.

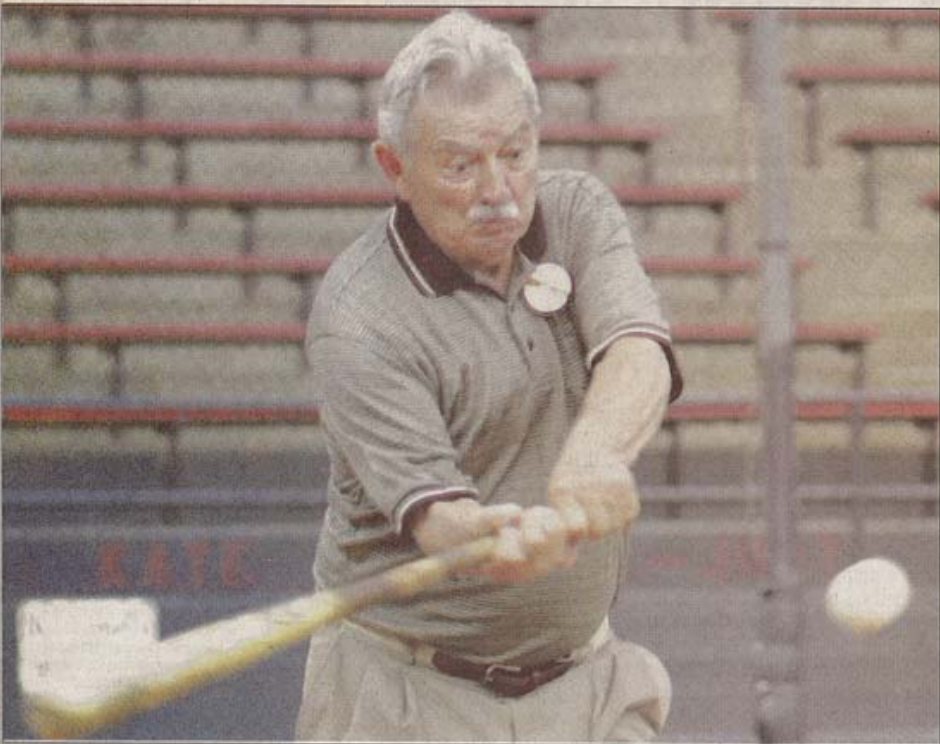
■ **1946-55:** The league has its best years with a 10-year span of success, including the 1947 and 1948 season when nearly 350,000 fans attend its games. Owensboro is a dominant team and Paducah is not a member of the league.

■ **1948:** Paducah's J. Polk Brooks builds a 2,500-seat stadium as home for the Paducah Chiefs, a minor league affiliate of the St. Louis Cardinals. The team initially plays in the Missouri Valley League.

■ **1951:** The Paducah Chiefs move to the Kitty League.

■ **1952:** The Paducah Chiefs draw 60,000 fans in 54 home games to Brooks Stadium, the franchise's most successful season.

■ **1955:** The Kitty League folds, attracting just 120,000 fans. Paducah is the league's strongest franchise, and final league champion.



LANCE DENNIE/The Sun

Big league swing: Former Mayfield Kitty League star Charlie Metro takes a cut at a pitch during the Kitty League Reunion home run derby at Brooks Stadium.

Metro made big league leap

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the Class C Cotton States League.

Nearly sixty-three years later, they're still together.

"I'm from coal country in western Pennsylvania," Metro said. "I told the people back home I picked a flower of the South."

Now 85, Metro fondly recalls his summer well spent here.

"That was a pretty good year," he said. "Fulton had three or four guys that made the major leagues. Hopkinsville had a left-handed pitcher that made it."

Among his Mayfield teammates were a pair of future big leaguers, outfielder Jim Russell (played for three National League teams from 1942-51) and shortstop Vern Stephens, a power-hitting shortstop with the St. Louis Browns in the 1940s and one of the best players to ever come through the Kitty League.

The off-the-field memories are nice, too, but this was no "Bull Durham" kind of romance. Metro, a youngster with a future, was no

Crash Davis, hanging on for a final hurrah.

And the future Helen Metro was no Annie Savoy — he didn't meet her at the ballpark.

"I kind of eye-balled her for a while," Metro said. "Her father owned a taxi service in Mayfield, and I met her when we went into town."

From there, his career took him to brief stops with Detroit and the old Philadelphia Athletics, then a long career as a coach, manager and scout. He managed the Cubs in 1962 and the Royals in 1970, their second season, before moving into the front office and helping build the great Kansas City clubs of the 1970s.

Metro, who retired from baseball in 1984 after a tenure as one of the Dodgers' top national scouts, was only one of the Kitty League's success stories. Red Schoendienst, the legendary Cardinal player and manager, passed through Union City, Tenn., in 1942.

Tony Kubek was Owensboro's

shortstop just before the league shut down for good in 1955. Future major league manager Jim Frey was a slugging outfielder for Paducah in 1951. Chuck Tanner, manager of the "We are Fam-a-lee" Pirates, was a Kitty League alumnus.

As someone who was saw major league baseball's transition through seven decades, Metro saw the minor leagues change for the worse.

Football and basketball started to siphon off many of America's best athletes, further opening the way for players of Latin heritage. He was in the forefront of that with the Dodgers, who opened the first baseball academy in the Dominican Republic.

"A lot of these leagues died out, and it took away a lot of competition," Metro said. "Baseball misses that competition. I'm not saying the quality of play has gone down, but the competition (for prospects) has because there are fewer people playing."