

# CHC: Q&A with Larry Schmittou

by Bill Traugher

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*Larry Schmittou is a baseball icon to Nashville. Born in 1939, Schmittou grew up in West Nashville where he graduated from Cohn High School and George Peabody College. Schmittou coached sandlot baseball throughout Nashville and would eventually change the landscape of Vanderbilt baseball with his arrival in 1968.*

*In 1971, the Commodores won their first of four consecutive SEC Eastern titles. In 1973 and 1974, Vanderbilt captured the SEC championship and Schmittou was named SEC Coach-of-the-Year both times. He coached 20 All-SEC players while 14 were taken in the major league drafts. Schmittou is currently ranked second all-time in Vanderbilt wins with a mark of 306-252-1.*

*Commodore players that thrived on the diamond in this era include Rick Duncan, Mike Pike, Jeff Peeples (All-American), Mike Willis, Scotti Madison (All-American), Ted Shipley, Gene Menees, Steve Chandler, Rick Rhodes and Scott Sanderson.*

*Schmittou's vision to bring professional baseball back to Nashville was realized in 1978 with the Double-A Nashville Sounds of the Southern League and Hershel Greer Stadium.*

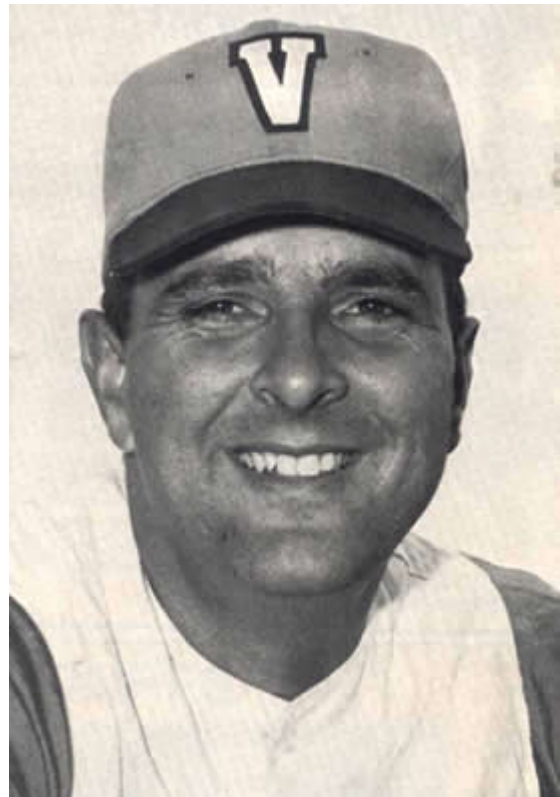
*During that first season, the Sounds drew 380,000 fans to lead the league in attendance. In recognition of his achievements, Schmittou was named Sporting News Double-A and Southern league Executive-of-the-Year in 1978 and 1981 and the Triple-A Sporting News Executive-of-the-Year in 1989.*

*Recently Commodore History writer Bill Traugher spoke with Larry Schmittou about his career with Vanderbilt and the Nashville Sounds. This is their conversation:*

**Bill Traugher:** When did you acquire a love for baseball?

**Larry Schmittou:** I can't remember not having one. I grew up listening to the old Nashville Vols on the radio. Every now and then, usually on a Sunday, my mother would take me down to watch a game at Sulphur Dell. We didn't have a car, and buses ran out to where we lived. Baseball was the sport period, back in the late 40's and 50's when I grew up.

**BT:** How did you get into coaching baseball?



**Schmittou:** Actually my high school coach got me into coaching. They started the Junior Knothole League for kids 9-12 when I was a junior in high school. I guess I was 15. My high school coach asked Bobby Roberts, my best friend, and I if we'd go down to Cockrill School and coach the team. I went down there with Bobby and there must have been a bout 100 little boys as cute as could be. We played pickup games taking a baseball bat working our hands up to the knob to get first choice. Bobby chose the biggest boy in the school. A little bitty boy ran up to me and told me whom the best player was to pick. So that's whom I first chose. And he'd choose all the good players for me while Bobby had picked the more unathletic people. He wound up in last place while I wound up in first. And I liked that. So I started coaching. I coached players like Wayne Garland and Sam Ewing. When they got older, I advanced to a different league.

**BT:** You were also the head baseball coach at Bailey Junior High for three years and the head basketball and football coach at Goodlettsville. How did you get the attention of Vanderbilt's athletics director Jess Neely?

**Schmittou:** They only had a part-time coach. One of my players (Elliott Jones) on the summer team had a father who was a professor at Vanderbilt and on the athletic committee. I guess he got Mr. Neely to follow my summer league teams and he wanted to upgrade all the sports at Vanderbilt. He made me an offer, which wasn't very good, but he promised that he would do better if I'd take the job. That was in February 1968. I believed him and took a huge pay cut to go over there with no scholarships. I was able to talk some of my summer players to come to Vanderbilt who mostly paid their own way. In the second year, I got one scholarship and one more the next year. I never had more than four.

**BT:** Who was your first scholarship player?

**Schmittou:** Mike Willis. He didn't get much, maybe half of his tuition paid. Tuition at Vanderbilt wasn't that high back then. I got other players like Steve Estep and Bill Winchester who wound up being All-SEC players.

**BT:** Were you a full-time baseball coach from the beginning?

**Schmittou:** When I went over there it was for \$1,500 that spring and let's see what develops. I was told to go out and sell ads for the program. Mr. Neely told me I'd be the football recruiter and head baseball coach and make \$7,000 a year. That was about \$5,000 less than I was making teaching school, working at Ford in the summer and scouting for the Cleveland Indians. So it wasn't a very smart move on my part. Chuck Boyd and I sold ads for the first three weeks and the business manager told us to quit selling ads because the program was getting to big.

**BT:** Did you enjoy being involved with the football program as a recruiter?

**Schmittou:** It was thankless job. I was on the road all the time. I had small kids at the time. We did well. Bill Pace was the coach at the time and I stayed on with Steve Sloan and a year with Fred Pancoast because they begged me to stay. Back then you signed people the second Saturday in December. So from the middle of August through the middle of December, I was gone except when we had a home game when recruits would come in.

**BT:** Was it difficult to recruit for football?

**Schmittou:** No it wasn't. I always had the attitude and it worked for me to get every player football and baseball player in middle Tennessee that was good enough or close to good

enough to play. We did an excellent job of that. Actually we were ranked in the top ten in the country football recruiting for two years. That was the squad that Steve Sloan inherited that went to the Peach Bowl. All of our assistants did a great job. There was a great camaraderie on the staff like Bob Patterson who is still a friend of mine. When Sloan came in, there was Bill Parcells and Rex Dockery. I've had a friendship with Parcells ever since. Fred Pancoast was the hardest working head coach. He was a workaholic in recruiting. I'd worked myself up to \$20,000 a year after winning four baseball championships and going to a bowl. Then Clay Stapleton (Vanderbilt athletics director) cut my salary to about \$14,000. He cut out my football-recruiting job. So I said that was a good time for me to start thinking about doing something else to support my wife and kids.

**BT:** What about recruiting for Vanderbilt baseball?

**Schmittou:** I never had a budget of more than \$12,000 and the most I ever had was \$500 to recruit on. But, I had made so many friends in professional scouting that a lot of scouts were telling decent players about our program and me. Hugh Poland sent me Rick Duncan and Ted Shipley. Shipley was a No.1 draft choice of Minnesota and all of them made All-SEC while they were there. Then I recruited all the good players in Nashville. If you look back at my teams, you will see that almost everybody that played was from Tennessee. I loved Vanderbilt. It was easy to recruit at Vanderbilt. I just sold the merits of Vanderbilt. You can always sell the parents and then you just had to sell the kid.

**BT:** You won four consecutive Eastern Division titles and two SEC championships. What do you credit for that success?

**Schmittou:** Good players and hard work on the player's part. Back then you had to win your division. There were only 10 teams in the league with two divisions. Then you would play the other division two-out-of-three. Whoever won was the only team that got to move on. We were ranked 13th in the country one year and didn't go anywhere. We didn't beat Mississippi for the overall championship. Then they went on to the World Series. I recruited pitchers. I didn't have many scholarships. I did it the way baseball people do. Get good pitching and good defense up the middle. We had a few football players that would play and one or two basketball players. Their seasons got over quicker than they do now. Our guys worked hard. Sure they had talent, but I also recruited to the field. I maybe got guys who couldn't run fast, but could hit that ball on top of the gym with that little short left field fence. We beat Southern Cal one year when we had three scholarships and Rod Dedeaux (USC coach) had 26, but we had the best pitcher in Jeff Peeples.

**BT:** Was there one day or one game that was most memorable for you at Vanderbilt?

**Schmittou:** There were two. We had gotten our hat handed to us that first year by Tennessee. Sam Ewing was at Tennessee and he was an All-American. Tennessee was going to be our biggest rival. In the first game, Peeples pitched. It was the only game I had ever seen him get hit hard. They hit five home runs in one inning. They were ahead 8-4 going into the ninth inning. We get a few guys on base and get a run. Then we get a couple of more guys on base. All of a sudden it's two outs in the bottom of the ninth and we're down by three runs. Tommy Powell hit a grand slam home run on top of the gym. We beat them 9-8 and went on and swept them and pretty much swept the SEC.

**BT:** And the second?

**Schmittou:** Rod Dedeaux was such an icon in college baseball at Southern Cal. He had won five consecutive national championships when we went to Riverside (CA). Before the game,

they would get on the dugout and bug you unmercifully. I had a third baseman named Bill Hardin. He asked me, "Coach, what's a grummet?" I said I think it is a desert bug. I asked him why and he said that's what the USC players were calling him. My assistant, Roy Carter, asked me what was I going to say to the team before that USC game. I walked down there and you could tell everybody was so nervous. I said, "Fellows, we'll win. Peebles is pitching. Let's go." Peebles struck out Fred Lynn four times. We beat them and were ahead the whole game. Then we beat Arizona State in that tournament. We knew we could play with anybody.

**BT:** When Clay Stapleton reduced your salary, was that the time you thought about bringing professional baseball back to Nashville?

**Schmittou:** I knew I had to do something else to support my family. I was offered a couple of other coaching jobs, but I would have had to move. And I didn't want to do that. One was to coach in the low minor leagues and I didn't want to do that either. I learned how to promote. At the start we never charged admission to baseball games at Vanderbilt. I had to fight to get them to charge as we were drawing big crowds since the teams were so good. I also noticed what Chuck Roll had done at UT when he created "Big Orange Country" and plastered this city and the state with billboards. Chattanooga decided to have pro baseball return after a long absence. They'd bought out Birmingham I believe and moved it there. And Columbus brought baseball back. I followed it a little bit and saw that they were drawing. I visited those two cities and said, "Shoot. Nashville can do that if we could figure out a park." I never had any doubt that we would draw fans. I had made up my mind that I was not going to promote the team; I was going to promote fun. That was what was working. Everybody knew we were going to have a baseball game. And the players here today might not be here tomorrow.

**BT:** Wasn't there a conflict with you coaching at Vanderbilt and being involved with a professional baseball team?

**Schmittou:** I coached Vanderbilt the first year we had the Sounds. Then I bought Greensboro and I wanted to finish coaching Vanderbilt in 1979. I had to appear before the NCAA Executive Committee to get permission because I was involved with pro sports. I just wanted to finish out the year. I made my pitch, but they voted no and said I needed to resign now. I resigned in February 1979.

**BT:** Tell me the demands of setting up a professional baseball team in a city without a baseball stadium?

**Schmittou:** My terms with the city was you can lease the land, but you have to build the stadium and you have to pay property taxes if you own the stadium. We had to build that park with our own money. If it had not been for Conway Twitty, I could not have put the group together. I had absolutely no money. The bank agreed to loan me \$30,000. We thought the stadium was going to cost between \$300,000 and \$500,000. It ended up costing over a million dollars. I had to go around to beg and borrow to get people to donate products. I had to mortgage my house. Then the bad weather set in. We had requested to open on the road. We knew we couldn't get finished before the first home stand. So I needed to get Chattanooga to swap a series with me. They charged me some money to do that. Then tragically for me, a few days before we were supposed to open, my mother passed away. That was weighing on my mind. The sod came in late. We didn't know how we were going to get it down so Farrell Owens called a bunch of the radio stations to tell them we were going to have a "sod party." Come on out and help us lay sod. We must have had 50 people come out while some people worked almost all night helping lay that sod and

rolling it. It wasn't in that good of shape. The first game was rained out. But when we did open, it opened in front of a full house. The electricity was turned on five minutes before the gates opened.

**BT:** Cincinnati was your first major league affiliate. You had a disagreement involving the designated hitter rule. Did that hurt your relationship with the Reds?

**Schmittou:** Chief Bender was the farm director and at first they let us use the DH. Then Bob Howsam (Reds president) came down to see a series. When he went back, he told Chief we could no longer use the DH. We had a decent team that year. When they decided that, I made the announcement that if we couldn't use the DH when the other teams were using the DH, then I wasn't going to renew with them. I knew that everybody in the world wanted to come to Nashville. I would have no difficulty getting my choice who to sign with. Once they saw we had a new park, people starting calling me to get into the Southern League, especially for those in the Eastern League where they had bad weather.

**BT:** With a close working relationship with the Reds, you must have met some of their former great players.

**Schmittou:** Pete Rose and I became friends. We became bigger friends when he became manager of the Reds. He was very personable with the fans. He would call all the time about his players. When they showed those calls, when he was supposedly calling bookies, the call right in front of them was the Nashville Sounds number. He called the Sounds wanting to know how our players did like how did so-and-so pitch. If he had a player on rehab he wanted to know his progress. Actually when Rose opened his restaurant, we gave him the original seats because some of the seats that we owned were from the old Atlanta Stadium. When he opened his restaurant in Ft. Lauderdale, we gave him eight of those.



**BT:** Then you were able to jump to the New York Yankees organization. What was your relationship like with George Steinbrenner?

**Schmittou:** They had tried to get me to go Triple-A when I first started, but I had already made a promise to Cincinnati that I would go with them in Double-A. I told the Yankees that I couldn't go back on my word. So when it was evident that we were not going to resign with the Reds, they immediately called us as well as four or five other clubs. Mr. Steinbrenner at the time owned the Nashville Bridge Co., and he wanted to come to Nashville for reasons more than baseball. They were so super to us. They gave us those great teams. He'd come to town himself and do things to raise money for charity. He came to town at my request and got roasted and raised money to build the Eye Cornea Transplant over at Vanderbilt, which is named after his wife Joan. He helped raise money for the Old Timers Baseball Association. We had Vanderbilt play Tennessee one time in my honor and gave them \$10,000 to play at Greer Stadium instead of McGugin. He did a lot of things for Nashville. Everything I asked of him he did.

**BT:** Have you got some Steinbrenner stories? (Note: Joe "Black Cat" Reilly sold newspapers

at the State Legislature for over 60 years. He also was a fan of the old Nashville Vols and Sounds. Cat was a supporter of many local amateur teams).

**Schmittou:** I asked George to speak at the Old Timers meeting and he came down. He had a written speech on manners and loyalty. "Black Cat" Reilly was standing in the back of the room wearing a Yankee hat and jacket. If the speaker had been from Seattle, then "Black Cat" would have had on a Seattle hat and jacket. At that time, Cat was probably close to 60, but Steinbrenner developed infinity with him. Cat would brag about it at the State Legislature while selling those newspapers. Steinbrenner's secretary called me one time and asked if that was a right or left handed glove that I needed. I said, "What are you talking about." She said, "Well, this glove for Mr. Reilly." I said, "You mean "Black Cat" Reilly?" He was promising all kinds of things to those secretaries at the legislature. Every year Steinbrenner gave Cat a Christmas present. In his last few years, Steinbrenner paid for all the expenses for Cat to go down to spring training and stay at his hotel at the Bay Harbor Inn. He put Cat up for two weeks and set him outside the Yankees' locker room in a Yankees jersey where he could get autographs.

**BT:** And another Steinbrenner story?

**Schmittou:** Once he had my whole family sitting up in his box at Yankee Stadium and set us up in a big fancy hotel. We were sitting at a game when Lou Piniella was the manager. The Yankees are getting beat. Mrs. Piniella was in the box with George and us. Lou made some kind of move and George, right in front of everybody, was raving and running Lou down the road about that decision. About that time my youngest son, Steve, lost a tooth. He was about 10 years old and had a loose tooth. All of a sudden with the game going on, George was on his knees. Mrs. Piniella was on her knees and my wife was on her knees looking for my son's tooth.

**BT:** You must have gotten to know some of the Yankees' legends.

**Schmittou:** Mickey Mantle came down a lot with George. Yogi Berra was special. Yogi came down during the strike and spent eight days with us. Yogi is a very intelligent man. He sat in the press box and never took a note. He wanted to talk about life. He didn't talk much about baseball. He did tell some funny stories. At the end of those eight days, Yogi went down to address our team. Yogi discussed game-by-game from memory on everything such-and-such you needed to move so-and-so over in the third inning of the first ball game. If you'd hit behind the runner, you would have moved him from second to third. I just sat there in amazement. He never wrote down a note.

**BT:** In 1993 and 1994, you brought in a second baseball team the Nashville Xpress? How did that develop?

**Schmittou:** There was only one thought. I also owned Huntsville at the time. They were Double-A and with the major league expansion, Charlotte became an affiliate. The man that owned the expansion Double-A team, didn't have a place to play. If they didn't find a home, I would have lost 16 home games for Huntsville. Everybody else in the league would have lost 16 home games. We would have had only nine teams and everybody would have been open four days in a row. Nobody wanted that to happen. I asked my people what they thought about bringing that team to Nashville. They were gung ho about it. It was the easiest two years for my staff in all the 19 years. We could have a regular week. Somebody was there every night. I was the only one there every single night.

**BT:** In 1983, the Texas Rangers asked to become Vice-President of Marketing. What was

that experience like?

**Schmittou:** It was great. I was offered the job in February 1983. They had lost a ton of money the year before. We immediately started making a little money. We were working on getting another stadium built. Our owner was a non-baseball person and non-promotional guy. We had a lot of promotions that set a lot of attendance records. You couldn't see all the fans like you could in the minors. The minors are more fun. Its big business when you are in the majors. I had 13 departments to answer to me. I hired a lot of great people that are still with them. Some have gone on to become general managers of other places. A couple of them are working in the commissioner's office. Chuck Morgan, who I took from the Sounds, is still there as a vice-president. I wish we could have won a championship. We had a chance in 1983, but the White Sox beat us out. I moved down there and lived year round for four years.

**BT:** What was the worst part about running a minor league baseball team?

**Schmittou:** You can have too many owners and you can have too many politicians. And you have too much press.

**BT:** What is your fondest memory about your experience with the Sounds?

**Schmittou:** We were able to bring baseball back. It was successful and we stayed there. And we built a nice stadium for its time that has lasted 30 years. It's still a great place to watch a game.

**BT:** Why did you sell all your financial interest with the Sounds and the other minor league clubs and leave baseball?

**Schmittou:** When the Titans came to town, I knew where the money was going. I decided it was time for me to exit and do something else.

**BT:** You own a number of bowling centers. How did you get onto that venture?

**Schmittou:** For the first six months I made out schedules for leagues and really didn't enjoy that. I really wanted to buy just one or two centers to have something to do. I approached Melrose about buying it, but that didn't work out. I had made friends with Rick Scott, who was involved with Columbia HCA. The commissioner's office called me and asked if I wanted to try to put together a group to buy the Kansas City Royals. I didn't have the money to do that. I left right before George Bush bought my owner out. I knew that Rick Scott had been a very limited partner of Bush with Texas. Scott became CEO of Columbia HCA and moved into Nashville. I knew he was from Kansas City and I approached him about that through a mutual friend. He decided not to do it, but said let's do something together. So I studied the bowling industry through the publicly traded bowling companies and decided to get into bowling in 2000. We bought one and now that's 12.

**BT:** Of all the players you have been associated with the Sounds, who was your favorite player?

**Schmittou:** Skeeter Barnes. The reason Skeeter is my favorite is he's one that no matter whatever bad happened to him, he still worked the hardest. He had that cheerful face on him. Skeeter came to us in 1979 right out of high school. He wasn't a very good fielder. He bounced around the minors and maybe got called up in September one year. Then he came back to us when we were with the Reds. He was always the first person out who was

cheerful and inspiring other people. He would play any position you asked him to. He came in one day after the 1993 season and asked if I'd recommend him for a job on the fire department in Indianapolis where he was from. I said, "I'd be happy to, but you are probably making as much now in Double-A and winter ball as you would make as a fireman. I'd keep playing until they told me you couldn't play any more." Fortunately the next year he was with Detroit, got called up and spent four or five years with them. He usually called me every week. His attitude is what made him one of my favorites. Skeeter wasn't the best player, but he worked harder than anybody I saw coming through there.

*Thanks to Schmittou for giving me all the time I wanted for this interview. He could talk about his love for baseball for days. Schmittou was an owner of the Nashville Sounds for 19 years (1978-96) He is currently an owner of S&S Family Entertainment that operates bowling chains in Tennessee and Kentucky. It is the seventh largest bowling chain in the world. In 2006, Schmittou was inducted into the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame.*

*If you have any comments or suggestions you can contact Bill Traughber via e-mail at [WLTraughber@aol.com](mailto:WLTraughber@aol.com).*