



Rizzo brings a healthy grounding of Chicago to Washington's budding baseball power

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Even though he's based in Washington, D.C. as general manager of the Nationals – winningest team in baseball in 2012 – Mike Rizzo does not have to keep a home in suburban Naperville to remain firmly grounded in his Chicago roots.

Anytime he talks to his father, Phil Rizzo, a man of firm opinions, he might as well be at the kitchen table at the old family homestead at Mobile and Waveland avenues, eight miles directly west of Wrigley Field. At 83, Phil Rizzo may be under his son on the Nationals management food chain as a special assistant, but he's still more than his equal in the family pecking order and with insight into baseball.



Washington Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo (left) with wife Sheilah and son Mike, Jr.

“I learn every day from him,” Rizzo said of his dad, who no longer is a pre-game staple in Chicago baseball pressboxes. Phil Rizzo's latest act of wisdom was to distance himself from Chicago winters at his new Arizona home. He's more than put in his time.

“He's forgotten more about this game than I'll ever know,” Mike Rizzo said. “He provides me with information and insight that few other people know. To this day, he calls me after every game, win, lose or draw. We discuss it, and sometimes we discuss it at quite loud levels. He questions a lot of what we do. At the end of the day, he trusts that I'm going to do the right thing.”

Mike Rizzo will remember how his father scraped to provide for the family, scouting for both the Anaheim Angels and driving a truck for the city of Chicago. You don't forget such an upbringing and the neighborhood in which it took place. That's why the younger Rizzo, an alum of the old Holy Cross High School in River Grove and St. Xavier College on the Southwest Side, was thrilled to accept the Major League Executive of the Year Award from the Pitch and Hit Club at its 67th annual banquet Jan. 27 in Lombard. This time, he was a headliner instead of a spectator.

“It’s a prestigious award,” he said “I’m very humbled by it. I came to these things when I was 5 years old. I’ve been to 20 of them in my life. They used to be at the Martinique on the South Side.”

All levels of baseball were honored, including scouts. The Rizzos were at home at the banquet, then and now. Father and son both scouted for the White Sox. In addition to the Angels, Phil also worked for the Brewers and Diamondbacks. Mike also beat the bushes for talent for the Red Sox. He began his rise through the front office as scouting director of the Diamondbacks from 2000 to 2006. Phil Rizzo was a proud papa when Mike finally reached the pinnacle, ascending to GM of the Nationals in Rizzo 2009.

In accepting the award, Rizzo insisted he’s only the front man for an organization he and the Lerner family built from the ground up. The Montreal Expos-turned-Nationals had been a ward of Major League Baseball, an unwanted team once targeted for contraction and loser of 205 games in 2008-09 at the bottom of the cycle.

Change of culture key for Nats’ rise

“The most important thing I did when I took over is change the culture of the team,” Rizzo said. “We were very comfortable and used to losing. We were in last place for five seasons straight. I think it does (feed on itself). Until you get the right kind of personnel in there to overcome that, or show the way, or to lead in a way the players respect.

“We had to turn over the entire organization, not just 25 players on the major-league roster, but 250 in the organization. We’ve gone from 59 wins to 98 wins in four seasons. We feel we’ve changed the culture, we feel we’ve changed the depth in the system, changed the talent level and changed the expectations level. Now the players are expected to win, and we demand they perform.”

Rizzo still has unfinished business. Although the Nats paced the majors with those 98 victories, their postseason inexperience showed when they were ambushed in the NL Division Series by a playoff-tempered Cardinals team. But the Rizzo style is long-term, focused on player development. He finally had more projected regulars than jobs in the off-season, enabling him to trade slugger Michael Morse to the Seattle Mariners.

“We feel we had a long-term plan in place,” Rizzo said. “(Manager) Davey Johnson and I felt very confident that we were going to be a playoff-caliber club last year. We had to rely on some young players to reach their potential. We didn’t feel anyone played over their heads or above their ability levels. We feel we have a lot of guys that still have a lot of room to grow as players. We feel the best days of the Nationals are still ahead of us.

“We changed the entire organization from top to bottom. We hired 17 new scouts and player development guys (after the 2009 season) we felt were the best and brightest from other organizations. The Lerner family allowed me to open the checkbook and pay some guys to come over here.

“People have heard me talk heard me say it’s truly the backbone of every organization – without good scouts and without good player development guys, there is not long-term, continuous success in an organization. You may have a short-term success if you go free-agent market. It’s churning out the players for your own big-league club.”

Strasburg curtailment put him on hot seat

The upward rise has not been all smooth, given the rude ejection from the postseason by the Cardinals, or Rizzo's decision to pull the plug on wunderkind Stephen Strasburg's season after 159 1/3 innings in his first year back from Tommy John surgery.

"Those are the tough decisions," Rizzo said. "That's why I'm the general manager of the team. That was a developmental philosophy I've had during my time as a scout, scouting director, player development director and assistant general manager. I've administered the same developmental curve on pitchers throughout my career.

"We did it three times with the Washington Nationals -- three times before Stephen Strasburg. We're going to do it two or three more times with good prospects after him. This was not about Stephen Strasburg. That was about adhering to a philosophy we've had all along."

Players throughout the game reacted with utter disbelief when Rizzo's plan for Strasburg was revealed. With a World Series finally reachable for the former sad-sack franchise, they could not understand how the young ace could be shut down for the postseason. At one point, it seemed to be Baseball vs. Mike Rizzo.

"Early in the decision -- it was my decision -- I took the onus off the ownership, off the manager and off the player," Rizzo said. "It has nothing to do with them. They can say what they want. They can scream and yell. It was my decision. If you want somebody to yell at, you yell at me, which is fine. There was some of that. At the end of the day, I have to make the best decision for Stephen Strasburg. What's best for Stephen Strasburg is best for the Washington Nationals and the fans of DC."

Scouting judgment paid off on young Harper

Another decision involving a prime Nats prospect also could have backfired on Rizzo. But he and Bryce Harper ended up smelling like a rose. If some looked askance at pulling Strasberg seemingly too soon, how would they have viewed bringing up Harper at just 19 and throw him into the middle of the lineup and center field in a pennant race?

"The biggest part of being a farm director (his old job) is knowing when to bring a person to the next level," Rizzo said. "With Bryce Harper, you throw all developmental curves out the window. He's such a unique and special player.

"We did homework on the kid's makeup, his character, his attitude, his confidence level. Factor in how many at-bats does he have as a professional. What can he do to improve? The most important aspect is will it hinder his progress if he goes to the next level and struggles?"

Again, the buck stopped at Rizzo's desk, and any blame for failure would be his alone.

"I felt when I went to see him at Triple-A a month into the season (he would scout) how he handles left-handed pitching, how he handles the strike zone, how he plays center field and what type of makeup and determination he has," he said.

"I found the kid to be fearless on the field. The bigger the stage, the better he likes it. He's not going to be intimidated by the big leagues. He had the plate discipline and strike-zone discipline to perform in the big leagues. He handles center field to the point where we thought he

was only going to get better.

“The thing I felt most sure about was this kid’s makeup, this kid’s character, and this kid’s confidence level and swagger, that if he did struggle in the big leagues, it wasn’t going to hinder his progress. He would fight through it and find a way to get it done. He did just that to become the (NL) Rookie of the Year.”

These and future tough decisions will always be the result of input from an organization Rizzo sought to credit when picking up the Pitch and Hit Club award.

“In our organization we have an open-door policy,” he said. “My job is to make the decisions, pull the trigger and take the consequences as they come. We have a whole group of scouting personnel, and if they have another opinion other than Mike Rizzo’s, they say it. It’s my job to decipher it, break the ties and come out with the right decision.”