



Lesson for Leigh Ann: The first angle of a story isn't always the best one

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An experienced writer and blogger, Leigh Ann Young of Charlotte, N.C., just experienced the equivalent of a Journalism 300 class.

Young is going through an advanced course in the school of life that showed her the quest for truth – and in her case lost love -- often doesn't lead in preconceived directions.

Some months ago, we detailed Walker's search for any recorded clip of the voice of the late Verlon "Rube" Walker, her father and a popular Cubs coach from 1961 to 1970. Young was just 3 when her father, just 42, died of leukemia just before the 1971 season, after he had been named Cubs pitching coach. Walker was born 30 years too soon. By the turn of the millennium, his type of leukemia had become curable. A father torn from his daughter, especially at such a formative age, leaves a gaping hole in the latter's life that is never really filled in.



Leigh Ann Young today in Charlotte, N.C.

Yet Young's journey has taken some unforeseen turns. She was warned her search for a recording would be like trying to find a needle amid three haystacks. Preservation of broadcasts of big-league games in Verlon Walker's era was spotty at best, usually with just highlights saved, if that much. The pre-game TV and radio shows on which the good ol' boy from rural Lenior, N.C. would have appeared likely were not recorded. And if they were, they weren't saved or were discarded over the decades.

As the 2014 season approaches, Young has not heard one second of Verlon Walker's voice. She's come out way ahead, though. Her lost father has spoken to her through all his baseball colleagues whom he positively touched. And in re-creating the baseball ca-

maraderie in which Rube Walker easily moved, Young feels she has come out ahead in connecting with her dad in ways far better than a short, probably scratchy recording.

The Chicago Baseball Museum couldn't help Young with a Walker recording even among the hundreds of hours play-by-play broadcasts, some apparently the only copy remaining, and interviews it possesses in its archives. But the museum put Walker in touch with a number of Walker's Cubs contemporaries. The San Francisco Giants' media relations department, one of the best in the business, got some quick results in re-connecting Young with a Walker coaching comrade. And the son of one of Walker's bosses contacted her after she made the publicity rounds of a riveting human-interest story.

'Blown away' by memories

"I've been blown away at the people who remembered him," Young said. "You're talking about 40 years. It says a lot how he treated people."

Young "needed to heal" by hearing her father's voice. But she's in even better shape after the complete portrait of Rube Walker – his advice, his humor, his impact on others – was painted in vivid colors by those to whom she spoke.

"I didn't know how much I've yearned to know him," she said. "I've healed. I felt he was tough and really strong and determined and honest. I think he used his sense of humor to make up what he lacked in baseball ability (as a career minor-league player). He just had a charisma that allowed people to remember him after 40 years.



Verlon Walker (left) shows off infant daughter Leigh Ann in the Cubs tiny left-field locker room in 1968.

"My uncle (Al Walker, also nicknamed "Rube," a long-time Mets coach) told me once that (Verlon Walker) appealed to P.K. Wrigley to promote him to manager. 'Give me a shot,' he said. Wrigley said, 'I like you too much to put me in a position to fire you.'"

Young's ongoing journey is chronicled in her own blog <http://www.baseballlovestory.com/>. And, of course, if any readers have that needle under the hay via a recording, or any other ancient link to Verlon Walker, Young said feel free to contact her at leighann@baseballlovestory.com.

"Absolutely," Young responded when asked if she felt successful in her efforts. "You start a journey and think you have an end objective in mind. It ends up as better and

you have been given so much more. I actually dreamed of (Walker's personality). He's always been one-dimensional to me." But the picture of him she could not complete through stories from her mother and Al Walker dramatically filled out once she contacted his contemporaries.

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The task was not easy in the biggest project ever for Young. The effort was worth it, though, as results have been satisfying.

"It's unnerving to me, to call up strangers and make cold calls," she said. "But I've been given back so much.

"Speaking with all of these men has changed me. I haven't seen any of them in person so their voices are what carry me to the past. Most of them I have caught off-guard. They answer the phone and there I am. They all love talking about their baseball days. Inevitably each wants to know who else I have spoken to. They freely share what they can remember and for that I am so grateful. The words they use, the stories they tell --- I get to travel with them back to that moment."

Here is the diary of her journey, her own comments and the significance of each of the men to whom she spoke. Perhaps most eloquent was an e-mail response Young received March 10 from Ken Holtzman, who lives in his native St. Louis area. Holtzman's memories are in his own words, while the others are Young's quotes about their conversations.

Ken Holtzman. "I do indeed have fond memories of your father. He was a coach in the Cubs system when I came up and was very helpful to young players like me. He was ordinarily a quiet, reserved person but was also super competitive and we used to enjoy the back and forth banter with his brother on the Mets. I know you were very young when he passed, but I'm glad you're seeking out the memories of his life. My grandkids do the same to me and it is a way of connecting families through the generations. I hope you reach many players and that they enrich your father's memory. P.S. He always used to brag about Lenoir!"

Ken Holtzman is the only pitcher in Cubs history to have thrown two no-hitters, in 1969 and 1971. His Aug. 19, 1969 hitless gem astonishingly was accomplished without a strikeout. The game featured a ball Henry Aaron claimed was the hardest he ever hit seemingly headed into the bleachers in left field in the seventh, but pushed back by a wall of wind into Billy Williams' glove in the ivy in the curvature of the bleachers. Holtzman won 17 games each in 1969 and 1970.

Jack Rosenberg. "He discussed with me how different baseball was when my dad played. There was much more access to the players. Mr. Rosenberg recalled seeing my dad in the bullpen a lot and remembered him as a consistently nice, easy-going guy. He wished me well in my quest and thought it was a wonderful tribute to my father."

Jack Rosenberg, 87, was WGN's longtime sports editor and assistant/writer for Jack Brickhouse. He worked Wrigley Field the entire time Verlon Walker was a coach. He now lives in Lincolnwood, Ill.

Joey Amalfitano.

“I left word through the San Francisco Giants organization for Joey to contact me. Within days he did! He was thrilled, saying, 'Young lady, it's been a long time since I've seen you.' He and my dad were good friends. He told me how much my dad loved me -- how his face would light up when he talked about me. Interestingly, he mentioned that Leo Durocher really liked my dad. We vowed to keep in touch.”



At spring training in Long Beach, Calif., the Cubs coaching staff and manager craft an inadvertent countdown to the 1966 season. From left are No. 5, Whitey Lockman; No. 4, Verlon Walker; No. 3, pitching coach "Fat Freddie" Fitzsimmons, and No. 2, manager Leo Durocher.

“Pal Joey” was one of a select group of Cubs who played, coached for and managed the team (1979 and 1980-81). He was on the coaching staff with Verlon Walker from 1967 to 1971. Amalfitano, turning 80 this year, went on to be a longtime Dodgers coach before serving as a special assistant with the Giants.

Chris Krug. “I introduced myself to Chris and asked if he remembered my dad. His response, 'Of course! He was my coach.' He went on to tell me several stories. Once, while Chris sitting alone in the dugout pensively thinking about the status of his contract and if he would maintain his position of catcher, my father sat down next to him sensing he was worried. My father tried to calm him and said, 'You are our catcher now.' Leo replaced him the next season with Randy Hundley, but he had appreciated my dad talking to him. Chris was interested in the other players I had spoken with -- what they were doing, where they lived. He texts me occasionally, inquiring about my quest.”

The irrepressible Krug caught Bob Hendley’s one-hitter that wasn’t enough to beat Sandy Koufax in his 1965 perfect game against the Cubs. Krug’s throwing error accounted for the only run of that game, but he was consoled by Koufax after the season the loss was not Krug’s fault. Twenty-three years later, Krug’s baseball-field-construction firm crafted the most famous diamond in film history – the rural field in Dyersville, Iowa for “Field of Dreams.”

Bob Hendley. “Bob Hendley called me back (the night of March 11). His wife said his memory was not what it once was. He did remember my dad and my uncle and spoke

kindly about them saying that Southern boys stuck together. He said he NEVER heard my dad say a cross word about or to anyone. And Bob hated Leo Durocher (shocker) Bob's youngest son Bart is big into collecting and is on the hunt on my behalf. Bob had been to my website and said it was GREAT.”

Hendley was contacted by Koufax decades after their amazing 1965 duel – just one hit allowed in the entire game, setting a major-league record – and told by the Hall of Famer of what a great experience they shared. Interestingly, in their re-match just five days later at Wrigley Field, Hendley defeated Koufax 2-1 thanks to a two-run homer by Billy Williams. Hendley went on to pitch for Durocher for 1 ½ more seasons in 1966-67, enabling him to develop the dislike, shared by many Cubs pitchers, for The Lip.

Dick Ellsworth. "Dick referred to my dad as 'one of the good guys.' He described him as 'even-keeled,' honest, wouldn't play the political games, quiet, hard-working with a grand sense of humor. Ellsworth said he was 'had' several times by my dad's Southern humor. He could deliver a punch line with a straight face, leaving everyone laughing. Both of them liked to arrive early at the ballfield on game days. Dick remembers my dad asking him, 'Hey, Lefty, why do you get here so early?' To which Dick replied, 'I can't wait to put on this uniform.' 'Me, too,' said my dad.

Ellsworth is the last Cubs left-hander to win 20 games with a 22-10 season in 1963. His 2.11 ERA is the lowest by a Cubs starter since World War II. Like Bob Hendley, Ellsworth engaged in some memorable duels with Koufax. A longtime real-estate executive in his native Fresno, Calif., Ellsworth is also part-owner of the city's Triple-A Grizzlies, the Giants' top farm club.

Don Kessinger. ““I e-mailed Mr. Kessinger asking if he remembered my dad. He wrote back a lovely e-mail reflecting fondly on his time as a baseball player and referred to my dad as 'one of the nicest guys he had ever met.'”

Kessinger is one of the greatest shortstops in Cubs history, holding down the position as a regular for 11 seasons from 1965 to 1975. He was the leadoff batter for the famed 1969 Cubs. Kessinger later ran the White Sox as player-manager for four months in 1979, resigning with rookie skipper Tony La Russa taking his place. He later coached the baseball team at alma mater Mississippi before working for his family's real-estate firm in Oxford, Miss.

Fergie Jenkins. “He was one of the first players I called. He referred to my dad as a true Southern gentleman.”

Hall of Famer Jenkins shares the retired No. 31 Cubs jersey with Greg Maddux, joining him in Cooperstown this summer. Jenkins has a feat that won't be equaled any-time soon in the majors – winning 20 or more games six years in a row for the Cubs from 1967-72. He served as Cubs pitching coach in 1995-96, and is frequently with the team in spring training and during the season in promotional roles.

George Altman. “Remembered my dad throwing batting practice to him. We discussed Mr Altman's long career and new book.”

“Big George” was a Kansas City Monarchs import to the Cubs via the legendary Buck O’Neil. Altman was the Cubs’ first regular African-American outfielder in 1959. He was an All-Star in 1961-62, slugging a homer at Candlestick Park in ’61, the season in which he batted .303 with 27 homers and 96 RBIs as a Cub. Altman later became a home-run star in Japanese pro baseball before returning home to be a commodities broker in Chicago and suburban St. Louis.

Bill Hands. “The first thing he asked me was, ‘Do you live in Lenoir?’ After all these years he remembered my dad talking fondly about his home town of Lenoir and being proud of his little town. Bill called my dad ‘humble--didn’t have a mean streak in him.’ Fun dugout banter usually led by my dad lightened the mood. After my dad was diagnosed with leukemia, Bill was with him in the locker room--there were only a few guys left. My dad asked Bill if he had dark marks on his back (a common symptom in leukemia is easy bruising). Trying to keep my mom from worrying.”



Jack Rosenberg, former WGN-TV sports editor, was one of a host of Wrigley Field figures to paint a portrait of Verlon Walker for Leigh Ann Young. Rosenberg likely landed Walker for a "Leadoff Man" pre-game TV show in the 1960s, but the broadcast has been long taped over.

“Froggy” Hands was one of the most underrated pitchers in Cubs history. After a 16-win season in 1968, he became the most effective Cubs starter on the famed ’69 team with a 20-14 record. His 2.49 ERA that season was fifth lowest by a Cubs starter since World War II. Hands’ season earned him “Chicago Player of the Year” honors from the local baseball writers association chapter. He has spent the last few decades helping run a family auto-repair garage in Orient, N.Y., on the eastern tip of Long Island.

Rich Nye. “Spoke to me for awhile. He didn’t have any specific memories of my dad but enjoyed talking baseball days with me.”

Lefty Nye was part of the startling Cubs revival under Leo Durocher in 1967, when he won 13 games as a rookie. His career was relatively short. Later, Nye earned prominence as a veterinarian specializing in birds and exotic animals in west suburban Westchester. Now semi-retired, Nye still lives in the Chicago area.

Ernie Broglio. “Respected my dad -- remembered him as a quiet-good guy. He has more respect for the Cardinals organization than the Cubs. Liked Ernie Banks and thought he should have been made captain instead of Ron Santo. He said more, but I shall not write it down.”

Broglie is one of the most infamous names in the Cubs' tortured history. He was the former ace pitcher who was traded for Lou Brock on June 15, 1964 – and within 2 ½ months was diagnosed with a sore right elbow that many thought he already had when dealt to Chicago. Two comeback attempts after surgery failed in 1965 and 1966 while Brock punched an express ticket on the bases to the Hall of Fame.

Terry Kennedy. “Son of Bob Kennedy, Cubs head coach from 1963-65 and GM from 1976-81. Terry remembers my dad playing with him -- throwing baseballs to him – and making him laugh. Terry reached out to me via e-mail after he saw the (Keith) Olbermann (show). He said it had been a long time since but you don't forget guys as nice as my dad.”

Terry Kennedy was a capable big-league catcher in the 1980s. His father once said if Terry was available to be drafted by the Cubs, he'd do so and then resign as GM to avoid continued charges of favoritism. Bob Kennedy, unfortunately, never faced that dilemma.

Young also has messages out to Hall of Famers Billy Williams and Ernie Banks, but has not yet heard back. But like her overall search for the tape of Verlon Walker, she's patient.

Olbermann's ESPN show was the highest-profile national publicity Young received. Olbermann's essay was “Everything in Sports is Recorded,” but he obviously hadn't done his research into 1960s baseball. The Vin Scully radio broadcast of Koufax perfecto, for instance, was taped by a teen-age fan, not by originating station KFI in Los Angeles, and only a couple of innings' of film shot by Dodgers trainer Bill Buhler from behind the plate exists.

Young got airplay in Chicago from Bruce Wolf's and Dan Proft's morning show on WLS-AM and NPR outlet WBEZ-FM's “Chicago Afternoon Shift.” The Associated Press penned a story. Al Yellon's BleedCubbieBlue.com site alerted a chunk of diehard Cubs fans to Young's journey. *Sports Collectors Digest* and *The Good in Sports* and *The ManFAQ.com* sites wrote stories. Walker's hometown *Lenoir News Topic* did the local-girl-on-a-quest angle. But it was a *Chicago Tribune* feature that brought her closest to a specific part of Verlon Walker he left behind.

1963 scorecard becomes a real treasure

A Sugar Grove, Ill. reader named Jack Manning searched through his own collection of scorecards after reading the story. He found a Cubs-Reds Wrigley Field card from 1963 in which his 10-year-old self had snagged a huge number of autographs just outside the Cubs players' exit at the northwest tip of the ballpark. Included was Walker's signature. Manning also snared the autographs of a crewcut Reds rookie second baseman named Pete Rose.

Realizing how much her father's autograph would mean to her, Manning shipped the scorecard to Charlotte. The donation was a good sacrifice, apparently. Young said Manning was a White Sox fan.

“He thought he remembered my dad sign the card,” she said. “He found the card. This is a guy who was a complete stranger.”



Otis Shepard's classic cover for the 1963 Wrigley Field scorecard (above). As a youth during a Cubs-Reds game that season, Jack Manning, now of Sugar Grove, Ill., collected the autographs of Verlon Walker (lower left) and Reds rookie second baseman Pete Rose (lower right).

“My dad was nice to that kid. And all those years later, that program has found its way back to me. That man stopped what he was doing, found that program and FedExed it to me. It was a beautiful moment for me. The whole thing was an act of kindness.”

Young hasn't given up her original goal of a recording of Verlon Walker, even though the odds are astronomical. They just got bigger with the death of Hall of Famer Ralph Kiner at 91. Speculation was Kiner might have gotten the Walker brothers together for an interview before a Cubs-Mets game back in the day at Shea Stadium on his “Kiner's Korner” TV show. But Young was unable to reach Kiner before he died. Her only hope is to persuade WWOR-TV in New York, the Mets' flagship station in Walker's era, to scour their archives.

“I've had so many emails of people who have sent leads,” she said. “I have not stopped.”

“I feel like there’s always something I could find. I’ve probably hit the bulk of it. But I still really believe there’s a collector out there with something in the bottom of a box.”

Given the currents that have carried her far from her planned trip so far, Young is leaving herself open to what could happen next as she tries to make up for the hole in her life.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever feel complete or closed,” she said. “All of this really helped. I feel I’m closer to him, brought him to me, called his spirit as you will into my life. If he liked sunflower seeds, tell me. If you know anything he did at the ballpark, let me know.

“It’s a completely spiritual journey.”