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A Look at the Finley-Led A's With Nancy Finley

March 09, 2011
by Paul Ferrante

Summary

Readers might recall my feature on Kansas City Municipal Stadium a few months back (Mar. 26, 2010, issue of SCD), which produced some wonderful responses from readers. One of the most positive and interesting writers was Nancy Finley, whose father, Carl (photo shown here), served as A's owner Charlie Finley's right-hand man during the A's stay in Kansas City all the way through to Finley's sale of the team in 1980. This architect of the Oakland powerhouse teams of the 1970s was recruited by his cousin, Charlie, a real estate tycoon, from his position as a high school principal to run a professional sports franchise (with a handful of staff) for a mostly-absentee owner.



Nancy Finley would spend her teen years at his side, helping out wherever possible. As you read this interview, just think of the many layers of management MLB franchises (some of which can't get out of their own way) employ today, and Nancy's story becomes even more incredible. And, of course, you'll enjoy hearing about the memorabilia she's retained from the era of Charlie Finley's Swingin' Oakland A's.

Sports Collectors Digest (SCD): Tell us how you (and your father) came to be a part of the Kansas City Athletics baseball club.

Nancy Finley (NF): When the phone call came, I was 2 years old. Of course, it was business. Nothing to do with me. And yet it had everything to do with my destiny and how as a young girl I would one day be witness to an era in baseball history few ever have had the privilege to experience. It was that phone call to our modest home in Dallas in 1962 that would bring me here, to a moment in 2003, watching my little 10-year-old daughter on the mound at

the Oakland Coliseum, getting ready to throw out the first pitch. How did she get there? How did I get here? What, as they say, was it all about?

This is the story of what it was all about.

When Charlie Finley purchased the Kansas City Athletics in 1960, he realized he needed a very good business "partner." Charlie had a very good eye for talent and who would be great in which position. Charlie wanted his cousin, my dad Carl Finley, to join him with his new MLB organization.

That was the phone call that changed everything.

In the early 1960s (1960-62), we lived an idealistic life in a white-picket fence neighborhood of Walnut Hill in Dallas. Dad was principal of a high school only a few blocks from our street.

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Charlie wanted Dad to join his new team. Somehow, Charlie knew he was "the person" for the job. There was no shortage of relatives. Even so, Charlie wanted Dad. To explain Charlie and Dad's relationship ... Charlie and Dad were actually cousins. Their fathers were brothers, close in age and closer than with the other siblings. Interestingly, Charlie took after my grandfather, Carl A. Finley, and dad took after Charlie's father, Oscar A. Finley.

Charlie and Dad each had one younger brother, and one sister. Charlie did not seem that close to his younger brother. Dad was about 12 years older than his younger brother. Charlie and Dad saw each other often growing up, since their fathers got the families together often.

Charlie never had an opportunity to finish college. He did not have a college degree. I remember how my grandfather made a huge issue out of Dad completing college. When Dad obtained a Master's, Granddad was elated.

Granddad pressed Dad to become a lawyer. He attended law school, although his heart wasn't in law. He wanted to pursue education, and become Texas State Superintendent some day.

Granddad certainly bragged about Dad's education. Soon, other Finley cousins were receiving college degrees. I know this family pressure had a lifetime impact on Charlie. Charlie appreciated Dad's composure and education. Charlie wanted Dad. Period. The phone calls were daily and persistent.

That first phone call was the first step in Charlie Finley's campaign to get Dad to quit his career in education and help run a big-league baseball team. Years later, Dad told me he told Charlie changing careers like that was out of the question. But Charlie didn't give up. The calls started coming more frequently.

I remember Mother telling me Charlie would often say, "Carl, you could be doing this, too." Or, "Carl, do you know what happened today? Carl, I really need you. Carl, I bought you a round-trip Braniff (airline of choice, from Love Field to K.C.) plane ticket to visit me for the weekend, you can see how things are run, all expenses paid."

I don't remember my parents ever arguing, until after one of these weekend visits. The argument was over Charlie asking Dad to show an actress around Kansas City. This was Kansas City. What was Dad doing with a Hollywood actress?

The actress was Connie Stevens. I remember Dad brought home an 8-by-10 signed photo of Ms. Stevens. This is what really made Mom mad. I heard Ms. Stevens' brother was applying for a job at Municipal Stadium. Charlie met Ms. Stevens, and asked Dad to help her brother. This kind of stuff didn't happen in our local school system.

Charlie was soon paying for Dad to visit every weekend, though he still wasn't willing to leave his career behind. Finally, Charlie had a meeting with Dad, and banker Alexander Barket of CPNB in Kansas City, Mo. Charlie made Dad the offer of having a minority ownership in the team, plus purchasing us a home, if he decided to make the career change.

It was after this meeting that Dad decided to submit his resignation to the high school. His last month as principal was May 1962. Almost every weekend through the first five months of 1962, Charlie was flying Dad to Kansas City. Dad moved to Kansas City first and continued flying to Kansas City from Dallas throughout the remainder of 1962.

We put our Dallas house up for sale and Dad moved to Kansas City in about February 1963, to prepare for the 1963 season. I remember my mother and I visiting every weekend, taking a passenger train to Kansas City from Dallas. Our Dallas house finally sold, and Mom and I joined him in Kansas City by August-September 1963.

SCD: In Kansas City, your uncle expressed a real disdain for the Yankees, whom the A's had previously dealt with quite a bit. Can you talk about this?

NF: I was so young then. I have heard the family speak of how the Kansas City Athletics were being used as a farm team for the Yankees throughout the 1950s. I've also heard many times that when Charlie won the winning bid at auction, circa 1960, he declared his team would no longer be connected to the Yankees in this way.

SCD: It seems fairly early in his KC days, Charlie began exploring other cities to which to move the team. What do you recall about that?

NF: I know Charlie did not want to move from Kansas City. In the early 1960s, Charlie invested \$200,000-\$300,000 in stadium renovations. He was so excited, as I remember the whole family was. Charlie was not the type to pay this kind of money out of his own pocket if he intended to move the team.

As an example, after moving to Oakland, Calif., this did not happen.

I remember hearing Charlie wanted to move the team out of Kansas City. The press was saying this before we ever started searching for a new place. We started searching for a new city because of the intense media and political pressure. We realized we needed a safety net. If we did have to move, we were hoping for Dallas. This is because we knew Texas well, having family there. As it turned out, when we really needed to move, fast, Oakland was the city ready at that time. That is how it happened.

SCD: How much authority did your dad really have in his position as general manager? Were there clashes with Charlie?

NF: Dad was referred to as Charlie's No. 2 person with the A's/Athletics organization. It's interesting. When Dad accepted Charlie's offer, he became a minority owner, too. It took much persuasion for him to leave his career behind at age 37.

Dad had the final say on everything on a day-to-day basis at the Coliseum. I remember how Dad had to sign off on the A's roster every late afternoon when the team was in town. Dad dealt with the media, advertisers, season ticket holders, security, etc. Whenever a fan was hit by a foul ball, he had to see that person afterward. I remember hearing about some of these injuries.

Dad didn't settle with one title. I could tell this confused people. He seemed to be whatever was best suited for the occasion. This could be vice president, general manager, director of public relations, ticket manager, operations manager, etc. I remember employees at our home needing to speak with him about Charlie.

Everyone who knew the dynamics between Dad and Charlie and knew he could get through to Charlie. Dad also knew Charlie's personality.

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How much authority did Dad have? I think the reality is "How much authority did he want for a particular issue?"

If Dad didn't trust someone, Charlie listened. Most of the time, Charlie was the one who from time to time fired front office employees, via the telephone, and Dad would quietly rehire the person the next morning.

I remember Charlie calling on the phone every day, usually more than once.

Charlie spoke to Dad about most, if not all decisions. Charlie liked, and seemed to need, others' feedback. I remember all the brainstorming sessions.

SCD: What do you remember about Charlie 'O,' the mule that replaced the elephant as the A's mascot during the Finley years?

NF: Our mascot, Charlie 'O'! I remember hearing family discussions about what the mascot should be. I don't remember seeing the elephant mascot. Then, I heard we were given a mule by the Governor of Missouri. This was not given to us intended as a mascot. I learned people in Missouri, and throughout the Midwest, adore mules. The timing was perfect. A mascot fell into our laps, so to speak. The name said it: Charlie 'O.' This was our mascot, and it seemed perfect.

Charlie 'O' was boarded at Benjamin Stable in Kansas City, owned by Howard Benjamin. Benjamin and Dad became very good friends. Benjamin gave me a horse. I used to ride up to Charlie 'O's stall, and give him carrots or sugar cubes from home. I would converse with Charlie 'O.' I was an only child and would pretend I could speak to animals. Charlie 'O' was such a sweetie.

SCD: What did you think about the controversial switch to the now-familiar green and gold colors of the A's in 1963?

NF: I really only remember green and gold with the A's. This is for Kansas City and Oakland. I loved color, and the K.C. Municipal Stadium was the best place ever for a child to be. In Kansas City, one of the renovations Charlie paid for was to have the stadium walls painted brilliant, bright colors. I remember walls of gold, aqua, sunshine yellow, orange. I loved our uniforms. To me, this was the way it should be. I can't forget the sheep dyed various colors, grazing in the field above the bleachers. It was a utopia.

SCD: What were your favorite Charlie Finley promotional events?

NF: In Kansas City, I remember one Easter Sunday, during a game, my uncles (and grandfather) dressed like rabbits (a la Harvey), and handed out candy during the game. Each carried a basket full of candy. I thought this was so funny. I was trying to guess who was under the costume.

Another time, Charlie 'O' was present with a huge birthday cake on the field. Everyone sang "Happy Birthday." Fans were informed in advance of the Charlie 'O' Birthday Bash.

In Oakland, the most unusual promotional day would have to be "Hot Pants Day" in 1971. This seems unbelievable now.

SCD: The A's front office was famous for being run on a shoestring. Are there any humorous aspects that you remember?

NF: We often worked with a skeleton crew. I don't think the front office ever exceeded eight people. The positive side of this is we certainly weren't run like a bureaucracy. No one was ever accused of acting like a bureaucrat, either.

We didn't have voice mail then. We used a switchboard operator for all calls. Then, we had private phone numbers, which went directly to an employee. In Kansas City, I was able to call the stadium and ask to speak to "Daddy," and the switchboard operator knew exactly who I was, and who "Daddy" was.

One comment I hear the most about Dad is how he did the work of many. The number varies, but seems to grow larger all the time.

As a teenager, I went through a baking phase. Our A's office was so small and personal Dad often brought my new concoctions to the office for a snack. I remember once I accidentally put too much bran in one of my recipes. Dad reported the outcome that evening.

SCD: Did you attend the Beatles concert at K.C. Municipal in the summer of 1964? What do you remember about the event?

NF: A few weeks before the Beatles performed, I remember Mom playing the record "I Want to Hold Your Hand" over and over again. I was about 4 years old. I knew something was going to happen around this song. We were given some comped Beatles records in advance of the concert. But when it was time for the concert, I came down with the measles. I remember how disappointed Mom seemed. It was good for me that Mom was a nurse. She and I had to be quarantined in a private K.C. Municipal Stadium office. We had a window, so we could watch the field. But I had a high fever, and fell asleep. I could sense the excitement from everyone, and had wanted to watch this concert so bad.

In the meantime, Dad and Charlie met and sat with the Beatles in the A's executive office until performance time. I later asked Dad about his impression and he said they were "a nice, polite group of young men," and they talked small talk for about 15 minutes before it was time to perform. Dad said he'd never heard screaming like that from a crowd.

SCD: Did your uncle regret the move to Oakland?

NF: I believe he regretted the move by the A's second home game in Oakland. At the A's very first Oakland home game, he was very pleased with the move. The 1968 opening Oakland A's game was a sellout (50,000). The next night, only about 5,000 were in attendance. What happened?

In retrospect, we should've sold A's game tickets for more than one day. I've heard this is done now, but this was not done at that time. Oakland had never had a Major League Baseball team before. The A's didn't take the place of a previous team. Oakland and its surrounding East Bay were getting used to having a new team. There was negative press before the A's even started in Oakland, and this didn't help. After the Oakland A's started winning championships, especially consecutively, the regret disappeared again.

SCD: What were your duties as the daughter of the general manager?

NF: My duties? Interesting. I never thought of anything as a "duty," although I guess deep down I felt a responsibility. If the team did well, we benefited. I also wanted to help Dad. I worried about him working too hard.

When the team was in town, Dad went to the Coliseum around 8:30 a.m., and stayed through until the game was over. He would have dinner in the Coliseum clubhouse. Many times I stayed at the Coliseum, too, if for no other reason, to keep him company.

There was a phone in the box seat where he sat during the game. This box seat was next to the press box, where the announcer sat. If I was home, I could call Dad on this phone to see how he was doing. This is the phone Charlie often called in on, to check with him on how the game was going.

Every morning between 4-5 a.m. (PST), Charlie called Dad. I was asleep most of the time. There were times when the ring woke me up, and I would listen to their conversation. It was mostly brainstorming ideas, how Dad thought the day at the Coliseum would be, employees, or just personal stuff. This became a routine.



During a home game, Dad would provide me with seat numbers of season ticket holders. He had me go talk to them and make them feel welcome. I knew the Coliseum seating by memory. If someone gave me a section and seat number, I could say exactly where it was. I found the seats and made sure to say "Hi" on behalf of Dad and Charlie. I was often walking around the Coliseum during games.

In the front office, I watched Dad's secretaries closely. Why? Because I noticed him do most of his own administrative work. I wondered why he didn't delegate this to his secretary. Dad told me he could get it done faster. I found a few secretaries filing their nails or gossiping, when I thought he needed help.

To help him, I started making cold calls to local businesses for season ticket sales, and I learned to develop an older sounding voice than my 16 years. I realized it would not be good if I tried to help him in a secretarial position because I was not a good typist. Eventually, I did start to try to find administrative help through my fellow high school associates.

SCD: Did you have any special friendships over the years with A's players?

NF: I did not; however, Dad certainly did. I found he was always careful about situations where I might get to know our players, though I was baby-sat by some players' wives in K.C. I believe the reason for this is because Dad was asked by Charlie to represent him (Charlie) in the players' salary negotiations. It would be awkward if I had a friendship with a player in this circumstance. Also, Dad was well aware of how players often move or are traded from one city to the next. I don't think he wanted to have any situation arise that might cause me to become involved with one of the players.

Dad had a special friendship with Billy Martin, our last manager before the 1980-81 sale. He was also very good friends with Dick Butler, head of the MLB Umpire's Association. I remember how Dad's face would light up when he would declare, "Dick Butler is in town, and we are meeting for lunch."

I remember Lefty Gomez and Bill Rigney. Dad stayed in touch with Mr. Gomez and Rigney over the years. Another long-time friend from our Kansas City years was George Toma. Mr. Toma was in charge of our field, which is an important job. I remember Mom used to talk on the phone for hours with Mrs. Toma during our time in K.C. in the 1960s. She once said they gossiped about the players and front office staff.

Our family was also good friends with the Smalley family of Kansas City. Garrett 'Gary' Smalley's family owned a local newspaper. His father covered our K.C. 1960s games as part of the press. Another friend was Howard Benjamin, of Benjamin Stables, in Kansas City, where we boarded Charlie 'O' in the 1960s. Benjamin Stables is where the K.C. Chiefs mascot, War Paint, was boarded, in a custom-made teepee.

SCD: It's often written that the players used their animosity toward their owner as a unifying motivational tool. How did your uncle feel about his players?

NF: Actually, the way I remember it is Charlie was willing to let himself be "the common enemy," if that's what it took to help win. I once overheard Dad talking on the phone to Charlie. He was saying, "If anything, you are motivating those guys to win, just to show you," and "keep it up."

SCD: Was your uncle disgusted with the lack of fan support during those Oakland dynasty years?

NF: I think the term "sad" or "disappointed" would be a better description. It seemed as if the name "Finley" was on the front page of our newspaper daily. I think writers enjoyed the topic. This may have had an effect on the fan base. Again, Oakland had a new team. We didn't have cable, Internet, clothing outlets, etc., to put our name in front of the public.

Charlie and Dad put the fans first. The fan was No. 1. I heard this many times. Conversations often started with "What would the fans like to see?" or "Do you think this would make the fans happy?"

Our issues were more with the city of Oakland at the time. When we moved to Oakland in such a hurry, Oakland was not 100 percent finished with the front offices of the Coliseum. After we arrived, we (Dad and Charlie) waited for the city to complete its work. This was supposed to include finishing the inside front office walls, moulding, new paint, etc. Instead we found ourselves working in gray cement walls and the very basic tile floors. Oakland never did the work. They had promised Charlie it would be done, but they reneged.

SCD: Your uncle was regarded as extremely frugal, to put it kindly. Was there justification for his cost-cutting measures?

NF: Frugal? Charlie was born into an extremely poor family in Alabama. The Finley family worked in the steel mills. This is why my grandfather decided to move to Dallas in 1921. He wanted to do anything except steel mill work.

Instead, Granddad sold cars, and anything else available. I believe Charlie had a Depression Era mentality. You never want to be in the situation again. When it came to the fan, Charlie tried to make it as economical as possible to attend a game. Charlie refused to make a profit on the backs of the fans. It was the players and front office workers who commented on Charlie's frugality.

Now, things seem in reverse. From what I hear, it's the fans who can hardly afford a ticket to a game, and players who are making mega-millions. I'm not sure what a front office employee is receiving these days.

SCD: What was your reaction when he started dismantling that great team?

NF: Sadness and uncertainty for the future of the team. I blamed Commissioner Bowie Kuhn for this. It seemed obvious there was an ego war going on between Charlie and Kuhn. Kuhn seemed to have absolute power, sort of like Julius Caesar. Who was Charlie supposed to appeal to?

I've heard Kuhn later admitted his issue with Charlie became personal. I could sense this at the time. This vendetta of Kuhn's really set us back. I call 1977 our "Dark Ages" year. At the end of 1977 and the beginning of 1978, Dad and Charlie decided to start over, to rebuild another winning team.

This was when we were knee-deep in litigation with commissioner Kuhn. Also, free agency began in the mid-1970s. Between 1975-77, Commissioner Kuhn blocked our attempted trades of some players. Most of our players from the championships were now gone. We were still at war with Oakland over promises made to finish the front office. Dad and Charlie decided they could scout fresh, new young players (like Rickey Henderson), and rebuild a championship team.

This two-part feature continues in a future issue of SCD, as Nancy Finley talks about some of the many innovations that her Uncle Charlie came up with, plus she makes a pitch for a Hall of Fame nod for the eccentric owner and maybe even for his right-hand man.

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