

## Coco Laboy

Jose Alberto Laboy  
**Born:** 7/3/1940 at Ponce (P.R.)

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## Coco Laboy

This article was written by **Brian Joseph (/node/4362)**

At times, it looked like José “Coco” Laboy would never get a shot in the majors. When he finally did, ten years after his professional career began, his rookie year made many wonder why it took so long. On his way up, no one would have ever accused Coco Laboy of having it easy. He suffered a number of odd twists and turns before enjoying a five-year big-league run filled with surprise, promise and disappointment.

José Alberto Laboy was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico (the same birthplace as Orlando Cepeda) on June 4, 1940. The origin of Laboy's nickname is mysterious. *The Sporting News*, during his rookie season, claimed that he got the nickname because he used to chew chocolate bars before he switched to cigars. However, Laboy himself stated, in a post-retirement interview with the *Montreal Gazette*, that the nickname “Coco” came from his mother -- but he never knew why. Note that in Puerto Rico, the accent is on the second syllable: Cocó.

While playing amateur baseball in Puerto Rico, Laboy was scouted by [Alex Pompey \(http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/acbbad4d\)](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/acbbad4d), Pedro Zorrilla and Frank Genovese. They signed Laboy to an amateur free agent contract with the San Francisco Giants prior to the 1959 season. Pedrín Zorrilla, owner of the Santurce Cangrejeros in the Puerto Rican Winter League, sent many prospects to the Giants because of his friendship with owner [Horace Stoneham \(http://sabr.org/node/28212\)](http://sabr.org/node/28212).

Laboy saw his first pro action with his hometown team, the Ponce Leones (Lions), in the winter of 1958-59. He then started his U.S. minor league career with the Fresno Giants of the California League (Class C) before being dispatched to the Artesia Giants of the Sophomore League (Class D). Coco then returned to the Lions. He showed promise despite Ponce's poor record, hitting eight homers.

In 1960, Laboy returned to Fresno and had a solid second season. He was a Topps Minor League Player of the Month in May and was frequently amongst the California League leaders in hitting. Again, he spent the offseason playing with Ponce.

José advanced to the Giants' Class A affiliate in Springfield (Massachusetts), contributing nicely to the 1961 Eastern League champions. It was more of the same in the '61 offseason as Laboy returned to the Leones, who struggled again and finished in the basement of the Puerto Rican League.

In 1962, Laboy moved up to the Giants' Class AA affiliate in El Paso and played for the Sun Kings in the Texas League. Through 12 games, he was hitting .400, but a back injury incurred sliding into second sidelined him on May 12. He returned to the team in late May but reinjured his back and headed to the disabled list for a second time.

After the '62 season ended, so did Coco's time with the Giants -- he was released after doctors told him never to play baseball again. Laboy ignored the doctor's advice, as did the St. Louis Cardinals, who signed him to a minor league contract. José started the Cardinals leg of his minor league career with their Class AA affiliate, the Tulsa Oilers of the Texas League. By May, he was sent down to their Class A affiliate, the Winnipeg Goldeyes. There, Laboy flourished and was named to the Northern League All-Stars. He was also named Northern League Player of the Month in August, hitting 11 homers. He ended the season at .291 with 21 homers.

Coco joined a new club in Puerto Rico that winter, the San Juan Senators. [Mary Staehle \(http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/438d0b6a\)](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/438d0b6a), who would later be a teammate in Montreal, remembers a funny line from Laboy, quoted in Thomas Van Hyning's book *The Puerto Rican Winter League*.

“In the playoffs, San Juan was beating a team very badly when the whole San Juan side in the stands lit matches. Staehle looked over to Cocó Laboy, who was playing third, and asked him what was going on. Laboy replied, ‘A funeral. We're burying them and they're holding a funeral.’”

After the Senators won the PRWL championship, the team then took part in a four-team international round robin in Nicaragua. The two Nicaraguan playoff teams were also joined by Panama's champ.

Laboy returned to the Tulsa Oilers in 1964, but by May, he returned to Class A. This time, he joined the Raleigh Cardinals of the Carolina League. Laboy joined the Carolina League cellar dwellers and started off with a remarkable flourish. He flew to Raleigh after the transfer from Tulsa and took a taxi to Durham, arriving in time to get into uniform in the sixth inning. Manager [George Kissell](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/efd7b343) inserted him the next inning and got an immediate reward -- Laboy hit the game-winning homer.

By August, Coco's spark had helped lift Raleigh into first place. He was a Carolina League All-Star and June's Player of the Month. Kissell was impressed by his wrist action, knowledge of the strike zone and ability to hit the ball both ways. Despite only being at Class A level, Laboy's production had gained the attention of the major league team. The Cards hinted that José might make their roster the next season because he would be available in the major league draft if he was not.

Then, Laboy's story took a disappointing turn. During a game at Rocky Mount on August 20, José thought Rocky Mount pitcher Carl Middledorf was throwing at him and hatched retaliation. In the fifth inning, Coco bunted down the first base line with two out. When Middledorf came over to field the ball, Laboy charged at him with the bat. The bat-swinging attack ignited a 15-minute brawl and Laboy was arrested on charges of "assault with a deadly weapon." The league leader in average and home runs pleaded guilty the next day and was sentenced to 30 days working on the roads by City Court Judge Tom Matthews. The sentence was suspended upon payment of a \$20.25 fine. The disciplinary action against Laboy didn't end there. He was suspended by Carolina League President Bill Jessup for three games and received a \$25 fine.

Soon after, Laboy was promoted to the Cardinals' Class Triple-A affiliate, the Jacksonville Suns of the International League. He helped their late season run and the team finished the regular season on top of the International League. However, the Suns were swept in four games by the Rochester Red Wings in the first round. Laboy struggled in the playoffs, going 3-for-15 with a double and a run scored.

He won a number of post-season honors. The *Greensboro Daily News* named Laboy the #1 hitter in their annual Carolina League all-star selections, while the National Association of Baseball Writers named Coco the third baseman of the Class A All-Star team. Laboy headed back to the San Juan Senators, and he was added to the Cardinals' 40-man roster heading into spring training in 1965.

After a look in spring training, Laboy was sent down to Jacksonville to start the '65 season. He had a mediocre season with Jacksonville but closed out the season with a 13-game hitting streak, raising his average from .254 to .279. Coco returned for another winter with the Senators in 1965-66.

With the departure of [Ken Boyer](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/d3cc1585) to the Mets, the 1966 third base job was open in St. Louis. While the Cardinals favored [Charley Smith](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/1367b883), Laboy was one of the candidates for the job. He failed to make the major league squad again and headed to the Tulsa Oilers, who had moved to the Pacific Coast League as the Cards' new Class AAA affiliate. He hit .308 with 16 home runs and helped Tulsa to the postseason in their first season in the PCL. They lost in the finals to the Seattle Angels in 7 games. Coco returned for another winter ball stint in San Juan.

In 1967, Laboy continued in the minors with Tulsa. The team didn't do nearly as well, finishing 65-79, 18 games out of first place. Laboy extended his greatest pro success, with a .298 average and 12 home runs. Under new manager [Warren Spahn](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/16b7b87d), the Oilers struggled on the field and also at the gate. Their move from the Texas League to the Pacific Coast League experienced growing pains. The fans were not as familiar with or as interested in the PCL (and its players) as they were in the tight-knit Texas League.

The 1968 season, Laboy's 10<sup>th</sup> in professional baseball, saw him return to Tulsa. The team turned it around and Coco was one of the team's stars. He hit .292 with 15 homers and 100 RBIs. The Oilers toppled the Spokane Indians in the playoffs to win the PCL crown in their third and last season in the League. The circuit's writers and broadcasters named Coco to the second team of their '68 all-star squad. He was also named to the Topps AAA All-West Team. 1968 was also to be Laboy's final season in Tulsa as the offseason brought change and opportunity for the Latin ballplayer.

Prior to the 1969 season, Major League Baseball added four expansion franchises. During the expansion draft, on the advice of infielder [Tony Taylor](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/bc362446), the Montreal Expos made Coco Laboy their 27<sup>th</sup> round selection (54<sup>th</sup> overall). After another winter in San Juan, he then joined the Expos for spring training. Manager [Gene Mauch](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/36a8c32a) liked what he saw of Coco's sound fundamentals and quiet nature during spring training. Laboy won the starting third baseman job, and the decision paid immediate dividends -- he hit a three-run homer in the Expos' first-ever game to give them a five-run lead in the 8<sup>th</sup> inning. They held on to beat the New York Mets in their debut, 11-10. Laboy had a big April. He hit safely in Montreal's first five games and 15 of their first 16. At one point, Coco had his average at a major-league-best .420; he ended April with a .377 average with 3 homers and 14 RBIs.

José then cooled off and his average slipped below .300. The Expos struggled throughout the season to get wins but Coco played a major role in a doubleheader sweep of the Cincinnati Reds on August 12<sup>th</sup>. In the two games, Laboy went 4-for-7 with 5 RBIs, including first-inning hits in both games that put the Expos in front. Laboy was named the Expos' outstanding player of the month, highlighted by his performance in the twin bill. He ended the '69 season at .258 with 18 home runs, 83 RBIs and a team-high 29 doubles. While the Dodgers' [Ted Sizemore](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/083bceb6) beat out Laboy for the BBWAA National League Rookie of the Year award, *The Sporting News* named Coco its N.L. Rookie Player of the Year.

The Expos were concerned that Coco might have tired at the end of the '69 season after appearing in 157 games. Still, he returned to Puerto Rico to play

another season of winter ball with the Senators. He had a strong winter session, staying amongst the top hitters in the league. However, the Expos planned to utilize the left-handed hitting [Kevin Collins](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/ae8a995) to rest Laboy more frequently in the 1970 campaign. Nonetheless, Montreal awarded José a new contract, the largest of his professional career, before the season started.

Unlike his surprising rookie season, Laboy struggled out of the gate in his second year, as did the Expos. Montreal dropped 12 of their first 17 games and Coco hit just .113 with no home runs and just 3 RBIs before Mauch benched him. Eight games later, Laboy returned to the starting lineup, but languished until late May. Then he went on a hot streak, hitting safely in 18 of 20 games from May 21 to June 12. During that stretch, Laboy hit .303 with 4 home runs and raised his season average to .211. The streaky sophomore went up and down throughout the remainder of the year but failed to keep his average above .200. Even so, Mauch stuck by Laboy, allowing him to appear in 137 games despite his pedestrian .199 average, 5 home runs, and 53 RBIs in 432 at bats.

Despite keeping him in the lineup, Mauch was vocal about this drop-off in production. In an October 1970 *Sporting News* story entitled "Coco's Collapse at Plate Baffles Montreal Brass," Mauch commented on Laboy's change in his approach to the game. In '69, he felt Laboy approached every game like it was "the World Series." He was concerned that Coco had lost his excitement now that he'd "been there." Laboy himself was puzzled. In the same article, the only insight he could share was that it was "just one of those years." Pitcher [Claude Raymond](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/2dfd7bf5) may have had the simplest and best explanation. "He was always a good defensive player, but after that first year he saw fewer fastballs," Raymond explained. "As the Expos got better, pitchers were much more careful with him."

Unwilling to rest on his poor second season, Coco scrapped plans to take the winter off and returned to the Senators. In 1971, though, he played sparingly after losing his starting job to [Bob Bailey](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/b5992b7d). Laboy started just 39 times and appeared in 76 games overall. He hit .252 with just 1 home run in 151 at bats. In the winter of 1971-72, Coco joined a new Puerto Rican team, Pepe Mangualthe Caguas Criollos. Unfortunately, he injured his right knee on opening day of the winter league.

A major league roster spot was not guaranteed for Laboy heading into the 1972 season. His knee nagged him throughout spring training; he had surgery to remove the medial cartilage on March 14. He was hospitalized for a few days and was supposed to be in a cast for five weeks -- but Coco threw away his crutches after a week and hoped to be ready by opening day. After spring training closed, Laboy returned home to San Juan to get into playing shape. By May 20, he was ready to report to the Peninsula Whips of the International League to test the repaired knee. He showed enough to get a call-up in July; he appeared in 6 games and went 0-for-4 as a pinch hitter and defensive substitute (he was always well regarded as a glove man) before being sent back to the minors. Laboy received a September call-up and performed well (a .277 average with 3 home runs in 22 games). On October 2, he started at third base in [Bill Stoneman](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/c77f0b5b)'s second career no-hitter; he was the only man to start in both of Stoneman's gems. Two days later, Coco batted 6<sup>th</sup> and was followed by rookie [Pepe Mangual](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/0f8e068f), his cousin. Both men had hits that day in the Expos' 3-1 loss to the Mets. For the '72 season, Laboy finished with a .261 average with 3 homers and 14 RBIs.

Again Laboy did not take the winter off, returning to Caguas. He was determined to unseat incumbent Bob Bailey at third base and made a serious run at the job in spring training. By the fifth game of the 1973 season, Laboy was back in the starting lineup after Bailey started off the season 1-for-14. Initially, the move looked good -- Coco hit safely in 4 of 5 games but then went into an 0-for-19 slump. On May 16, he went 0-for-3 after entering in the fifth inning of an 8-3 loss to the Mets. He was then sent down to the minor leagues.

Laboy played reasonably well for Triple-A Peninsula, hitting .263 with 9 homers and 37 RBIs. However, he struggled with Quebec City in the Double-A Eastern League, going 6 for 55 in 17 games. On September 4, the Expos gave him his unconditional release. His '73 big-league totals were a major disappointment -- a .121 average with just one home run in 22 games.

The 1973 season would turn out to be Coco Laboy's last season as a player in U.S. professional baseball. However, he did play on at home for two more winters. In 1973-74, he was with both Caguas and the Mayagüez Indios, hitting 10 homers, a personal high in the PRWL. Coco played his last games as a pro with the Indios the following year. Over his 17 seasons in Puerto Rico, José hit .226 with 43 homers.

He did return to Montreal in 1983 to play in the club's first-ever old-timers game. After his playing days, Laboy spent some time coaching and managing in the PRWL. He took a job with the Puerto Rican government where he worked for 27 years before retiring. For the last ten of those years, he was in charge of the country's sports programs. Laboy was also credited with scouting [Edgar Martínez](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/05b7d71d) for the Seattle Mariners in 1982.

Laboy and his wife (details of his marriage are currently unavailable) had two children, Eunice and Alberto. Both were born during his time with the Expos. Alberto was a good amateur player but his career was cut short when he suffered a knee injury similar to his father's. Although Coco Laboy's major league career was short, his time in the majors did qualify him for a major-league pension.

In 2003, the late Expos executive [John McHale](http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/65e2aa07) summed up Coco Laboy nicely in a retrospective by Montreal sportswriter Ian MacDonald. "[He was a] perfect gentleman and a plus for the team on and off the field. He had a million-dollar name and the fans loved it."

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