



‘Harry’ is pulled from life’s game a bit early, and it smarts

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In the end, Jim Rygelski proved too “old-school” for his own mortality.

We’re in the missing-man formation. We’re down one good man, one great friend going back to college, one lifelong true-blue (or red?) Cardinals fan and one knowledgeable baseball historian with the Dec. 17 passing of Rygelski. I nicknamed him “Harry” after the famous and non-famous in his river city: Harry Caray and ne’er-do-well Cards/Mets pitcher Harry Parker. Plus, “Harry” Rygelski sounded more rhythmic in a 1949-ish way than just “Jim Rygelski.”



"Harry" Rygelski manages a half-smile in the 95-degree heat in Busch Stadium's right-field bleachers before a Cubs-Cards game on July 4, 1982.

“Harry” was so old-school in many ways. He almost preferred to listen to ballgames on the radio, his Pavlovian training from the 1960s days when Gussie Busch put his fans on a starvation diet of just 40 Cards games on TV, better for the beer-baron team owner to not lose out on any paid attendance at his circular sweatbox of a ballpark.

Somehow, the lack of frequent Redbird images live and in color didn’t dampen the baseball IQ of “Harry.” He had learned it the right way, going to Busch Stadium I, not far from his childhood home on St. Louis’ old ethnic north side, in tow with dad John J. Rygelski, who later worked as a custodian at Gussie’s brewery. Later he took cousin Greg Schroeder to games at the sweatbox and taught him the game.

So he listened on KMOX-Radio first to Caray, then Jack Buck and more recently to foghorn-voiced Mike Shannon and John Rooney, no doubt at times mopping his brow on a front porch and burping from his latest Michelob. Or was it Busch Beer? He didn’t seem a Bud Lite guy. Anyway, I thought he e-mailed recently that he had given up his cable-

TV connection at his home on “The Hill,” Yogi Berra’s and Joe Garagiola’s home neighborhood. That meant few Cards games on TV for him.

“Harry” liked the complete game, but refused to realize pitching evolved from that standard as the last century ebbed. He certainly adhered to the ultimate role model in Bob Gibson, who had 28 route-going performances out of his 34 starts in his record-breaking 1.12 ERA season in 1968. I followed our good friend Fergie Jenkins with 30 complete games in 39 Cubs starts three years later. Both Gibson and Jenkins each had six complete-game *losses* in their respective Cy Young Award seasons.

Let the setup man work the 9th, too!

“Harry” just couldn’t understand why a pitcher cruising along in the eighth couldn’t go one more inning to wrap it up. Enraging him even more, believing modern-day managers acted like mindless robots, was pulling a setup man who had easily disposed of the side in the eighth automatically in favor of the ninth-inning closer. Arguing with my buddy that the closer needed regular work – use him or lose him – and owners typically didn’t want \$10 or \$15 million players gathering rust in the bullpen proved largely futile.

Unfortunately, there won’t be any more contentious e-mail exchanges over the 300 miles distance, the bytes zipping past the old Joliet Arsenal, interminable miles of corn and soybean fields, past the “basset hound waddle” headquarters in Dwight, west of the boss’ home in Monticello, past Abe Lincoln’s old stomping grounds and the talented woman who puts this site together, past Litchfield and the casino on the east side of the big river.

Being thoroughly old-school meant “Harry” would not have a modern-day life expectancy. Back in the day, a lot of men expired in their late 50s and 60s – no seventysomething life expectancy, largely due to too much smoking, drinking or a bad diet, and less magic by the sawbones of the era. “Harry,” who had some serious gastro-intestinal issues some 15 years ago and wore a bag after a lower G-I bypass, thought it would be a bonus if he made it to 70.

He didn’t live long enough to qualify for full Social Security. A month before his 65th birthday, he died, only three weeks after he was diagnosed with Stage 4 liver cancer. There wasn’t even a chance to fight it with cutting-edge cancer treatment. The only good aspect is he didn’t waste away in pain over many months.



"Harry" Rygelski in a reflective mood later in life. He was a firm believer in not pulling a pitcher automatically in favor of the ninth-inning closer.

Waste not, want not. “Harry” donated his body to St. Louis University. There were some good memories at his memorial service on Dec. 28. I wasn’t there, interestingly enough attending to baseball-oriented business in the dead of winter. While his body goes to science and the essence of his soul migrates to what you hope is a higher, better ballpark, part of his spirit stays here.

A precept of Judaism is you’re never totally gone if people remember you and talk about you. So as long as the good doctor allows me, I’m going to have “Harry” Rygelski references within this text. In a 100th anniversary season for Wrigley Field, it’s as good a time as any, seeing he comes from a city where excellence on the field was stressed more than bread and circuses in an ivy-encrusted ballpark.

He played all positions of writing

A writer who worked for both general-circulation newspapers and as editor of the St. Louis Review, the city’s archdiocese newspaper, he was able to scratch his baseball historian’s itch, co-authoring “The I-55 Series: Cubs vs. Cardinals,” with me in 1999 and “10 Rings: Stories of the St. Louis Cardinals’ World Championships” with Robert Tie-mann a couple of years back.

I’ll do my first of my post-corporeal “Harry” publicity efforts, promoting the books because his research should be read by any Cardinals fan, let alone any baseball rooter who believes, rightly so, that past is prologue in our oldest pro sport. Check out the books at Amazon.com. Or do it the old-school way by giving whatever remaining bookstore near you your business.

We got to change an avocation to a vocation in teaming for “The I-55 Series,” a detailing of the players and games of the Cubs-Cardinals rivalry, the title derived from the interstate that connects the teams through five-plus hours of some of the most boring high-speed driving in the country.

I could have been a greedy egotist and taken both the sole authorship and entire modest advance from Sports Publishing, a Champaign, Ill.-based sausage factory of books that went bankrupt a decade later. But I’d have been doing baseball history a disservice by not having “Harry” research and write the Cards’ end of the book. He was the consummate St. Louis baseball historian with a particular acumen in the doings of Chris von der Ahe, the owner of the 19th Century St. Louis Brown Stockings, who evolved into the Cardinals.



Busch Stadium I, formerly Sportsman's Park, gave "Harry" Rygelski his first ballpark experiences with the Cardinals middle-of-the-pack teams at the dawn of the 1960s.

His part of book oriented toward winning

Looking at “The I-55 Series,” “Harry’s” contributions lean heavily in Cards’ players and games that contributed to contending or finishing in first place. Handling the Cubs’ end of the book, my output focuses on a lot of individual achievement that usually went for naught – 19-year-old Phil Cavarretta’s homer in a key 1-0 Cubs win at Sportsman’s Park down the stretch on Sept. 25, 1935 a notable exception.

“Harry” thus had part of the grist for his later “10 Rings” book. I could never figure out how he had any complaints about his Cardinals, whom he tried to disenfranchise from his interest from time to time. Vowing to never attend a game again, I assured him every cold spring and tropical summer he’d be back in whatever version of the ballpark stood at that time. And I was right.

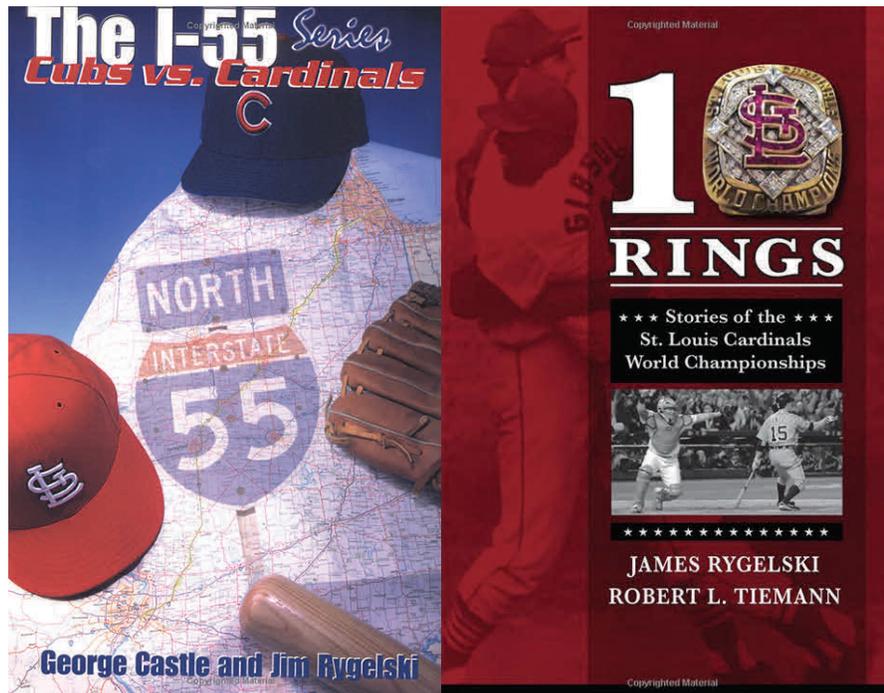
His tilt to the Red-birds was imprinted at the earliest age. One day, long ago, he produced a 1961 scorecard from Busch Stadium I. Baseball’s best player of the time did a number on his Cards that day. “I HATE WILLIE MAYS!” he scrawled. Everything flowed from there, despite later-in-life disavowings.

In the games we attended, our conversations ranged all over the place – career hopes and dreams, current events, drama or lack thereof

with women, Jewish vs. Catholic customs. But we always had baseball as a common bond, reaching across the prairie divide and interstate link between world-class city and old river town, in a friendly manner you’d never see in New York and Boston.

“Harry’s” passing reminds us to cherish those outings in Chicago and St. Louis, those arguments via phone, letter or cyberspace. Life’s nine innings are played at a brisk pace. Sometimes it’s called a bit early in the seventh or eighth, the game considered official.

You’re not assured of a complete game, as much as “Harry” Rygelski craved that. Enjoy every pitch you can, and never let loose of the good memories.



"Harry" Rygelski was co-author of "The I-55 Series: Cubs vs. Cardinals" (left) and "10 Rings: Stories of the St. Louis Cardinals' World Championships" (right).