

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## *Piersall crazy as a fox as Cubs' minor-league outfield instructor*

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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The Jimmy Piersall self-analysis was he was crazy and had papers to prove it.

Yeah, crazy as a fox.

As his community laid the controversial, colorful character to rest, his true baseball acumen came out in remembrances of big leaguers he helped as a 14-season Cubs minor-league outfield instructor from 1986 to 1999.

Gary Varsho remembered how Piersall not only drilled the Cubs kids 'till they might have been sick of him, but also had his ideas down on paper.

“He typed it himself, a five-page (outfield instruction) manual,” said Varsho, a 1982 Cubs draftee who went on to a career as a backup outfielder, bench coach of the Phillies and Pirates, and now a pro scout covering the International League for the Buccos.

Meanwhile, White Sox radio color analyst Darrin Jackson, a 1981 Cubs draftee, recalled how Piersall wanted his prospects to “get it right. He did not want you to learn the incorrect way. He taught you how to field a ground ball the right way.”

You had to work and not give lip to the old-school, sharp-tongued Piersall. But if you picked up on his wisdom honed as one of baseball’s best-ever defensive center fielders, you have a No. 1 public relations man in Piersall.

“Jimmy went to bat for you as a coach,” said Jackson.

Piersall’s Cubs connections took a back seat in all the remembrances about his on- and off-the-field histrionics, his battle against mental illness as chronicled in the book and

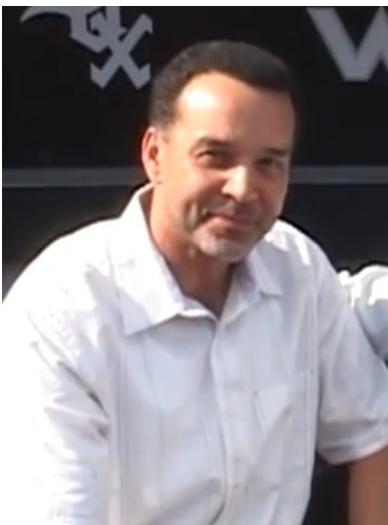


**Gary Varsho was impressed with Jimmy Piersall's five-page typed guide to outfield instruction.**

film versions of “Fear Strikes Out,” and his unforgettable teaming with Harry Caray on Sox broadcasts from 1977 to 1981.

Doug Glanville recently penned a New York Times tribute to Piersall. He started with the contrast of personalities – himself as a quiet, intellectual-bent African-American No. 1 Cubs pick sired by educated parents being coached by the white, working-class Piersall armed with just a high-school education. Once they had a meeting of the minds, Glanville was Piersall’s star pupil. Before he was traded to the Phillies late in 1997, Glanville drew Piersall’s raves for his center-field potential in his broadcast gigs for The Score.

The likes of Varsho, Jackson, Rafael Palmeiro, Jerome Walton and others benefited from Piersall’s tutelage. Dwight Smith remained a shaky big-league outfielder, but interestingly professed center field was easier to play than left.



**Darrin Jackson recalled how Jimmy Piersall urged his students to fire the ball back into the infield.**

Literally, anything under the sun was grist for Piersall instruction.

“Jimmy taught you how to do a sun ball,” Varsho said. “He threw balls up in the sun. He took things to another level.”

Outfielders often look silly playing caroms of the wall, the ball rolling away as baserunners steam for third and maybe more. Piersall had techniques for properly handling all the angles.

“His instructing of how you play the ball against the wall stuck out,” Varsho said. “How you attack it and he’d repeat it. He’d make you do the footwork correctly. When you go up against the wall, what are your feet doing? I never forgot that.”

But Piersall also taught mind games, for the benefit of his students and baserunners watching them field.

### **‘Show off your arm’**

“Always throw the ball in hard and show off your arm,” Jackson said. “Always run hard and get rid of the ball quickly. Getting rid of the ball is a job well-done. You don’t get rid of the ball lackadaisically and lob it to the infield. If you showed off your arm firing to cutoff man, everyone (especially wary baserunners) sees it.

“Play the game with 100 percent intensity.”

Added Varsho: “If you worked, you were golden.” Jimmy, of course, could have added “effin” for emphasis.

If Piersall could be this effective in the minors, why not have had him work with the big-league club full-time? After all, Wrigley Field sported one of the trickiest outfields in the majors with the effects of wind and late-afternoon sun.

To Varsho, Piersall was exactly where he was supposed to be.

“Jimmy was better in development, where you can control players,” he said. “You’re not going to pound all these drills (to big leaguers).”

Just as importantly, a Piersall traveling with a big-league club would be exposed daily to big-league media. His brutal candor likely would throw the team into an uproar.

As it was, he got canned from his instructor’s when he ripped top Cubs management on *The Score* for the debacle that permeated the second half of the 1999 season. He felt top brass should have paid for the hyper-collapse, not manager Jim Riggleman and his coaches.

Fortunately, he had a long run in the bushes, where the only ears he typically singed were eager minor leaguers.

“He cared about everybody,” Varsho said. “Once you understood his passion, he was a great teacher. He knew what to look for. He was as excited for you making a great play as when you screwed up.”