

# First area all-star happiest in PCL

Jim McConnell – Pasadena Star News

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Baseball is a humbling game, and no one could have told you that with more conviction than the late Max West.

West, a 1934 graduate of Alhambra High School, saw his major-league career turn from triumph to tragedy, all in the space of five minutes. It all took place in baseball's premier midseason event, the All-Star Game.

At the time that West was at Alhambra, the Moors were far better known for their outstanding football teams. But baseball was Max's first love.

"I was a pretty good-sized kid, but I really didn't care for football," West said in an interview in May 2000, four years before he died. "I loved baseball. Used to travel all over the area to play, up to Brookside Park in Pasadena, even into L.A.

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After three years as an outfielder in the PCL, West's contract was sold to the Boston Braves.



MAX WEST

Class of 1934  
Baseball  
All Coast League, Baseball 1934  
Professional Baseball  
Major Leagues 1938-1942, 1946, 1948  
Boston Bees (Braves), Cincinnati Reds, Pittsburgh Pirates  
Played and Hit Home Run in 1940 All Star Game  
Pacific Coast League 1935-1937, 1947, 1949-1954  
Sacramento Solons, San Diego Padres, Los Angeles Angels  
2003 Inducted into Pacific Coast League Hall of Game  
1943-1945 Played Baseball for U.S. Army, World War II

SEE: [http://ahsathleticfoundation.org/max\\_west.htm](http://ahsathleticfoundation.org/max_west.htm)

"To be honest, I wasn't wild about going back there to play," West said. "They didn't have any money, they were a real doormat in the National League.

"Braves Field was a tough place to play for a hitter. A big park, cold and damp, the ball didn't carry well. But I did get to play for Casey Stengel, which was an experience."

After a subpar rookie season with the Braves, West had a solid 1939 campaign, hitting .285 with 19 home runs. He was off to a good start in 1940 with the Braves, hitting near .300, when he was chosen as the team's representative for the All-Star Game, making him the first local product to play in the Mid-Summer Classic.

"I was honored to be picked, but I certainly didn't expect to play much," West said. "Our starting outfield was Joe Medwick, Terry Moore and Mel Ott. Last I checked, two of those guys are in the Hall of Fame and Terry Moore should be.

"But a couple hours before game time, (manager) Bill McKechnie comes up to me and tells me I'm in there, in right field. Seems that Ott came down with the flu and wasn't going to play. It all happened so fast, I didn't have time to be nervous. McKechnie already had his lineup card made out, with Ott batting third, so he just stuck me in the No. 3 slot instead.

"The game was played at Sportsman's Park in St. Louis. I liked playing there; they had a short porch in right field that was great for a left-handed pull hitter like myself.

"Anyway, the game starts and Red Ruffing of the Yankees is on the hill. Another Hall of Famer. But we get our first two guys on base.

"So I'm figuring I will be bunting them over, since (Johnny) Mize, (Ernie) Lombardi and Medwick are batting behind me. More Hall of Famers, right?

"But all McKechnie tells me is to go up there, look for my pitch, and drive it. Damned if Ruffing didn't throw me a fastball right where I liked it and I drove it outta there, to right-center. Man. I just floated around the bases."

West didn't have long to bash in his new-found glory. Ruffing retired the next three batters and the NL Stars took the field for the top of the second inning.

"I'm out in right field, and Luke Appling, another Hall of Famer, comes up. Luke was a slap hitter, but he got a hold of one and hit it good to right field. I go back to get it and forgot about that short fence and banged into it, hard. Messed up my left side pretty good, my ribs and collarbone and elbow.

"McKechnie came out and immediately wanted me to come out. 'No sense taking a chance in this game,' he says. I have to agree. So I'm outta there. Well, by the next morning I was really hurting. But, back then, if you came out of the lineup you might

never get back in. Besides, the Braves didn't have much of anything else going so they want me to play. I shouldn't have.

"My average slipped from .290 to .260. I hit only one home run the rest of the season. Worse than that, I messed up my swing trying to favor my left side."

West's career with the Braves never quite developed after that, although he was the team's starting right fielder in 1941 and 1942.

During World War II, he served three years in the Army Air Force, as a crew member on a B-29 bomber. When he returned to baseball, in 1946, it wasn't the same.

"I played one game for Boston in 1946, and then was traded to Cincinnati," West said. "There, I just sat on the bench. The younger guys were in there, and frankly I just didn't have the same desire I had before the war."

Fortunately for West, he was sold to San Diego of the Pacific Coast League. He hit .306 with 43 home runs and 134 RBIs for the Padres in 1947.

"I really found a home in the PCL," West said. "Loved playing in that league, and San Diego was a great place to be."

West had another great year with San Diego in 1949, hitting .291 with 48 home runs, 166 RBIs and a PCL-record 201 walks. He finished his PCL career with another standout season with the Padres in 1950 and four years with the Los Angeles Angels.

"After the 1954 season, I figured it was time to retire," West said. "I was 38 years old, and had a chance to go into the sporting goods business."

"Eventually, talked Ralph Kiner, another Alhambra kid, into putting up some money and we started our own sporting goods store in Alhambra. Ran that store for 30 years, and made a lot more money there than I ever did in baseball. So it's been a great life."

"Always figured that injury in the All-Star Game and missing three years because of the war all worked in my favor. Without that happening, I probably would have never gone back to play in the PCL and probably wouldn't have been around here to start up the store. You know what they say, everything happens for a reason."

After retiring from business, West lived in Highland for many years. He died of cancer on Dec. 31, 2004 at an assisted-living facility in Sierra Madre.

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