

Baseball pioneer Curt Flood, who paved the way for free agency, dies at 59

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Baseball pioneer Curt Flood recently died after a bout with throat cancer at the age of 59. Flood is profiled, and his role in paving the way for free agency is discussed.

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Athletes who have reaped the benefits of being a free agent owe a debt of gratitude to baseball star Curt Flood, who recently died after a lengthy bout with throat cancer. He was 59.

The star center fielder fought a legal battle with baseball officials which paved the way to free agency for other athletes.

Flood, whose career spanned from 1956-1971, played the majority of his career, 12 seasons, with the St. Louis Cardinals where he was an allstar center fielder. During his pro career, which included the Cincinnati Reds (1956-57) and 13 games with the

Washington Senators, Flood batted .293, stole 85 bases and appeared in three World Series which the Cardinals won in 1964 and 1967. In one span, he played in 226 consecutive games without committing an error and in 1966 went the entire season without making a misplay. He batted over .300 six times and won the Gold Glove for fielding excellence seven years in a row in the '60s.

Although he had a great career, Flood's legacy comes from his heroics off the field, where he became revered as a pioneer who stood up to fight a baseball system that he said "treated people like they were pieces of property." His battle for freedom within major league baseball, which he ultimately lost at the Supreme Court in 1972, caused his stellar career to be cut short. But the impact of what Curt Flood did spanned beyond baseball in helping athletes in all pro sports to even the control level between players and owners.

"A lot of people can be given credit for helping bring about free agency, but Curt Flood will always be considered the pioneer," said Chicago White Sox's Albert Belle in USA Today. Belle recently signed a fiveyear, \$55-million deal, which is the richest, free-agent baseball contract.

Flood's battle began after the 1969 season when the Cardinals traded him to the Philadelphia Phillies. He refused to go and rejected a \$100,000 contract. Baseball's commissioner at the time, Bowie Kuhn, would not declare him a free agent. That ignited Flood's challenge of baseball's reserve clause, which bound a player to a team regardless of his wishes.



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▲ Curt Flood, shown in this 1970 file photo, will be remembered as the baseball pioneer who paved the way for free agency. He recently died at age 59.

[Photograph]

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A judge in federal district court refused to upset the clause and suggested that the players and owners work something out.

Flood sat out the 1970 season after he refused to be traded. He signed with the Washington Senators in 1971, but he played only 13 games and then abruptly retired.

However his fight with baseball's establishment continued to find its way to the Supreme Court, which chose to side with baseball owners in a 5-3 vote in 1972. Flood's case was lost, but the fight he started eventually was won.

In 1974 Catfish Hunter became baseball's first free agent on a technicality, but it was the decision in 1975 when an arbitration panel granted free agency to pitchers Andy Messersmith and Dave McNally that ended the reserve system. Players were granted free agency after six years of major-league service.

"All the groundwork was laid for the people who came after me," Flood said a few years ago about his fight. "The Supreme Court decided not to give it to me, so they gave it to two White guys. I think that's what they were waiting for."

In recent years Flood lived in the Baldwin Hills section of Los Angeles and ran a foundation to benefit inner-city youths.

Rep. John Conyers Jr. of Detroit recently introduced a bill that removes the antitrust exemption as it applies to labor matters. The antitrust exemption is what supported baseball's reserve system. The bill is HR 21, in honor of Flood's uniform number. And, his life will soon be the subject of an HBO documentary directed by Spike Lee.

Flood is survived by his wife, noted actress Judy Pace, two stepdaughters and son by a previous marriage.



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[Photograph]

1 Former baseball star Curt Flood, shown at an awards ceremony in 1993, ran a foundation to help inner-city kids during his latter years. He recently died from throat cancer.