



Piersall-Finley pairing was a riot

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(Second of a two-part series.)*

“In the overall picture, I’ve done a lot of things. I’ve had a lot of jobs. I’m very successful in my own mind.”

Jimmy Piersall is right. Holding court at the kitchen table of his Wheaton, Ill., home, with wife Jan, the love of his life, looking on, the 83-year-old senior baseball raconteur took a visitor through a decades-long journey. He has done a little bit of everything, while keeping his name and mouth in the news, in the decades after his fly-catching big-league days concluded in 1967.

Piersall was best-known for his guerilla-theater-of-the-air pairing with Harry Caray on White Sox broadcasts from 1977 to 1981. He had a gaggle of other broadcast jobs. He worked in marketing for the Texas Rangers. He was minor-league roving outfield coach for the Cubs in the 1980s and 1990s, producing by his count 14 big leaguers. And he even served as general manager of a semi-pro football team in Roanoke, Va.

But for the sheer connection of all-time baseball characters, nothing probably could match Piersall’s jack-of-all-trades job in A’s owner Charlie Finley’s tiny front office in 1972.

As usual, Piersall spares no first-class epithet in describing the green-and-gold mogul – a man who could squeeze a buck better than any sports executive of his time. We’ve cleaned it up a bit here.



Jimmy Piersall with Jay Blunk, Chicago Blackhawks executive vice president, at the Chicagoland Sports Hall of Fame induction in 2012. Piersall and Blunk, who were Cubs employees together in the 1980s and 1990s, were inducted together.

“I worked in Oakland with Mr. Finley, the biggest (jerk) in America,” said Piersall.

Did Finley use Piersall’s expertise as one of the best defensive outfielders in history? Not exactly. He employed Piersall as a combination ticket salesman and 42-year-old office boy.

“He bought a truckload of moustache wax,” Piersall said of a 1972 delivery for relief ace Rollie Fingers, when Finley offered each of his players \$300 to grow moustaches. “Then he said to me, you got to unload the truck. When he left, I sat in the truck while the other guys unloaded the wax.

“He used to call me up and I’d have to read him the morning paper because he was in Chicago. I couldn’t read worth a (bleep), but I talked baseball with him and he liked it. I’d go on to sell tickets by those big factories around San Jose, but most of those guys were Red Sox fans from Boston. They had a girl who would squeal on everybody, a secretary. Monte Moore was a spy, but was a pretty good announcer.”

If Finley gamed his help, including his players, Piersall found payback was profitable.



Jimmy Piersall never was shy with the greatest figures of our time. Here he greets President John F. Kennedy at the Washington Senators' season opener circa 1962.

During the 1972 World Series in Cincinnati, Finley charged Piersall with selling an allotment of A’s tickets.

“I sold \$2,000 (worth) of them,” he said. “I gave him \$1,000 and made \$1,000. He didn’t know that.”

Finley always tried to get the last laugh.

“I got a (World Series) ring with no diamonds in it,” Piersall said. “I sold it for \$4,000.”

Bottom line, Finley was a successful businessman, for which Piersall gives him all the credit.

“He was a brilliant, brilliant handler of money,” he said. “He knew how to run a business. He just knew how to run a ballclub and make money (while spending little). No question, he knew how to handle a team.

“The (mascot) mule got (better) treatment than the players.”

Piersall’s A’s days benefited in the long run. Working for Finley gave him his first on-the-job training for his later calling in the broadcast booth. Piersall got to work Oakland home games with Moore and sidekick Jim Woods.

“I knew nothing about broadcasting, but Jim Woods taught me,” Piersall said.

Hard work to track down fly balls

Piersall worked hard at everything – like his original calling. He would not have classified himself as a natural in the outfield.

“I worked at it when I was a kid (in Waterbury, Ct.),” he said. “I used to go out with the amateur team with the older guys. I get into left field shallow, they’d hit balls over my head and I’d have to go catch it.”

His path to the majors in the early 1950s was garnished with the work ethic.

“How can you pay a high school or college graduate \$10 million to sign?” Piersall said. “He hasn’t hit anything. Make them earn it.”

“When I signed, I signed for \$2,000. I went to spring training with Scranton (Pa.). The Scranton center fielder got drunk (opening the job for Piersall). For the first couple of weeks, I couldn’t hit a curveball with a broom. The hitting coach pitched me curveballs for two weeks, every five minutes. I hit .287 and hit 18 home runs, led the league in RBIs, and went to Louisville next year. I went to \$3,000. In the big leagues, \$6,000.

“Then I went to the goofy house (a Massachusetts state mental hospital after his famed 1952 breakdown). When I got out, that’s when I proved myself. I had to feed my family. That was the turning point in my life.”

Devotion to duty paid off as Piersall became one of the most defensively gifted center fielders in history. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, in 1,614 games as an outfielder, Piersall’s fielding percentage was .99022 -- better than Willie Mays, Joe DiMaggio and other Hall of Famers. In fact, just 20 men in MLB history played at least 1,000 games in the outfield and fielded .990 or higher. Piersall is the only one to debut prior to 1963. Fielding percentages were generally higher after that year due to oversized and more flexible gloves.

Between 1953 and 1957, Piersall averaged .281 at the plate. He teamed with Ted Williams and Jackie Jensen to form Boston’s “Golden Outfield.” In 1961, he hit .322 for Cleveland (third in the American League) and finished with a solid lifetime average of .272.



Granddaughter Megan Jones and grandson Steve Jones flank Jimmy Piersall at the Chicagoland Sports Hall of Fame induction in 2012.

Lightning rod for fans

Piersall made almost as much news when he wasn't fielding or hitting. In addition to his treatment for what he called physical and mental exhaustion, Piersall had run-ins with opponents, umpires and fans. His mere presence on the field attracted shouts of "Cuckoo" from the stands and various thrown objects. If a brazen customer trespassed into center field, as happened in a famous Yankee Stadium incident, Piersall was apt to plant his cleat where the fan's sun did not shine. He had perfect pre-soccer-style kicking form.

"The fans used to throw things at me, all kinds of (bleep)," Piersall recalled. "I made a catch, ran by umpire (Bill) McKinley. He said, 'You're an instigator.' I said, 'I don't know what an instigator is, but they shot the wrong (bleepin') McKinley.'"

He also was a consummate showman in a button-down baseball era. For his 100th career homer with the New York Mets in 1963, Piersall ran around the bases backward. He had planned the stunt.



Jimmy and Jan Piersall flank Fox-32 anchor Corey McPherin at the Chicagoland Sports Hall of Fame induction in 2012.

Piersall took up a bit of the stance of Ted Williams toward the Boston media when doubters prevailed after his release from the state hospital.

"I used to draw a line in front of my locker after they got on my ass after I came out of the hospital, that I'd never play again," he said. "I said, 'You cross that line, I'll punch you in the mouth.'"

Beyond the outward controversy, Piersall was a studious player, also influenced by Williams.

"I played with the greatest hitter of all time," he said. "I learned how to study pitchers. I kept a notebook every day. I'd write out how pitchers got me out."

Piersall also got to know Jackie Robinson, who had a tryout with the Red Sox in 1945 before he signed with the Dodgers. We'll never know if Piersall, Williams and other talented Boston players might have made a World Series if the franchise had decided to integrate its roster much earlier than 1959.

Upstaging Jackie Robinson?

“I used to go to banquets with him,” he said of Robinson. “He said I don’t want to follow you (as a speaker) because I used to tell all the jokes. He was a wonderful man. I was so sorry when he died so early (at age 53 in 1972). His wife (Rachel) is one of the most talented women you’ll ever meet.”

Although Piersall gets a lot of mileage out of his mental breakdown – “best thing that ever happened to me” – he has no sage advice about any new-age advances in treating the mentally ill. If anything, he still has suspicions about mental-health practitioners.

“Psychiatrists can bluff you to death,” he said. “One thing about psychiatrists -- they very seldom help anybody.

They give them pills. Pills become a great thing for people today. It’s supposed to help you relax and think right. I know all about them.

“I used to con them. I was physically and mentally tired. When you’re tired, you can’t operate. I certainly couldn’t help anybody. All I could be is an example (of) when I came out of the hospital, I said I got to feed the family.”

Piersall cherished his induction into the Red Sox Hall of Fame in 2010. He entered with longtime buddy Don Zimmer. In 2012, he was inducted into the Chicagoland Sports Hall of Fame. He has honors galore, all the fame that he needs and four sources of retirement income.

In the end, he possesses the one memory that really matters.

“I had fun when I played,” he said.



Jimmy and fellow inductees in the Red Sox Hall of Fame Class of 2010—Don Zimmer, Tommy Harper, John Valentin, Tom Brunansky. Red Sox photo by Kristyn Ulanday.