

# The 'lifer,' McKeon reflects on 62 years working in professional baseball industry

Niko Fraser  
Reporter

Jack McKeon, 81, leans back and takes a puff of his ever-present Padron cigar. He stares off into a cloud of smoke, seemingly searching through an endless hoard of baseball stories — maybe the memory of winning the World Series in 2003 or perhaps the slog of rookie ball in the Midwest.

Chuckling to himself, he returns from his reverie.

"Could you, the Blessed Virgin Mary, intercede with the Lord and convince my father to let me sign a professional contract?" McKeon recalls praying.

It was 1948, McKeon's freshman year at The College of the Holy Cross. There out of obligation, restricted from the fate that awaited him in professional baseball, McKeon learned the power of prayer.

He said these fervent prayers regularly on those cool autumn nights.

McKeon's father, a blue-collar worker without a college degree, refused to let him sign a professional baseball contract.

"All I wanted to do was play baseball, the game I love," McKeon said, "but my father wanted my brother and I to get a degree so we wouldn't have to live his lifestyle."

That Christmas, McKeon's father sat him down and told him that if he promised he would get a college degree, he would have his blessing to sign to play professional baseball.

The legend was born, figuratively speaking, into professional baseball. A hybrid between new school and old school, the epitome of a "lifer."

Retiring this fall, for the second time, McKeon became the second oldest manager in Major League history.

"He is kicking and fighting to stay in the game," said his grandson, Zach Booker, a professional baseball player. "Baseball is his life, everything he does relates to it, he lives it and breathes it."

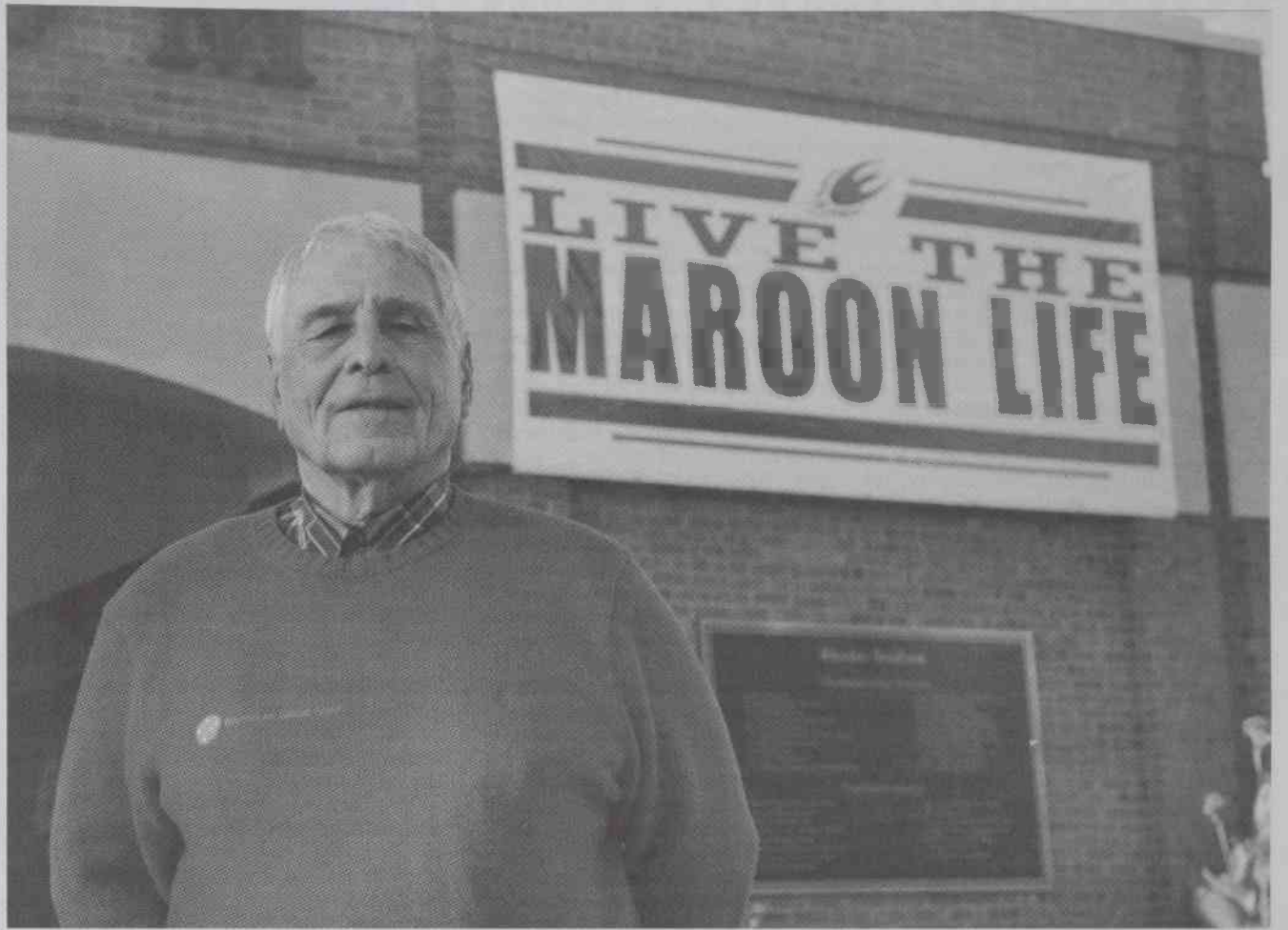
The game is McKeon's vantage point.

"Oh, it's a beautiful game. I don't understand why all you young people talk about it being a 'grind' playing every day," he said.

McKeon can't help himself; he speaks about the game with a passion similar to the tone of an aged lover.

Trader Jack is the name the game has yielded him after 62 years. His prowess in managing a baseball team is distinct and his methods of trading players championed the notion of purifying a clubhouse for the good of the team. In the early 1990s, he had the audacity to trade away All-Stars such as Sandy Alomar, Jr., Fred McGriff and Gary Sheffield.

In his last tenure as the Florida Marlins' interim manager, McKeon sent budding slugger Logan Morrison down to Triple A New Orleans. He



Former baseball player and manager Jack McKeon has been in the game for over six decades, from rookie ball to winning a World Series.

ELIZABETH EVERETT | Staff Photographer

had 17 homeruns at the time and was second on the team in RBIs. The Marlins fanbase was in an uproar over this decision. McKeon was unfazed.

"You come to the field and you talk about 'tweeter' or other 'bookface' things?" McKeon said. "No, when you walk into the clubhouse it's one thing you worry about, baseball. If not, you aren't playing."

There's the old school, stern McKeon, then there's the new school, fun-loving McKeon who will pat a player on the back and tell him a story, saying, "Hey Meat, I got a story for you."

"Meat" is a moniker that McKeon gives to almost everyone.

"What's your name? OK, Meat, go on with what you were saying," McKeon said.

Few know McKeon's hybrid better than Greg Booker, his son-in-law who was a professional pitcher. McKeon traded Booker to the Minnesota Twins for Freddie Toliver in 1989.

Snickering, McKeon recalls the trade.

"Yeah, I traded him," McKeon said. "He wasn't pitching well. Next question."

McKeon has the confidence to make the moves he believes are best for the team. Booker even notes that the trade in '89 was best for the team,

even though he was McKeon's son-in-law and the trade forced him to move his family.

Booker is now his neighbor and partner in landscaping McKeon's backyard.

"Jack doesn't care what other people think. He is always the same, whether it be cutting the grass or trading an MVP," Booker said. "That's why he is successful, he's his own man."

McKeon stories are as constant in his conversations as he has been in baseball the last 62 years.

"Every time I see him, I hear a new story," Booker said. "I keep thinking I've heard them all. Sometimes I think he makes them up. Either way, they are great."

One McKeon story took place in Missoula, Montana about Chuck Weatherspoon, a player of McKeon's in the Pioneer League in 1956. Weatherspoon was notorious for his fear of snakes.

"Hey Meat, let me tell you a story," he said. "I managed this guy in the Pioneer League who was scared to death of snakes, spiders and those little critters. All the guys on the team used to pull pranks on him and put rubber snakes in his equipment. Well, one day we were out on the field right before the game, when Chuck runs out of the clubhouse, stark naked,

because the guys put a rubber snake in his jock."

McKeon reclines in his seat, and puffs on his cigar as he laughs out loud at the memory.

A car drives by, honking and waving at McKeon. Waving back, McKeon turns and said, "I don't know who the hell that was. Everyone around here (at Elon) knows me. I just smile and wave, it works, try it."

On clear nights in the spring, McKeon stands right outside the gate of Newsome Field at Elon University, smoking his cigar, watching the game he loves. Whispers linger in the dugouts about the legendary Trader Jack's presence.

Sixty-two years after his debut in rookie ball, after his prayers were answered and his father let him sign a contract, McKeon talks about the game with childish excitement and a past master's knowledge.

"Meat, when you play the game, do it how you oughta," he said. "Play it with a lot of kid in ya."

McKeon flicks the foot of his cigar onto the sidewalk. With the finish of the Padron still in his mouth, he said, "Be excellent, have fun and make yourself great at this beautiful game. Never lose the kid in you. Look at me, I'm only 58." McKeon smiles and walks away.

## Volleyball looks to even SoCon record on road

Adam Lawson  
Reporter

Ten games into the Southern Conference schedule, the Elon University volleyball team finds itself in a familiar place. With a losing mark against conference foes, the team has to beat Western Carolina University and Appalachian State University this weekend to get back to even in the SoCon.

Almost a month ago, the Phoenix was in this exact situation. Coming off losses to UNC Greensboro and the College of Charleston, Elon was 0-2. That's when wins at home against the Catamounts and Mountaineers helped right a ship that was veering off course.

In order to get back on track this time around, Elon will have to find wins on the road, a task the Phoenix

had been unable to accomplish prior to a win against Wofford College Oct. 21.

"I think it's a step in the right direction," said head coach Mary Tendler of the win against Wofford. "I think that'll carry over to next weekend."

After sweeping Wofford in three sets, Furman University showed no mercy the next day against the Phoenix. After winning the first two sets 25-18, the Paladins took the third set, sweeping Elon off of the Furman home court.

"Everyone's disappointed that we lost," said freshman middle blocker Kris Harris, who had 16 kills in the two matches. "It's not frustration. We're just a little disappointed."

Toward the end of September, Elon had almost no problem taking care of Western Carolina, sweeping them on

Oct. 21.

It was Appalachian State that gave the Phoenix its toughest match of the weekend. The Phoenix was able to fight back from a one-set deficit and take the match in four. Since then, the Mountaineers have gone 6-1 and vaulted themselves into a first place tie atop the SoCon North standings.

"I think they're going to be hungrier to beat us," junior libero Ali Deatsch said. "They'll have a renewed fire now that we beat them. It'll be a battle."

Few on Elon's roster know the experience of defeating App State firsthand. The last time the Phoenix escaped Boone with a win was 2008, when the current crop of seniors were freshmen. In order to let last month's history repeat itself, the Phoenix will have to make history of its own by reversing its lack of success in Boone.

One advantage the veterans do have is knowledge of the opposing fanbases. They know that, for better or worse, fans in Cullowhee and Boone will show up and will be loud.

"I wouldn't say they're the nicest fans ever," Deatsch said. "There's going to be some heckling going on."

As of Oct. 23, Elon sits in fifth place in the North Division standings, a significant statistic because only the top four make the conference tournament. But right now, the Phoenix players say they aren't worried about it. Instead, they say their top priority is simply taking things one weekend at a time.

"We're working toward a goal," Harris said. "Right now our goal is to get back to .500."

Elon will return home to play its final four games of the year in Alumni Gym starting Nov. 4.