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Wes Singletary

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OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS ONCE: A Conversation with Manuel "Curly" Onis

Cafe Creole, Ybor City, Tampa, Florida July 20, 1993

By WES SINGLETARY

When discussing Tampa's exceptional baseball heritage the names Al Lopez, "Sweet Lou" Piniella, Steve Garvey, Wade Boggs, Doc Gooden, and Tony LaRussa readily spring to mind. Yet others, less remembered in the national consciousness but etched as local icons nonetheless, have made the arduous trek from Hillsborough County sandlots to the big leagues. Such players came from the neighborhoods of Ybor City, West Tampa, South Tampa, Interbay, Wellswood, Forest Hills, Belmont Heights, Seminole Heights and points both in between and beyond. Their skills were fashioned at the local high school and amateur league level and are still discussed locally with pride and reverence. Charlie Cuellar, Alan Brice, Ken Suarez, Rich Puig, Manny Seone, John Tamargo, Nardi Contreras, and Lenny Faedo are among those Tampa ballplayers whose names may not ring a familiar bell but once graced the back of big league uniforms. As former major leaguers, all have claimed their piece of "America's Game" and each has his own unique set of memories to share.

Perhaps the most "Intriguing" of such baseball tales to be shared is told by Ybor City native and former Brooklyn Dodger, Manuel "Curly" Onis. With a lifetime major league batting average of 1.000, one might think that Onis could have enjoyed a more prolific stay in the major leagues than he actually did. However, longevity was not to be the case. Onis' baseball career, a saga really, that took him from the sandlots of

Ybor City to the glory that was Ebbets Field, provides a clear example of the old adage that "opportunity knocks once."

In *The Glory of Their Times*, Lawrence Ritter illustrated that the best source from which to gather information regarding a particular baseball life is from the mouth of the person who lived it. In his prologue Ritter asked that the reader "listen" to the stories of those whom he had interviewed. The following transcript is the story of Manuel "Curly" Onis, the state of Florida's sixteenth big leaguer and the city of Tampa's second. While reading Onis' tale, *listen* to it and recall with him the memories that "can't be taken away."

Interview begins:

Q: Mr. Onis, were you born here? Did you grow up in Tampa?

Onis: Yes

Q: What was it like for you as a child then; did you play a lot of baseball?

Onis: Yes, that's all we had to do. We didn't have a radio or TV or anything so what we did was play sandlot.

Q: Were you raised in Ybor city or West Tampa?

Onis: I was raised in Ybor City about 17th Avenue and Columbus Drive. We had a

sand street and it had a street car that ran down the middle of it, right in front of the house.

Q: So, there weren't many paved roads in Tampa then?

Onis: No, no, not then. You know I had an incident when I was about six years old. We had a streetcar switch in front of the house and I used to take my little seat, rocker, and I used to put it on the track and then sit on the porch and wait for the streetcar to come. The streetcar would stop and there was this one fellow who used to pick it up and bring it back over to the porch. I was about six years old and I was trying to derail it.

Q: Where were your parents from?

Onis: From Spain; one was from Asturias and the other was from Galicia.

Q: Did they stop in Cuba on the way?

Onis: Yes, Yes. they stopped in Cuba and came on in here and went to work in the Cigar factory.

Q: Which factory?

Onis: Regensburg. That was on Columbus Drive and 16th Street. That's where they worked and we lived just a block or so from there.

Q: When did you start playing organized type baseball, high school or junior high?

Onis: No, I started in what they called the city league here in Tampa.

Q: Something like the Inter-Social League later on?

Onis: Right. In 1929 I went to work for Tampa Electric Company. They gave me a job if I would catch for them. So, I went to catch because there weren't no jobs. They gave me a job running the streetcars. You know, I met the guy who used to pick up the rocker and put in on my porch. He was still running the streetcars. Name was Ross, he was a big German fellow, about six feet tall.

Q: How long did you play in the City League?

Onis: I played in 1929 and 1930 in the City League with the Tampa Electric Company. 1931 is when Al Lopez recommended me to a friend of his that was manager in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and he took me with him.

Q: What were they, class B ball or something similar?

Onis: It was a minor league team but I have forgotten what level it was.

Q: How long did you stay there?

Onis: I stayed there one year, and then they released me and I came back home and played with a team they called the Cuban Stars. We went to New York barnstorming in 1933.

Q: Who else was on that team, anybody that played in the big leagues?

Onis: No. There was a couple of guys on there that could have played in the big leagues. We stayed up there for two months and we played the black teams. They had some good ballplayers. Yeah, they had good ballplayers.

Q: In pro ball, you have said that you were signed by this minor league club, how did you get up to the big leagues?

Onis: The following year I went into what they called the Florida-Georgia League. I was catching at the time, which was 1934, for Jacksonville. I got a call from Al Lopez and he says, "Can you come up here?" I said, "Sure." Man, I was excited. He said, "They want to look at you, because I recommended you." Casey Stengel was the manager at the time in Brooklyn. So I said, "Well Al, I don't have no fare. I got no money for the ticket." I didn't have it either so Al sent me a ticket. So I got on the train to New York and Al met me at the railroad station. I had told Al to meet me at the station and he did and he took me in. Boy, I was really excited. The next day he took me to the ballpark. I can still close my eyes and see Ebbets Field; I felt on top of the world.

Q: How long were you there?

Onis: I was there two months in 1934, no, a month in 1934 and they sent me to Allentown, Pennsylvania, to play. I played out the season there and went to Brooklyn. Al had a little automobile and we used it to ride home.

Q: You drove it all the way down to Tampa?

Onis: Yes. I am telling you that was some experience. The roads were all dirt, rocky and what have you. But, we got home.

Q: How did everybody around here feel about you after playing with the Dodgers? Were you kind of a celebrity?

Onis: Yeah, I had friends you know and they all wanted to know how it was. Most of them hadn't been out of here either so we talked about everything. Al and I spent the



Manuel "Curly" Onis, 1993

winter playing golf at Macfarlane Park, in West Tampa. The city had a nine hole golf course there. We used to have the clubs. You only needed to use a driver, a putter and a pitching wedge. That's all it took.

Q: The next year you went up?

Onis: Well, after 1934, when we came home, I got a telephone call from one of the directors in the office and he said, "Manuel, I'm sorry but I forgot to sign you up. We are going to take you down to Spring Training." So, he sent me the contract, I signed it and sent it back. Of course when the time for camp started, we went to Orlando to train. I had a nice training session there. I hit .359 in 16 ballgames and I caught most of them; I was ready.

Q: What was Lopez doing if you were catching most of the ballgames?

Onis: Messing around; he wasn't worrying about his job or anything and I was working, I was working hard. One game I caught was against the New York Yankees. Of course, they had some ballplayers. During the game,

Lou Gehrig hit a screamer right back to the mound and the pitcher had to fall flat to avoid it. Gehrig hit it so hard, our centerfielder caught it on the fly. Well, anyway, the club liked me, so when camp ended they carried me right on up to Brooklyn with them. Once there, we were Lopez, Babe Phelps and myself at catcher. The season started and we were sitting on the bench during one game, in about the seventh or eighth inning, and Casey leaned over and he looked at me and says, "You wanna catch?" Of course, I told him that is what I am here for. He said, "Well go on in there." I went in and put my stuff on and man, I was shaking. I can't explain the feeling and you can't realize the feeling that I had at that time, when he told me to get in there.

Q: Who was pitching?

Onis: For us, Johnny Babich, and we were playing Boston, then the Boston Braves. So I went in there to catch and do you know the ground was still frozen when we started to play? There was ice on the ground. We went ahead and played the inning out and went back to the dugout and my time came to bat. I went up there and I couldn't stand at the plate; I was so nervous. George Magerkurth was the umpire, stood about 6'2", a big, huge man. Lefty Brandt was pitching. Ed Brandt, a left-hander, one of the best that Boston had. He threw me a pitch and it was a strike. So I stepped out of the batters' box, stopped over to get some sand in my hands and Magerkurth stepped by me and he said, "Get up there and hit son." Then he walked off, didn't even look at me or nothing, but I heard him. So that kind of gave me a little strength, you know? I turned back on the plate and this guy Ed Brandt threw me a curveball and I hit it right over the third baseman. Jeez, I ran to first base and I got there and couldn't get off the base. I didn't

want to get picked off; I didn't know what to do. I stayed right there at first base because nobody could move me over. Later, Al told me that when I got the hit, Casey had turned to him and said, "Where did you get this guy?" (laughter) Well, the inning ended, then I caught the ninth Inning and that was it. I guess I thought there would be plenty of other chances.

Q: How much longer did you stay up with the Dodgers?

Onis: I stayed there until cutting. That is the only year that the major leagues cut the roster to 24. It had always been 25, and I was the 25th. So, when the cutting date came they sent me to Dayton in the Mid-Atlantic League. Brooklyn had me on a ten hour recall so I could come back if they needed me. But before I got back to Brooklyn, an incident occurred. We were playing in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and we had lost four games in a row. Everybody was upset and so was I. We started the game and I stooped down to catch. Late in the game the first baseman for Wilkes-Barre came up to bat and we had him 2 strikes and 2 balls. Then my pitcher threw a pitch that was right down the middle. I swear today that it was right down there and the ump called it a ball! Oh boy, that started it right then; I was steamed up about it. The next pitch, the guy hits a home run. Well, you know how I felt and so I raised hell with the umpire. "I'm going to charge this ballgame to you," I kept arguing. He said, "Get down there and catch or I'm going to throw you out." I said, "If you throw me out I'm going to hit you in the head!" So he threw me out and I hit him in the head. I hit him with my catcher's mask and it cracked open his head and he was bleeding there at home plate. I started pounding him with my fists, but they separated us and I was out of the game.

Q: You know, a lot of people want to do that to umpires but very few actually do.

Onis: The umpire was all right but I got suspended without pay for thirty days and fined \$25. You can imagine, I was only making \$150 a month to begin with and now on top of the fine I was suspended. The team sent me back to Brooklyn because the umpires wouldn't even let me stay on the field. Then after that, Brooklyn released me; I think they feared trouble with the umpires. My temper cost me a lot. The next year or so I played in Fort Worth, Texas, and Sioux City, Iowa. Then in 1937 and 1938 I played for Leesburg, Florida, and after that my contract was bought by Washington, in 1939. Washington made me the player-manager of the Charlotte, North Carolina, club.

Q: How did your baseball career wind down?

Onis: What happened was at the end of the season in Charlotte, I got a broken ligament in my knee. When I broke my knee I couldn't squat down anymore and I didn't have it repaired at the time as I should have. I told Washington that since I couldn't play I wasn't coming back. They tried to get me to come back. They said, "We'll fix your knee." I wasn't going back. By the way, it was Lou Klein who broke it. He ran into me at home plate; I had him about ten feet and he ran into me with his legs up and hit me right on the knee.

Q: And it never really healed up for you?

Onis: No. It broke a ligament in the knee. So I came back home and I had a good friend at Tampa Electric who was the operator of the street cars. I told him, "Mr. Sheridan, I can't play ball no more and I need a job;" and they were hard to get. He said, "O.K., I'll put

you on the street cars." I said, "Fine," and got 22 cents an hour.

Q: How long did you work there?

Onis: I worked there a year; less than a year. I understood from a guy that the street cars were going to be taken off the line soon. They were going to be removed. Then the President of the Italian Club, a guy who was the operator of a ball team, asked me to be the manager of his club. I said that if he wanted me to manage then he was going to have to get me a Job in the Fire Department. He was well-liked, you know?

Q: Is this the city fire department we are talking about?

Onis: Yes, the city. He said O.K., just give him some time. So after I had worked for Tampa Electric about nine months, he called me and said that they wanted me to report to the fire department. So I went and the fire chief was Mr. White and he was a rough customer. He carried a pistol right on his hip. I tell you, those were rough times then. So he says, "Go to Number I." the next morning I got my boots and went to Number I and I stayed there twenty years.

Q: Did you retire from the Department?

Onis: Yes, I retired from the Fire Department and that was it.

Q: At this point in your life, are there any regrets?

Onis: Yes, there are regrets. Sometimes, I wake up and wonder what I could've done with another chance in the majors. I was good. I could throw and hit; there is no telling. Man, I am sorry for hitting that umpire. I was such a hothead. Now I tell people, don't argue with umpires, you can't win.