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Parnell, Ott Join First Class in N.O. Hall

Bonura, Gilbert, Heinemann to be inducted Thursday night

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By William Kalec

Staff writer

The Zephyrs will induct the five inaugural members of the Greater New Orleans Baseball Hall of Fame during its third annual Evening with the Zephyrs dinner Thursday night at the Pontchartrain Center.

A five-member committee, using the criteria that each candidate must have been born in the Greater New Orleans area or relocated to the area during the time he achieved baseball notoriety as a player, manager or administrator, selected Mel Parnell, Mel Ott, Larry Gilbert, Henry "Zeke" Bonura and Alexander Julius Heinemann.

"This is a concept that has been in the works for a while, especially since we've been looking for something to add to the dinner," Zephyrs spokesman Tim Grubb said.

Team executives talked about honoring the rich baseball tradition in the area, and the dinner "just seems to be an ideal opportunity to recognize these inductees' local contribution to baseball," Grubb said.

A monument placed along the Zephyr Field concourse, accessible to fans on gamedays, will serve as a temporary home for the Hall of Fame plaques. Grubb said that, during the initial discussions of the proposed Hall of Fame, there also were talks of a possible separate museum/restaurant to be constructed beyond the left-field wall, though there are no immediate plans for such a project.

Parnell, the only living original inductee, compiled a 123-75 major-league record with a 3.50 ERA during 10 seasons with the Boston Red Sox and is the winningest left-handed pitcher in club history. Red Sox scouts noticed Parnell in S.J. Peters High School and signed the New Orleans native following his senior prep season.

On July 14, 1956, Parnell tossed a no-hitter against the Chicago White Sox in Fenway Park. The final-pitch ball is showcased at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. Parnell was inducted into the Red Sox Hall of Fame on Sept. 8, 1997. He managed briefly in the Red Sox farm system, returning to coach Tulane in 1958, then the Pelicans in 1959, the franchise's final season in New Orleans.

Major league scouts signed Mel Ott (1909-58) as a 16-year-old prospect from Gretna, leading to a 22-season Hall of Fame career with the New York Giants. Ott hit at least 30 home runs in eight seasons, leading the National League in long balls for six summers spanning from 1932-42. He finished with 511 home runs and a .304 lifetime average.

Gilbert's greatest contribution came as a manager, though he did break in with the Boston Braves in 1914, becoming the first New Orleanian to win the World Series during a short major-league career. Spending much of his playing days with the New Orleans Pelicans, Gilbert then managed the club for 15 more seasons, capturing four Southern Association pennants and posting a .575 winning percentage while in charge.

Bonura, one of New Orleans' first true collegiate baseball stars, spent three seasons with the Pelicans before the White Sox afforded the first baseman an opportunity in the majors. Outspoken and brash, Bonura hit a then-club best 27 home runs as a rookie.

Heinemann climbed nearly every rung of the Pelicans organization, going from concessionaire to vice resident. He was largely responsible for moving the Pelicans into a new ballpark on Tulane and South Carrollton avenues, where the team remained until playing out its final two seasons in City Park (Tad Gormley) Stadium.

Ott, Gilbert and Bonura will be honored posthumously with local relatives in attendance for the dinner. Zephyrs officials were unable to locate any member of the Heinemann family still residing in the area. Tickets to the Evening with the Zephyrs, including Hall of Fame festivities, dinner, drinks and an autograph session are \$25 per person. Reservations can be made through the Zephyrs offices at (504) 734-5155.