

## What People are Saying about *Dreaming of the Majors*

“Lefty” O’Neal is truly a man who loves God . . . *Dreaming of the Majors – Living in the Bush* is a rich and valuable read for anyone who has a great life dream, and more importantly, reflects upon how to deal with life when that dream doesn’t come true. “Lefty’s” personal sports witness to his Lord is truly a spiritual breakthrough insight. I fully endorse his book. He touches some great themes in America’s historical culture. I think the book should be in the school systems across America.”

**Frank Broyles**

Former Athletic Director and Hall of Fame  
Head Football Coach for the Arkansas Razorbacks

“This book by Dick ‘Lefty’ O’Neal is a lovely piece of Americana. It will take you on an ironic tour of race relations on the diamond, as Lefty becomes the mirror image of Jackie Robinson, playing as the only white guy on a negro league team. If this story weren’t true, it would be a great novel. The fact that it is true makes it even better. If this book doesn’t convince you that we are all one people, all God’s people, nothing will.”

**Larry Dierker**

Houston Astros Hall of Famer  
Player, manager, and announcer

“My good friend Dick O’Neal has written a very meaningful and clever book in *Dreaming of the Majors—Living in the Bush*. The first several chapters could have as well been written about my life in the golf world. I particularly enjoyed his wife’s reflection on their early days of marriage and baseball. God blessed Dick with a wonderful platform, baseball, with which to share his life and faith journey, and he does it in a very compassionate and interesting way throughout the book. Frankly, I was quite surprised to see how much life Dick has lived this side of heaven. I am inspired by Dick’s book, and grateful for his labor for the kingdom.”

**Bill Rogers**

PGA player of the year, 1981 British Open Champion

“Dick O’Neal’s writings are those of an angel himself. He is a very humble and inspiring person, whom I have come to respect and love dearly. He is truly a family man, a baseball man, and most of all he is a child of God. His writings are a pleasure and a joy to read.”

**Mike “The Hit Man” Easler**

Hitting coach for the Los Angeles Dodgers

“Lefty O’Neal has a winner in this book that will stand the test of time. Reading the book brought back fond memories I had with him at two universities. One of my wife’s favorite quotes is ‘Bloom where you are planted.’ Lefty’s book definitely shows that when the Lord is in charge you will bloom where you are planted. I know Lefty was an asset to our football programs and asked nothing in return. This book is a must read for anyone who has a dream.”

**Coach Mervin Johnson**

Former assistant coach for the Arkansas Razorbacks  
and former assistant head coach for  
the Oklahoma Sooners

“As the Executive Director for the Center for Negro League Baseball Research, my initial contact with Dick O’Neal came from my desire to interview the only white ball player to have played in two different Negro Leagues (Gulf Coast and South Texas Negro Leagues). I soon found out his career in baseball was far more than having played in the Negro Leagues. His career in baseball has moved from being one of the best high school ball players in the South, to being scouted by the St. Louis Cardinals, to the college level, to professional baseball in the Negro Leagues, back to amateur baseball and culminating in a long career in coaching and scouting. Besides having been blessed as an excellent athlete, Dick O’Neal is an outstanding person. His story is a unique perspective of how a young player grows as a ball player and how a young man becomes a Christian to stand as an example for all of us.”

**Dr. Layton Revel**

Center for Negro League Baseball Research

“My dear brother Dick O’Neal has implanted his vibrant spirit and love for athletics into a moving and insightful witness about his own sports journey and love for Christ. He shares his witness in wonderful common ways by taking the little things of competition and creating large lenses that reveal challenge, thrill, satisfaction, and joy of being in the game. Of all of the sports stories

I have heard throughout the years he has captured their essence in this brief read of his outstanding career. I found it refreshing and strengthening and confidently recommend it to others.”

**Dr. H. D. McCarty**

Chaplain of the Arkansas Razorbacks, Emeritus  
Brigadier General, USAF (Ret.)

“Have you ever noticed that baseball is raceless? Ageless? Timeless? Priceless? Have you ever wondered why? Then this book is for you! You need not be a lover of baseball as Dick “Lefty” O’Neal is. You need not understand the strategy of the game. You need not even know any of the teams or players of yesteryear or today! This book is about how one man with the right purpose, surrounded by the right people, can make a difference!”

**Skip Bradley**

President of the Men’s Senior Baseball League of  
San Antonio, Texas

“Coach O’Neal has not only touched and inspired my life through baseball but he has equally filled a lot of puzzle pieces in my own spiritual path. His story is one of hope, and it encourages all of us to pursue our dreams regardless of the obstacles that stand in our path.”

**Dustin Craig**

Past pitching student and professional baseball player

“As a child I also loved the game with dreams of making it to my favorite baseball team. As we know, life does have a way of changing even the best-laid plans. Dick’s story of hope and doing what you love and how God used it is well worth the read.”

**Don Varney**

Professional inspirational speaker, Christian radio talk show host, and  
member of the executive board of FCA,  
San Antonio, Texas

“Lefty’s book was an inspiration and definitely shows that you can get strength from heavenly hormones rather than steroids. It is a must read!”

**Gary Delaune**

Feature sports announcer and writer in San Antonio, Texas



DREAMING OF THE MAJORS  

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**LIVING IN THE BUSH**



DREAMING OF THE MAJORS  

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**LIVING IN THE BUSH**

*A Life's Journey through  
the Negro League with  
His Guardian Angels*

DICK "LEFTY" O'NEAL

**REDEMPTION**  **PRESS**

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# CONTENTS



Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	xv
Foreword: Harriett O’Neal	xvii
<b>PART 1: WARM-UP</b>	
1. My Family and Friends	1
2. Watching My Hat Size Grow	7
<b>PART 2: THE GAME I LOVE</b>	
3. The Journey to the Bush Begins	19
4. From Pain to Gain	25
5. A New Definition of “Fun”	33
6. Looks Are Deceiving	43
<b>PART 3: AFTER THE GAME</b>	
7. Life after Baseball—or so I Thought	67
8. The Bottom Line	85
Epilogue: The Reunions	93
Appendix: An Interview with a Living Legend	107



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My family—Adam, Harriett, Elliott, Amy, and me

my parents, who backed me in everything I tried to accomplish, my big brother Gary, who will always be my best friend.



Gary, Mom, Dad, and me in the seventies

My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who has been with me every step of the way; and all of His guardian angels and Christian brothers and sisters He sent my way when I needed them the most. I feel He has always been saying to me, “A man who can lead a soul to Me is playing in life’s major league.”

And to all of the young-at-heart old-timers who are still reliving their lives in baseball, either by watching or playing the game: Never forget your past, because it could become a rich part of your future.

To all of you who were, and still are, a part of my journey in life, thank you, and may God bless you for making my life worth living.

# INTRODUCTION



I'VE OFTEN WONDERED what my life would have been like if someone had shared a book like this with me when I was young.

Those stars who made it to the top usually wrote the sports books. They became the household names. They tell the story, "If you try hard enough you will get to the top." As Americans we like this scenario.

Looking back on my life, however, I wondered what "get to the top" meant if you didn't make it.

Most of the baseball kids in my time grew up expecting to make it to the big leagues someday, because all the books told us we could. We dreamed, we worked hard, but for one reason or another, a lot of us never made it to the majors. I thank God I had the chance to try. Ask anyone with a passion for sports, and he or she will say the same thing.

At age five I dreamed of playing baseball. My parents wanted me to succeed. Coaches helped me to develop my talent. I pitched whenever I could. I played Little League, Pony League, American Legion, college, and professional Bush League baseball at a lot of interesting places and was even a top prospect for the St. Louis Cardinals in 1967, in the early years of the professional baseball June draft.

This is my story. My hope and prayer is that you will make it all the way to the top in whatever you are going for—and remember who helped you along the way. In my case I had to realize that there is more to life

than baseball, but baseball gave me a great opportunity to share how it helped me with my walk as a Christian. It still holds a special place in my heart. But if you only make it as far as I did, perhaps you may learn a little bit about yourself and life as you go. Whatever lessons I learned in sports, particularly baseball, I used in my life as a Christian.

If part or all of your life is spent in the “bush,” make it an enjoyable time. In my life the bush was the Negro Leagues. In your case it might be the position you had to settle for because you weren’t able to get that top job you wanted. Just remember, the Lord has a reason for putting you where you are, and He’ll be with you no matter where your path may take you. Believing in Him and following His lead will give you a life that will last well beyond this short time we have on earth.

# FOREWORD

## HARRIETT O'NEAL



*To sum up, each one of you is to love his wife as himself, and the wife is to respect her husband.*

—Ephesians 5:33

LIVING WITH AN athlete can be very trying, unless you love the sport as much as the athlete does, and I definitely didn't. Let's face it: baseball can be very boring, especially when there are just a few hits. So it's not difficult to imagine how our conversations went when Dick was so excited that he hadn't allowed very many hits. (He does admit now that even he has a hard time watching baseball with the same enthusiasm as he does football and basketball.)

When I met Dick in college, I always enjoyed watching him play, but I went to see him pitch, not to watch a baseball game. If he wasn't pitching, I didn't have a clue who was winning, and I really didn't care. Of course, to him, it didn't matter if he was pitching. The most important thing was that he was a part of the game, even if it meant playing a support role on the bench.

Just before our wedding, Dick took an Air Force job that would allow him to play baseball for them. I thought once we were married I would be able to change his desire to play all the time. I was wrong.

After two short weeks of marriage, I thought about going back home to my parents, because baseball always had to come first. Of course, Dick had told me up front that baseball was first, and I would be second—until he had to hang up his cleats. I thought he was kidding. Again, I was wrong, at least for the first five years of our marriage.

My favorite story that sets the stage for what I experienced during the first part of our lives together as husband and wife shows how dedicated Dick was to his game.

I had just finished turning our tiny mobile home into a cute, cozy home for two.

We went to church on Sunday, as usual, at Keesler Air Force Base, and I left a chicken cooking in the oven so Dick could eat before he went to his game. We did not know that the oven's thermostat didn't work, and 250 degrees was really 500 degrees. I jokingly told the preacher we had to hurry home because my chicken was probably burning.

When we approached the mobile home we saw smoke pouring out of the windows. We ran in to find that the chicken was on fire in the gas oven.

By the time we put out the fire, soot covered every inch of every room. I was shaken by the fact that our home had almost been destroyed, but I was also really mad that I had to clean everything all over again.

Dick, however, had his mind on only one thing: the game. He went back to the bedroom, put on his uniform, and returned to the living room, where I was sitting in shock. He said, "Honey, I've got to get to the ballpark early because I'm pitching in the first game. I know you understand. When I get back, I'll help you clean the trailer."

I'll never forget watching him get on his motorcycle and drive away while I sat crying on our front porch. At that moment I felt I had to make a decision: Do I never speak to him again, call my mom and dad back in Arkansas and tell them to get my old room ready, or just ride this one out and find a way to get back at him later?

Knowing what I would do even as I weighed my options, I stood up, dried my tears, and walked back inside. I cleaned the house again—every dish, every shelf, all the curtains and linens, the carpet, the furniture, every room. (And, yes, I got the faulty thermostat fixed.)

At the end of the day, my husband waltzed in, telling me how great the games were and that he was the winning pitcher for the first one! That day I definitely learned where I fit into his plans.

We never had to worry or argue about what we wanted to do on weekends. Every Saturday and Sunday arrived preplanned: baseball games—games in some of the most unusual places, such as pastures, big backyards, overgrown cornfields in Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Mexico.

When Dick began playing for the Gulf Coast and South Texas “Bush” Leagues, I had another adjustment to make. In Biloxi there were other white players on his team, though it was odd being one of the only three white wives sitting in the stands. The games were fun to watch, and all of the Biloxi fans treated us like we were part of the family. They also did a great job of protecting us from any verbal abuse from the visiting fans and teams. In Texas, however, I was the only white wife at the ballpark. That alone made me uncomfortable, but that wasn’t the reason I didn’t come back. I was working on my master’s degree at that point, so I really didn’t have time to go to his games; I spent all my time studying on weekends. If not for that, I would have gone back; the home fans and Dick’s teammates really took care of him, and I know they would have done the same for me.

The Spanish American League took their games too seriously for me. It just wasn’t fun at the park, so I stayed away from those games as well. Still, I didn’t try to stop Dick from playing in any of those leagues, because he always said to me, “If they have the guts to take a chance on me even though the leagues don’t accept it very well, then I’m going to play. I have no other choice. These leagues are allowing me the chance to continue playing the game I love. I’ve always been taught to see just the good in people.” Nevertheless, I worried about his safety. But, as we know, the Lord has a plan for everything, so I was willing to go along and trust the Lord would protect him.

After Dick was chosen to attend the University of Arkansas to work on his master’s degree and earn an Air Force commission, I thought my days as a sports widow were over. Once again, I was wrong. Since baseball wasn’t in the picture for about the next nineteen years, Dick found ways to get his sports fix through football at the University of Arkansas and

the University of Oklahoma. He also looked for ways to keep involved in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes every time we moved to a new location. He even volunteered to be a marshal at professional golf events in Ft. Worth and San Antonio.

When we moved back to San Antonio for the final time, Dick—at the ripe young age of fifty—jumped at the opportunity to be a part of the amateur baseball league there. He tried that for four years but started realizing that he had better learn how to just watch the game. The Lord allowed another dream to come true when Dick was able to become a baseball scout, and he is still doing that today.

Once two people marry, it's for life. And if one is an athlete, the other marries the lifestyle of an athlete. I tried to love and support Dick in all of his athletic endeavors because it was so important to him and because he maintained his faith in the Lord through it all. I even joined a softball team when we first got married to see if I could learn to appreciate what he found in sports. However, I ended up with a cast on my wrist when a base runner decided to plow me over between third base and home plate. My career in sports was definitely short lived, but I think Dick appreciated my attempt. It helped him realize the need to be more involved in things I liked to do also.

We both have a love for music and the arts—as well as a mutual love for the Lord—and that's what has kept our relationship somewhat balanced all these years. We knew we had to give and take to be able to live a lifetime together; our family and our relationship with each other are the most important things to both of us. Because we've prioritized our lives this way, coupled with the fact that we love each other very much, the older we get the better life becomes. God is good!

I'm really proud of Dick for writing this book. I know it was a labor of love and a long journey to the publisher. I'm glad he felt it was important for me to share with other "significant others" who have to live with athletic "nuts" to let them know they are not alone. If we really love that nut and we allow the Lord to guide us through our short time on this earth, then life is worth living.

Be encouraged by Dick's journey, and remember that none of it would have been possible without the Lord being with him all the way. May He bless you on your journey as well.

*PART 1*  
WARM-UP

*Teach a youth about the way he should go;  
even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

—Proverbs 22:6



# MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS



*Honor your father and mother . . . that it may go well with you  
and that you may have a long life in the land.*

—Ephesians 6:2–3

*How good and pleasant it is when brothers can live together!*

—Psalm 133:1

“MISTER! HEY, MISTER!” came a boy’s voice from across the infield.  
“Sign my ball for me?”

I looked up to see a young boy waving at me, and I heard the soft thud of small tennis shoes racing down to the field from the stands.

“Hey, mister, will ya?”

I breathed deeply the faint smells of hot dogs and popcorn, the scent of freshly mowed outfield. Behind the kid running toward me, I heard the backdrop noise of the fans in the bleachers, punctuated by the hawking cries of the vendors.

It was the San Antonio Missions Old-Timers’ yearly classic, and I was to pitch that day. I grinned at the kid and nearly teared up.

*Why would he want me to sign anything? He doesn’t even know who I am.*

Then I thought back to my childhood and saw myself doing the same thing. It didn't matter who I was; he was just looking for a ballplayer who was nice enough to sign something.

I said to him, "You bet, and don't lose faith, kid. Don't ever lose faith, because when you stop believing in the game, it will cease to exist."

He held a brand-new ball and had a smile that was contagious. You can see the face of God in the innocence of a child so well. He looked eight to nine, but tall. He wore a fairly new Missions cap, baggy jeans, and looped through his belt hung an aged and well-oiled fielder's glove. Likely it had been his father's.

With a grin the kid said, "Thanks, mister," and he ran back to his family and friends.

After that experience I signed anything the kids wanted signed. Just keep your innocence and your love for the game. Don't ever forget these soft summer days with the breeze blowing small bits of litter toward the back fence or the feel of the rosin bag in your hand. We are here because we love the game, and when you're hooked, really addicted, it doesn't matter if it's the World Series, a bunch of neighborhood kids out in the back lot, or even the Old-Timers' Classic.

I felt just plain good and happy knowing I would be on the mound that day, pitching against some formidable sticks. These guys may have retired from pro ball, but they could still hit. And many, like me, were still actively involved in the game. Others run farm clubs or coach at the college or professional level.

That old-timers' game is as clear to me today as it was when it took place in 1994. But I never would have stood on that pitcher's mound if not for the people and circumstances the Lord brought into my life that prepared and shaped me for that moment. For years, I was scrutinized, observed, coached, and primed for a place in the Major Leagues, yet I never made it out of the Bush Leagues. So why don't I feel like a failure? I loved the game itself, but I loved more how it brought fathers, mothers, children, friends, and even strangers (like you and me) closer together.

My life has been anything but that of a typical athlete. When I was young I was physically large for my age and wore thick-rimmed, black glasses with heavy prescription lenses, giving opponents and fans ample opportunity to make cracks like "Four eyes" and "Fatso." And when

it came to picking teams and positions, I was always picked last and I could count on playing right field or bench warmer. In school I spent as much time on stage or playing in the band as I did on the mound. That also brought on the “sissy” comments.

I’m not a Renaissance man, but my father and mother taught me the true meaning of the dictum, “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well.” Dad also said, “Someday when you’re old, and you find yourself sitting in a rocking chair on your front porch, don’t let any “what ifs” cross your lips. There should be no regrets.” So I tried everything I could and gave every attempt my best effort.

My brother, Gary, who is four years older than I am, was one of those big brothers who took me along on some of his teenage outings. Even though I was probably a pest, I think he really liked me, and I was proud to be his little brother.

My dad never finished high school. But he greatly appreciated the value of education and taught me to never count on having a career in the pros.

“Get an education,” he said, “and learn other skills so you won’t have to sling a pick and a shovel for the rest of your life.”

Dad served in the army and then worked for the soil conservation service for more than forty years. He spent grueling hours in the field, but I don’t recall him ever complaining. He always made time for my mom, my brother, and certainly for me.

When my dad realized I wanted to be a professional athlete at such an early age, he started throwing the ball with me whenever I asked. Unfortunately for him, that was nearly every day from 1955 to 1967. He knew, too, that when I turned nine and started pitching, I would be better accepted by my peers because I was left-handed.

Though he was tired after a long day at work, he would unhesitatingly play catch with me and talk. I used an exposed tree root for a pitcher’s rubber, and threw down-slope to him so he could catch without having to get into a classical catcher’s squat. (To this day, grass will not grow where we stood.) And we’d talk. Talk about his day. Pitch. Talk about my grades. Pitch. As I got older, we even talked about girls. And then I would pitch. The rhythmic cadence of our conversation punctuated by the sweet slap of the ball in his glove is something I still think about

daily. He taught me to take my time, think of the consequences of every pitch, and then throw like my life depended on it. I took so much time in between my pitches that it seemed to make the batters mad, but it worked. Perhaps that hypnotic pace is why one of my baseball nicknames was “Mother McNeal.”

Mom said it was a very sad day in Dad’s life when I had to get a catcher to catch for me because I was getting too fast for him to see the ball. Mom told me Dad would come in from our sessions and secretly soak his hand so he could keep catching. She asked me to, as diplomatically as possible, get him to give it up and invite him to become my personal baseball coach while someone else caught for me.

As I recall, I said something like, “Dad, I have really appreciated your help with catching, but I really need someone on the mound to teach me the finer points of the game.” Since my dad was never a pitcher, I didn’t know exactly what he might have to teach me, but it was important to me to have him nearby, and it was important to him to be needed.

Mom really liked Little League, but as I got older it became difficult for her to listen to the verbal abuse being thrown my way from the visiting teams and fans—and sometimes my own fans if we weren’t winning. She couldn’t stand to hear negative comments about her baby. She still feels that her staying away from most of my American Legion games over a three-year period brought all of my success and eventual interest from professional baseball scouts. She never understood that the pitcher was the center of the action and bad-mouthing the pitcher was just part of the game.

Family values work. I could never put in one little book everything my dad and mom taught me. They sacrificed so much for my brother and me. Their world centered around our needs first, and they were my first look at what a Christian should be like.

In baseball, I quickly learned how agents and scouts would talk and talk, promise everything, and, to some prospects, deliver next to nothing. Without a solid family or foundation of friendships, a promising young athlete can get lost in the machine, and many do. But with a supportive family structure, a young jock can walk on and off the field knowing he or she is loved and accepted no matter how he or she performs.

At my pitching clinics I try to teach kids to do their very best, but have fun. When the fun, faith, and desire to do your very best are gone, you may as well hang up your cleats. I sometimes see young guys so pressured by their parents to perform that their throwing arms are ruined by the time they're teenagers. I want to take those kids out to the field and remind them that baseball is a game. Feel the breeze blowing in from the outfield. Remember what it's like to react snake-like to a hot grounder, throw with your entire body, and nail that dude at first.

I distinctly remember when I finally realized I would never be a pitcher in the Cardinal organization. I was devastated. But because of the way I was raised, I knew I could keep my love of the sport, remain active in it, get on with my life, and see what God had in store for me along the way. I realized that my love for the game was not contingent on being in the starting lineup!