



## Ex-Illini baseball coach Eilbracht led a full life, prepped others to do the same

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
Posted Friday, January 11, 2013*

Lee Eilbracht could handle you with vinegar instead of sugar if you pushed his buttons just right.

Like his daughter Ann and step-daughter Deb Wolf. They'd come home after curfew to a welcoming committee experienced at handling young folks sneaking in too late.

"We had to face the 'Great White Robe,'" Deb recalled of Eilbracht's after-hours garb. "He would ask the boyfriend to leave, then tell us to get up to bed. We still laugh about the Great White Robe."

Or how 'bout Tom Fletcher, taking too much time to saunter from the locker room to the University of Illinois' baseball field to pitch the second game of a double-header?

"I had gone back to the dressing room, came back out and didn't realize the game was over," future Detroit Tigers (one game, two innings) left-hander Fletcher said as if it was yesterday, not 1962. "Eilbracht got ahold of me, he got in my face all the way down to the bullpen. You should have been there. It scared the living crap out of me.

"I was so scared I gave up the first hit... in the ninth inning."

Eilbracht got the intended result, and said little to Fletcher the rest of his superb sophomore season. The girls? They were the apple of his eye, and went with him on baseball trips as far away as Japan.

Tough? Sometimes. Fair? Almost always. The positives of Lee Eilbracht, former Illini baseball coach who died at 88 on Jan. 2, flowed prodigiously from the memories of those who loved him and played for him. He had almost too many careers to count be-



**Lee and Euline Eilbracht (Photo courtesy of Deb Wolf).**

sides winning 515 games and four Big Ten baseball titles in a 27-year Illini career from 1952 to 1978.



**Lee Eilbracht as Illini coach calling the shots from the third-base coach's box (Photo courtesy of the University of Illinois).**

Baseball League of World War II-vintage ended up as probably Madonna's and Davis' best-known roles, helped out by their on-screen transformation into legit baseball players. In the autumn of his career, hobnobbing with Davis and Madonna definitely made Eilbracht's day.

Through all his real-life roles, Eilbracht was a super salesman for baseball and the University of Illinois.

"He was a consummate politician, a PR guy," said Ken Rizzo, former longtime president of the Mickey Owen Baseball school who was an Illini catcher from 1965-68. "He knew so many people. He had such a great personality."

### **Tough and demanding... and fun-loving**

"An interesting combination of things," said Ann Eilbracht. "He was tough and demanding, but not in a punitive way. The worst thing he said to you if you screwed up was, 'Annie, you're better than that.'"

"You can't argue with that. He was incredibly fun-loving."

He had 20 ways to handle 20 players, the most prized talent for a baseball coach and manager.

"Lee motivated each player in a different way," said Fletcher, now a resident of rural Vermillion County, 20 miles east of Champaign. He was the first of two generations of

Cubs minor leaguer. Radio color announcer on Illini baseball radio broadcasts. Consultant to the Arizona Diamondbacks. Moving-and-storage company official and insurance salesman.

Perhaps the most long-lasting incarnation was Eilbracht's touch of Hollywood – personal baseball coach to Madonna and Geena Davis on the set of "A League of Their Own" in the Chicago area in 1991.

The movie about the Rockford Peaches of the All-American Girls Professional

big leaguers to bleed orange and blue. Son Darrin Fletcher went from Illinois to a long career catching for the old Montreal Expos.

“Lee was type of guy who was very smart in game of baseball,” Tom Fletcher said. “Everybody who played for Lee liked him.”

Eilbracht thrived in an era when big league-bound players were regularly produced by the Big Ten before the balance of college baseball power shifted to the South and West, where teams could play and work out outdoors year-round. His biggest-name alum was Ken Holtzman, drafted by the Cubs in the fourth round out of Champaign in 1965, the only Cub to hurl two no-hitters and a winner of 174 games.

Eilbracht scoped out Holtzman correctly soon after the lefty arrived in Champaign from high-school stardom in University City, Mo. Freshmen could not play on the varsity, but Holtzman attracted Eilbracht’s attention just throwing during workouts.

“My dad went up to the pitching coach and said, ‘Don’t teach him anything,’” said Ann Eilbracht. Holtzman had all the stuff he needed to see as an 18-year-old.

### **Learning how to run teams at 24**

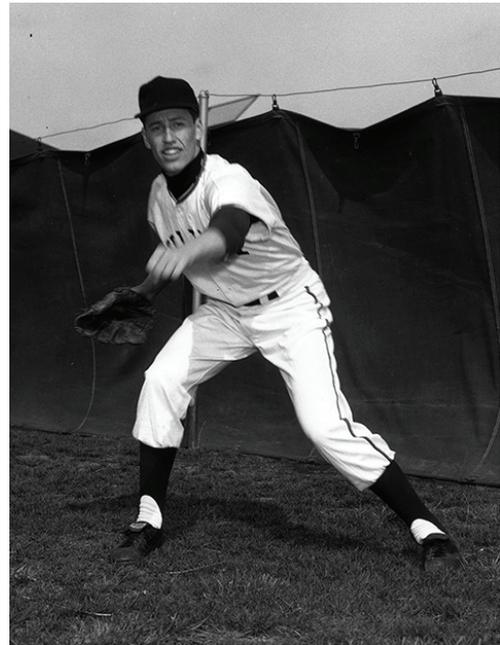
Eilbracht learned about spotting and handling talent at the grassroots level early. St. Louis-born, he was a baseball All-American at Illinois in 1947. A year later, at 24, he was player-manager at Class C Clinton, Iowa in the Cubs farm system. He later managed in Sioux Falls, S.D., also Class C. The moment he hung it up playing at Class D Danville in 1952, Eilbracht found his calling in Champaign.

“He had a real good eye for talent, he was phenomenal,” said Rizzo. “His nickname was ‘The Swam’ (short for Swami), the magician.”

Eilbracht literally beat the bushes for talent. He combed the most rural of baseball leagues for future Illini. That’s where Fletcher impressed Eilbracht after the former’s high school did not field a baseball team.

“We were the ‘Field of Dreams’ people,” Fletcher said of his own baseball background, where diamonds literally were carved out of cornfields as in the famed 1989 fantasy movie.

“He and my dad Glen played ball together in the Indiana State League, a semi-pro



**Future Cubs two-time no-hit pitcher Ken Holtzman as an Illini under Lee Eilbracht (Photo courtesy of the University of Illinois).**

league. I knew him when I was a kid. I played in a country league against ex-pros and college players. Lee was interested. I had committed to the University of Michigan, but I had not signed anything. Lee came in, we had a long talk and I switched to Illinois.”

But as a pre-business administration student, left-handed Fletcher was a “fish out of water.” His grades were failing. Eilbracht switched him to the Physical Education/ Recreation courses and he stayed in school. “I owe so much to Lee,” he recalled. “My grades came up. I’m so grateful he kept me in school.”

So was Eilbracht, as Fletcher headed a pitching staff that was the Illini’s redeeming quality.

“We won the Big Ten,” Fletcher said. “We were a lousy team except for our pitching staff. He’d say, ‘Fletch, I’ll see you after nine.’”

At the same time Eilbracht signed Fletcher, he also recruited a tall catcher out of Lane Tech High School, a traditional baseball power two miles west of Wrigley Field. But John Felske never did play one inning for Fletcher. He signed with the Cubs in the late summer of 1961. After a brief big-league career, Felske ended up the first big-league manager who had been associated with Fletcher. He piloted the Phillies from 1985 to 1987.

Eilbracht had an affinity for catchers. A Willowbrook, Ill., prep product, Rizzo made the team as a walk-on, converting to catcher from shortstop as a sophomore. The next year he started behind the plate for Eilbracht, making All-Big Ten second team.

“He was very helpful in the strategy of the game,” Rizzo said. “He understood catching. He always believed in a good defensive catcher.”

All the while, Eilbracht combined baseball with family. Ann, Deb and son Kurt would go on Southern trips in late winter. Ann accompanied Dad to Japan.

“As I got older, my dad appreciated the fact I enjoyed sports,” Ann said. “He taught me about racquetball and golf.”

### **Baseball tutor to Geena Davis, Madonna**

But he was in the right place at the right time to teach the key stars of “A League of Their Own” about his favorite sport. Director Penny Marshall recruited Eilbracht to tutor Davis and Madonna about Baseball 101 to make them look like skilled women’s players of the 1940s. Eilbracht had to start from Square One with Davis, who was billed as the star catcher. Davis did not respond to an interview request, but Deb Wolf knows the storyline by heart.

“When she swung bat, she swung from her shoulders,” Deb said of Davis. “Lee told her, ‘Rotate your hips... Do you mind if I stand behind you, hold your hips as your swing and rotate them to get a feel for it?’ She swung, he whipped her hips around. She was so pleased she got the feel for it. She hit every time. And she thanked him.”

“Madonna has the same problem. She had a bodyguard with her, so Lee was reluctant to touch her. He told her, ‘You want to bring your belly button around.’ He bought her a whiffle ball and bat, and told her to stand sideways in front of the mirror in the room. Madonna told him, ‘I have mirrors on every wall of the room.’ Madonna, though, had a tremendous work ethic.”

Wall-to-wall mirrors were in keeping with Madonna’s sexually-suggestive screen role of “All the Way” Mae Mordabito, a Forties taxi dancer-turned-outfielder. The lines she spewed forth were right out of the Mae West double-entendre bible.

Part of the movie storyline could have been taken from Eilbracht’s real life of scouring out-of-the-way places for talent. Davis’ character, Dottie Hinson, is discovered working on a dairy farm.

His coaching paid off on-screen. Special effects may have helped, but the tall, angular Davis appeared competitive swinging the bat. One memorable scene has Davis’ catcher character doing the splits while making a sensational catch. Eilbracht no doubt never quite did that in the Cubs’ bush leagues. Madonna’s Mae Mordabito persona cavorted around the outfield like she had been flycatching for years. Rosie O’Donnell, playing Mae’s friend Doris Murphy, also had to look like an athlete when not wisecracking.

After dealing with the Fletchers and Rizzos of the world for decades, Eilbracht couldn’t believe his good fortune working with the celebrity women.

“He said I’m the lucky one, do you know how many people would pay to do what I’m doing now?” Deb Wolf recalled.

Yet another experience was meeting Tom Hanks, “such a tremendous gentleman,” Wolf said. All mingled at the movie’s Fourth of July picnic.

Obviously, Eilbracht’s coaching helped in “A League of Their Own’s” reviews. Costing \$40 million to produce, the film earned \$132 million worldwide, including \$107 million in the United States. Without Davis and Madonna, a TV series spinoff on CBS quickly was cancelled in 1993. Davis would later play a female U.S. president on a TV drama series that also did not last long. But she’ll always have Dottie Hinson, “A League of Their Own” and some free hitting lessons to savor.

Eilbracht could tell a million of these stories. Fletcher re-united with him to gab about old times when he visited his mother-in-law at an assisted-living facility in which Eilbracht also lived near Champaign. After his death, some 25 family and friends exchanged stories about the famed coach over lunch.

“My son, Robert Carey, said Grandpa gave me the courage to take the training wheels off my bike,” said Ann Eilbracht. “He loved how grandpa roughed him up.”

Deb Wolf summed up the most human side of her stepfather in the eulogy she delivered at Eilbracht’s funeral service Jan. 7:

“I must share my admiration for Lee over the past several years. He loyally and lovingly looked after my mother throughout her long battle with dementia. Even when they could no longer live together, he faithfully visited her daily, and, at the end of Mom’s life, you could tell that Lee’s presence brought her great comfort.

“Lee was always optimistic and uncomplaining and I was blessed to be able to visit him frequently, listening to his stories and learning about what an astonishing life he had led. And, this past year, we spent a lot of time quietly watching ‘Animal Planet’ together, which is right up my alley! I cherish those times with him.

“He loved my mother with an unrivaled passion, as she did him. They had a tremendous zest for life. They demonstrated the rewards of hard work but took great joy in play and laughter. They created a united, loving family, showing their interest in and support of all of their children and brought us together as often as possible for wonderful family gatherings!”

“I am proud to have called Lee my dad. He leaves a wonderful legacy, not only for his children and grandchildren, but for the U. of I. and the world of baseball. It is an honor to pay tribute to Lee Eilbracht, one of the “greats”!”

Deb concluded as only such a tribute could:

“May he play baseball forever in the perfect fields of heaven with the sun shining down, and the fans going wild!”