

The Sad Story of Shufflin' Phil Douglas

By Edwin Burnett

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The story of Phil Douglas, who grew up in Cowan, Tennessee, is a source of both pride and sadness. Phil was born in 1890 in Cedartown, Georgia. He was the son of John and Lucy Hawkins Douglas. John and Lucy were married in Cowan, TN but moved briefly to Cedartown. Phil was a long, lanky hard throwing kid growing up in the first half of the 20th century. For the first 50 years of the 20th century, baseball was truly America's pastime. Towns in the south and mid-west with as few as 100 people would field baseball teams to compete against neighboring towns. In larger towns, companies would hire talented baseball players who would "work" at some make work job during the week and play baseball on Sunday. The author can remember as many as 1,000 spectators showing up for a game in 1950 in Pelham, TN, whose population was less than 200. The coming of television in the mid 1950s offered a wide variety of entertainment and the era of small town baseball teams began a 10 year decline.

Shufflin' Phil Douglas, who was given the nickname by an early team manager, most certainly played for a home town team while he was a teenager. By the time he was 20 years old, he had been "discovered" by a team called the Peaches in Macon, Ga. Unlike today, a player who signed a contract was owned by that team essentially forever or until he was sold or traded. Shufflin' Phil Douglas was sold to the Chicago White Sox in 1911. He played for a minor league team owned by the White Sox in Des Moines in 1912 until he was called to report to the White Sox on August 30 where he pitched in 3 games recording a record of no wins and one loss. The next year the White Sox sent him to farm teams in San Francisco and Spokane. At the end of 1913, his contract was purchased by the Cincinnati Reds.

Phil was a full time major league pitcher in 1914 and began his many instances of alcohol abuse and rebellion against the discipline needed on a baseball team. Next to baseball and his family, Phil Douglas had two loves: alcohol and fishing. Pitchers typically only played every 3rd or 4th day and Phil would simply disappear to get drunk or go fishing. His first wife, Louise, appeared to be a calming influence on him but; unfortunately, her influence was no match for Phil's addiction to alcohol. During Phil's early years in major league baseball, he played for teams that lost more games than they won. He bounced between the White Sox, Chicago Cubs, Brooklyn Robins (later called the Brooklyn Dodgers), Cincinnati Reds and New York Giants. Due to his drinking, he was suspended at least once each year in 8 of his 9 seasons in major league baseball. The suspensions would last as few as 3 days or as long as several weeks depending on how close the team happened to be to winning the pennant.

By 1918, Phil Douglas had played on his fourth major league baseball team, the Chicago Cubs. Phil missed the first half of the season due to an appendicitis operation but led the Cubs to the national league pennant. The Cubs lost to the Boston Red Sox in the World Series. Phil was the best pitcher on the Cubs team that year. In 1919, the Cubs were out of the pennant race and tired of Phil's drinking and disappearing act. He was traded to the New York Giants where he regularly clashed to the point of violence with the no nonsense, legendary manager, John McGraw. In 1921, Phil led the Giants to the national league pennant. The Giants beat the New York Yankees in the 1921 World Series where Babe Ruth supposedly said that Phil Douglas was the best player he had faced. Phil briefly refused to sign his contract in 1922 without a raise but relented near the end of spring training.

The relationship between Phil and John McGraw reached a breaking point in the 1922 season. Phil's pitching deteriorated and the Giants, convinced that alcohol was his problem, concocted a plan that can only be described as a 1920s version of our modern day soap opera. The Giants hired two police detectives to pose as Western Union delivery men and break into Phil's room where he was drunk. He was taken to a sanitarium where he was treated with depressants for 5 days against his will. During this time, his wife and family did not know his location. When he was released, he was allowed to pitch for the last time in the major leagues still under the influence of the depressants. As a result, he lost in his worst major league pitching performance. A terrible fight erupted after the game between Phil and John McGraw. Phil interpreted the fight between him and John McGraw as his termination from the team. To make matters worse, bills for his involuntary stay in the sanitarium and the taxi rides were in his mail that evening. Phil wrote a letter to a former teammate who was playing for the Cardinals asking him to try to convince the Cardinals to let him play for them. In the letter, it can be interpreted as his being willing to do anything, including intentionally losing a game, to see that the Giants did not win the pennant in 1922. The letter found its way to the baseball commissioner, Kenesaw Mountain Landis. Landis had been hired after the scandal of 1919 when the Chicago White Sox took money from gamblers to intentionally lose the 1919 World Series. Landis suspended 8 of the "Black Sox" in an effort to convince the public that baseball was on the up-and-up. Still sensitive to the 1919 scandal and thinking that Douglas would throw a game, Landis banned Phil Douglas from major league baseball. Douglas attempted to sue the Giants for kidnapping but later dropped the case.

Phil Douglas' life continued its downward spiral as he moved to his off season home in Birmingham, Al. He was arrested for domestic violence and briefly curbed his drinking. Broke and out of a job, he soon lost his house and moved to Pikeville, TN where he began pitching for several semi pro-baseball teams. In 1927, his wife Louise died of cancer and he returned to drinking excessively. He bounced from town to town in Tennessee: Nashville, Tullahoma, Cowan, Whitwell and eventually Sequatchie. In 1941 he got a job as foreman working for the Tennessee Department of Transportation. He and his new wife lived modestly in a log cabin in Sequatchie for a time and controlled his drinking. In 1949 he suffered a work related injury

which resulted in a blood clot that resulted in a stroke. Debilitated and broke, he and his wife existed on a meager pension until he died after another stroke in 1952.

Shufflin' Phil Douglas played for 5 major league teams and numerous minor league teams and even more semi-pro teams. He amassed a record of 94 wins and 93 losses as a major league pitcher. His ERA (earned run average, which is a measure of a pitcher's ability) was 2.80 in 9 seasons as a major league pitcher. His ERA is seldom matched by today's major league pitchers. In 1990, friends of Phil Douglas attempted to get the lifetime ban lifted by major league baseball but were unsuccessful. Phil Brooks Douglas is buried next to his first wife, Louise (Wepf) Douglas in the city cemetery in Tracy City, Tennessee.