



Tribune file photo by JIM REED

Al Lopez, Tampa's first member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, relaxes in the living room of his Tampa home in 2003. This August, Lopez will be joined in the Hall of Fame by Wade Boggs, Tampa's second inductee.

El Señor SPEAKS

Interview by MARK STANG

Tampa native Al Lopez, at 96, is the oldest living member of the Baseball Hall of Fame. His career has spanned much of the history of professional baseball. To this day, he can tell you the players, the dates and the details of an era known for Sunday double-headers and travel by train.

Lopez became a major-league catcher in 1928, a year before the stock market crash that caused the Great Depression. It was a time without free agency or agents. It also was a time when a ballplayer played for whatever a team would pay him, or he went home, grabbed a lunch pail and went to work.

Lopez played against the giants of the game: Dizzy Dean, Rogers Hornsby, Mel Ott and Hack Wilson. He saw Babe Ruth bat and Carl Hubbell pitch. He even caught the legendary Walter Johnson as a high school kid in Tampa.

Lopez was one of baseball's first famous Latinos, earning the nickname "el Señor." When he retired from playing in 1947, Lopez held the record (since broken) for most games caught in major-league history.

Later, as a manager, Lopez won pennants with the Cleveland Indians in 1954 and the Chicago White Sox in 1959. Too often, though, the New York Yankees spoiled his seasons. Nine second-place finishes earned him another nickname: "Bridesmaid."

Lopez, who has a park named after him on North Dale Mabry, lives in a modest waterfront home off Westshore Boulevard. Recently he talked about his career with baseball historian Mark Stang, husband of Tribune editorial page editor Rosemary Goudreau.

Stang is writing a book on the Washington Senators, the team that gave Lopez his first taste of spring training at Plant Field in 1925. Plant Field now is home to the University of Tampa.

Here, in edited excerpts of the conversation, Tampa's original Hall of Famer talks about his career.

Al Lopez tells his stories from baseball's golden age.



Photo from Alan Feinberg collection

Q: Tampa has developed a reputation as a hotbed of baseball talent: Doc Gooden, Gary Sheffield, Wade Boggs. But you were the first real talent to come out of Tampa.

A: It was a miracle. It was just one of those things that happened. You know, here I am, 15-16 years old. I was catching high school.

This newspaper man came to see me one day. There used to be this newspaper, *La Tradicion* in Ybor City, that used to cover the city like *La Gaceta* does now.

I was playing in this series and I happened to be playing pretty good. He liked something about me.

"Al," he said, "Will you go and try out with the Tampa Smokers?"

I said, "Are you crazy? You want me to play with the professionals?"

I used to jump over the fence to try and get in for nothing at Plant Field to see them play. I says, "I'll go out."

He sent me downtown. There was a cigar store, *The Horse-shoe*.

He sent me down there to see this guy to get a contract — Doc Nash. So I go down there

and Doc Nash is forming this club and says, "You want to try out for us?"

"Yeah, I'd like to try it."

He says, "How much do you want?"

I didn't know anything about contracts.

He says, "How about \$150 a month?"

I said, "That's fine."

Q: Let's talk a little bit about you in Tampa as a young man. All the official baseball records have you being born Aug. 20, 1908. That's correct?

A: Right.

Q: Which would make you now 96 years old.

A: Yeah.

Q: Your father was born in Spain?

A: Right.

Q: And his name was Modesto? Like the city in California?

A: Yeah, Modesto. Means modest.

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A kid among giants.



The Plain Dealer (Cleveland)

In 1925, 16-year-old Al Lopez, left, gets pointers on catching from Washington Senators veteran Muddy Ruel. Above, as Cleveland's manager during spring training in Arizona in 1950, he poses for photographers in the ceremonial headdress of a local Indian tribe.

AL LOPEZ

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Q: And your mother was from Tampa?
A: No, she was from Spain also.

Q: And they met here?
A: No, they met in Spain. They went to Cuba. And my dad learned [to be] what they called the selector—he's the one that spread out the leaves of the tobacco. In those days, everything was made handmade and he was the one that handled the leaves. They had seven kids in Cuba. They came over to Tampa in 1906.

Q: How long were your parents in Cuba?

A: Well, they had seven kids, so they must have been there eight or nine years.

Q: Did your father continue to work in the cigar business in Tampa?

A: My dad, yeah.

Q: Your mother stayed at home?

A: Yes, she was a housewife. In those days, they stayed home and raised kids, nine altogether. I'm the last one left.

Q: Did your parents approve of your playing baseball as a young man?

A: My father did. My mother didn't get mixed up in anything like that. But my dad used to play handball and a type of jai-alai.

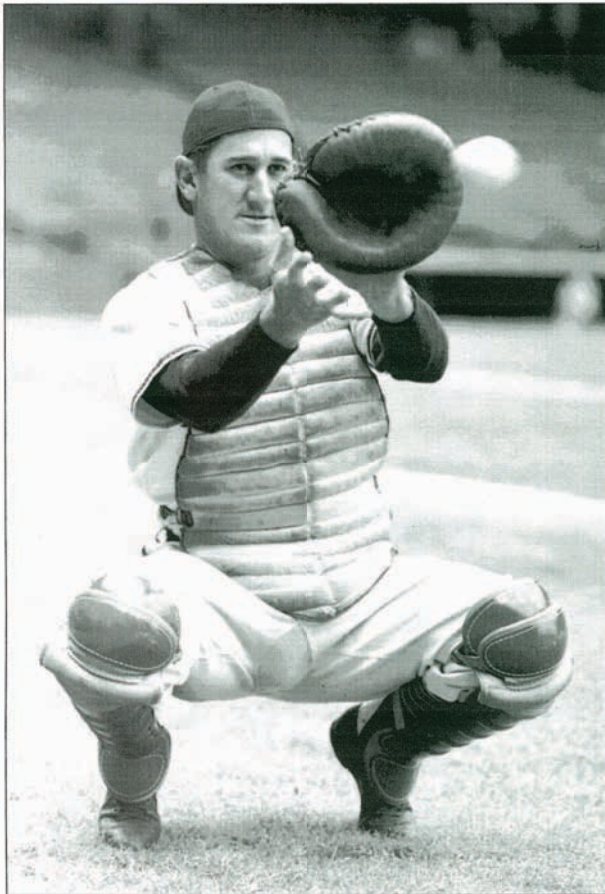
Q: So your father was a good athlete?

A: Nah. He mostly worked. The poor guy was trying to raise a family of eight or nine kids. All he did was work. He loved baseball. He finally came up with cancer of the throat and had to retire. He used to come out to watch me play.

We used to catch without a mask or nothing. The batter fouled one off and it cracked me right on the nose. In fact, my nose is still a little crooked. It hurt like hell, but I didn't say a thing to my father because my mother would've killed me.

For a while I didn't want to catch anymore because we didn't have a mask or nothing. So I pitched and I played short-stop. Then we went to play in back of the Cuban Club and there was nobody to catch, so I began catching again because they had masks.

Q: How, as a young high school player in Tampa, did you end up in a professional training camp with the Senators in 1925?
A: I was just a kid going to school. They used to stay at the Tampa Bay Hotel, where the



AP file photo

In 1947, Al Lopez retired from playing after 18 seasons as a major-league catcher. He ended his playing career with the Cleveland Indians, the team he would later manage and lead to an American League pennant.

University of Tampa is now. They had Muddy Ruel and Benny Tate as catchers, and they had a fellow by the name of "Pinky" Hargraves, the third-string catcher. That's all the catchers they had. So I had to go over and catch batting practice. They paid me \$40 a week.

Q: Forty a week?

A: Yeah, for my expenses, which was great. I would have done it for nothing. I would've done it just to have the Washington uniform to put on.

Q: As a 17-year-old kid, did you have any problems being around players who had just won the American League pennant?

A: No, no. The guy that was

very quiet, very well-respected was Walter Johnson. I remember that. And I think he was the hardest-working ballplayer I ever met in my whole career. I don't know if you're acquainted with Plant Field or not, but it's a quarter-mile track, and he used to run around there twice without stopping—at a good pace. Worked like a horse. He used to get Joe Judge or Sam Rice to hit him pepper. He'd stay just as long as it took to get a good workout.

Q: Did the Senators ever offer you a contract?

A: Mike Martin was the trainer for Washington and he kind of took a liking to me for some reason. I guess I was about the first one on the field and the last one to leave because I was

better off at Plant Field than someplace else. I think he suggested to the old man, team owner Clark Griffith, that he take me with them. He liked me, but they never extended a contract. Years later I saw Mr. Griffith at Griffith Stadium in Washington. He was sitting up in the bleachers with my manager, Max Carey, and they called me over. He says, "You know, I could've had you as a kid."

"Yes," I said. "I remember that very well."

Q: Did you ever play an exhibition game with the Senators?

A: At the end of the year, after they won the pennant, they came through Tampa. Walter Johnson picked a team, an all-star team, and they asked me if

I would catch Walter Johnson. I said, "I'll try." They wanted to attract all the people from Ybor City, all the cigar-makers. I caught Johnson that day. He pitched five innings. He was fast but easy to catch because he had real good control.

Q: You played for the Tampa Smokers in 1926, played with Jacksonville in '27, Macon in '28, then got called up to the Brooklyn Dodgers for the last week of the 1928 season.

A: Here I am, just a kid, never been out of the Tampa area. They called me to report to Ebbets Field on such-and-such a date. So I was thinking, "How am I going to get from the railroad station"—because in those days, there were no airplanes—"to Ebbets Field?" The only way I could think to get there was to take a taxicab. But I was very lucky. I ran into two players they had recalled from Atlanta on the train. I had been with them in spring training in Clearwater. Brooklyn used to train in Clearwater. They were in Clearwater for years. In fact, Mr. Ebbets used to have a home in Clearwater.

The year I went to Brooklyn, they had four catchers on the club. I said, "What chance do I have to even get in a ballgame? I don't know why they called me up." It was the day before the last day of the season and they were playing Pittsburgh. Burling Grimes was the pitcher for Pittsburgh. He was a spitball pitcher. I'd never seen a spitball pitcher in my life. And they put me in this lineup to hit against Burling Grimes in the major leagues. Here I had been a busher [bush-league player] in the minors.

The reason I got in was because Burleigh had been with Brooklyn and they didn't get along very well. One of the catchers for us spoke up and told our manager [Wilbert Robinson]: "Robby, what did you bring that young guy up for? Why don't you let him catch?" They didn't want to hit against Burling Grimes. That's the reason they put me in there, and I caught a doubleheader. I went 0 for 4, 0 for 4 and 0 for 4.

Q: You caught all nine innings of that game.
A: Yeah. And then caught the other game too.

Q: First day in the major leagues and you catch 19 innings. Let's talk about salaries. For the Smokers, you were paid \$150 a month. When you got to Brooklyn, do you remember how much you were paid?

A: I was getting \$5,000 a year. I thought that was big money. I was satisfied with \$5,000. Who is going to make \$5,000 in those days? But they called me to the office. They told me, "We appreciate you didn't come up here asking for a

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Mark Stang's book "Senators Snapshots, 70 Years of Washington Senators Photos," is due out in September from Orange Frazer Press. Stang, a native of the Minneapolis/St. Paul area, is a member of the Society of American Baseball Research and author of these earlier books:

- "Cardinals Collection, 100 Years of St. Louis Cardinals Images" (Orange Frazer Press, 2002)
- "Cubs Collection, 100 Years of Chicago Cubs Images" (Orange Frazer Press, 2001)
- "Indians Illustrated, 100 Years of Cleveland Indians Photos" (Orange Frazer Press, 2000)
- "Reds in Black and White, 100 Years of Cincinnati Reds Images" (Road West Publishing, 1999), co-authored with Greg Rhodes
- "Baseball By The Numbers, A Guide to Major-League Player Uniform Numbers" (Scarecrow Press, 1996), co-authored with Linda Harkness



raise. "I didn't have any idea of asking for a raise. I was tickled to death to be there. So he says, 'I tell you what we're going to do. We want to sign you up for next year.' I said, 'Fine.' He says, 'We're going to double your salary, to \$10,000, and we're going to give you a \$2,500 bonus.' So I'm going to be the big businessman and I say, 'I'm going to have to think this over.'" I knew damn well I was going to take it.

Q: As a rookie in Brooklyn in 1930, you caught 128 games and batted .309, the highest batting average of your career. You were playing for Wilbert Robinson, "Uncle Robby." You played for a lot of Hall of Fame managers.

A: And I roomed with a lot of Hall of Famers.

Q: You played under Wilbert Robinson, Max Carey, Casey Stengel, Bill McKechnie and Frankie Frisch. Every one of those guys is in the Hall of Fame. Do you think as a player in those days you learned some things that helped you later as a manager?

A: Different traits, these different things that they do. I think that Robinson was great. He loved young players. He was a guy that if he liked you, he played you. Playing is the way you become a player. I was very lucky. I was under Carey. Carey was a guy who liked to steal bases. After that I played for Casey Stengel. Casey was all

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EL SEÑOR SPEAKS

AL LOPEZ

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right with young kids. He wanted to teach, and he talked a hell of a lot. He fit in perfectly in New York because he talked all the time. And he was a good friend of mine.

Then I played for McKechnie. I thought McKechnie was a fine manager.

Q: You went to Pittsburgh during the war years, from '40 to '46. You had Frankie Frisch, "The Flash," as your manager. A: Frank was an offensive manager. Pretty good manager. Not very good with pitching. McKechnie was great with pitching. I liked Frank. He was a good guy.

Q: In those days, players traveled by train. There wasn't any air conditioning on the train, and for the most part, there wasn't any air conditioning in the hotels. You go to Sportsman's Park in St. Louis in July and play a doubleheader. It's 95 degrees and humid and you're wearing those old wool flannel uniforms and you're squatting behind home plate.

A: That was the hottest place in the world. I thought it was hot in Florida, but Florida was great compared to those days in the Middle West — St. Louis, Kansas City, Cincinnati. There was no air conditioning in the hotels. They used to have a big fan in the room. You'd put a quarter in there. It lasted two hours. Then we'd call the bell captain: "Send us a pitcher of ice, will you please?" We'd give him 15 cents or a 20-cent tip. We'd put the pitcher of ice in front of the fan so we could cool the air. Ten minutes, the ice was gone. We finally ended up getting a bucket of ice and putting some water in the tub. We'd stir it up to cool the water and go to sleep in the tub.

Q: That couldn't have been very comfortable.

A: I caught, I think, the second game of a doubleheader one time without any chest protector or shin guards, just a mask. It was so hot.

Q: I hope you remembered to wear your cup!
A: (Laughs)

Q: Who was the toughest pitcher you ever faced?

A: Bucky Walters.

Q: What made Bucky tough?
A: He had a real live fastball that used to fly into you. He missed my nose about that far one time. The ball used to come in on you.

Q: After you managed in the minors for a couple of years,



Photo from Bill Loughman collection

Cleveland Manager Al Lopez and his three ace pitchers, left to right: Mike Garcia, Bob Lemon and Early Wynn at Yankee Stadium in 1954, the year they won the American League pennant.

Bill Veck wanted you to go to Cleveland and manage there. That meant moving out manager Lou Boudreau. Were you concerned about taking over for somebody as popular as Boudreau?

A: Very much. I got some threats — letters with threats — when I took over the job. In fact, [Indians GM Hank] Greenberg told me to save the letters so they could give them to the FBI. But nothing happened. I was very lucky.

Q: The Cleveland Indians of 1948 to 1955 would be considered a dynasty.

A: I think so. I thought we had one of the two or three best teams in baseball then, along with the Yankees.

Q: Now, Larry Doby came up to Cleveland in '47.

A: Yeah. I was there when he came up.

Q: He broke the color barrier in the American League 10 weeks after Jackie Robinson debuted with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Do you think Larry's been given enough credit for what he did?

A: I wasn't there for Jackie Robinson, but I think Jackie was a hell of an athlete. Big guy, strong, mean. I think [Dodgers general manager Branch] Rickey had a talk with him. He needed to kind of hold it down because he was going to be the



AP file photo

In the fall of 1925, at age 17, Al Lopez was tapped to be Walter Johnson's catcher for an exhibition game at Tampa's Plant Field because organizers thought he could attract 'Ybor City residents. Johnson, shown here at Plant Field in 1927, would retire that year with 416 career wins, second only to Cy Young.

first black player. And he did. I understand there were some guys who got on him a little, but very few. I went through the same thing. They used to call me names. They thought I was a Cuban. I'm not a Cuban. Why should I resent the Cubans? The Cuban people are

very nice. But they used to call me a Cuban. I never resented it. Let 'em call you what they want. That's part of the game, to call names. So I think it was overdone.

Q: In 1959, you're managing the Chicago White Sox. The press

was surprised that you won the pennant against the Yankees. I think the fans were surprised. Were you surprised?

A: (Laughing) Let me say this. Every year, including that year, I was finishing second next to the Yankees. In Cleveland, five times I'm second. Then I go to

Chicago — three years of second. Then I won a pennant. But every year some of the writers from New York would come over to spring training saying, "How you going to catch them this year?" I was always optimistic. You can't say you're not going to win. You've got to give the fans some hope. So I said, "We'll catch 'em. We're going to catch 'em." And finally we did. We caught 'em in '54 and then we caught 'em in '55.

Q: Did you enjoy managing more than playing, or playing more than managing?

A: I liked playing. Managing was a challenge and I didn't know if I could do it or not. I think I had an advantage because I was a catcher for 18 years in the majors. So it gave me some experience. But managing is a challenge. You've got to get the right person with the right temperament.

Q: What gave you the most satisfaction?

A: I think helping pitchers, bringing pitchers along, running the club, trying to help some kids. I think that gave me the most satisfaction.

Q: You served on the veterans committee for many years and you saw how the process works. Are there one or two guys who are not in the Hall of Fame who should be?

A: There's so many guys so close, you know. But personally, I recommended Babe Herman. To me, the two years I was with him, Herman had Hall of Fame figures. He turned out to be a good outfielder, hit .390 twice. And we couldn't get him in. Then we had a guy by the name of Glenn Wright, a shortstop. Glenn Wright was the fourth-place hitter — as a shortstop. He and Pie Traynor were the left side of the infield at Pittsburgh. I recommended Glenn Wright and they turned him down. I recommended Roger Maris. They turned him down. Who else did I recommend? I'd like to see Billy Pierce given some consideration because he was a real good pitcher.

Q: The veterans committee has been restructured. Do you think the Hall of Fame has too many guys in it?

A: We'll, they've come up with this new way of voting that I don't think is the right thing to do. We had 17 guys [on the committee] when I was there, and it's tough enough to elect a guy. How can you bring other people into the committee? It's going to be tough to pick every year.

Q: Well, Mr. Lopez, this has been a true pleasure. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you taking the time.

A: I'm glad you came by.