

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Absolute affirmation in La Russa HOF induction

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When Tony La Russa delivers his Hall of Fame acceptance speech in Cooperstown, he may experience his most relaxed moment of the past 35 years, in contrast to the butterflies and emotion felt by many inductees as they speak.

If he still has a shred of doubt, if in the corner of his mind he still has a bit of insecurity over whether his baseball persona has been accepted, La Russa's enshrinement should counter that once and for all. It's the ultimate affirmation he's a baseball 1 percenter, square among the game's elite.

I bring this up because through the decades, catching La Russa smile while managing the Sox, Athletics and Cardinals was a challenge. Most of it was his trademark intensity and concentration while running a game. But a little bit was a desire to prove himself to doubters, never forgetting his was a 34-year-old rookie manager without portfolio promoted by a cost-conscious Bill Veeck to run a laggard Sox franchise in 1979.



George Castle



Harry Caray interviews Tony La Russa in 1981. La Russa never forgot the criticism Caray aimed at him as a young manager who seemingly had to prove himself.

La Russa accomplished a lot in his seven seasons at the Sox helm. He made himself into a marketable manager, given his quick re-employment with the Athletics after Hawk Harrelson fired him in a move Jerry Reinsdorf regrets to this day he didn't block with his chairman's powers. Yet he faced as many brickbats as bouquets in his South Side run, the fans seemingly never satisfied with his managerial strategy or even his educated persona.

La Russa has a long memory. That is a given. Chicago broadcast baseball pundit Bruce Levine put something out there in the 1980s that prompted La Russa to give him the cold shoulder over the ensuing two decades. Fortunately, the pair of diamond mainstays patched it up a little while back. Life is too short for petty grudges.

Caray, Piersall were critics

I picked up on the hurts inflicted on La Russa when I asked for his memories for my very first book, *I Remember Harry Caray*, in 1998. Caray and broadcast partner Jimmy Piersall, the most entertaining guerilla theater of the air tandem in baseball history, often skewered the young manager. La Russa even took coaches Jim Leyland and Charlie Lau to SportsVision's studios to confront analyst Piersall after one game in 1982. Fortunately, La Russa the attorney quickly came to his senses that any physical contact with Piersall meant a lawsuit and hot-water with Reinsdorf.

Caray was like a pied piper in his 11 Sox seasons from 1971 to 1981. Other than Dick Allen's MVP season in '72 and the South Side Hit Men's 4½-month run in '77, Caray was the Sox's top attraction during that period. He had huge sway in shaping the often-critical, hard-to-please fan base. Caray roasted Chuck Tanner, creating tension and leading to his temporary firing late in 1975. He also nearly came to blows with Bill Melton, another on-air target, at the Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee. So when you added Piersall, who bragged he had the papers to prove he was wacky, you had even more volatility when a target like La Russa came into the crosshairs.

"Yes, fans followed Harry and Jimmy's lead a lot regarding Tony," said Sox historian Mark Liptak, a contributor to the Chicago Baseball Museum. "Those two guys knew baseball and if they weren't sold on Tony, fans weren't, either."

Only a couple of months after Caray's death in 1998, La Russa had no fond memories to recall about the broadcaster. He captured the tension of nearly two decades gone by as if it was yesterday.

"I was a young manager, and Harry needed to be shown that I could do something to help a club," La Russa said. "There were a lot more important things in his life besides the manager of the White Sox. I don't think I was a big part of his life."



Tony La Russa (center) greets Washington Nationals GM Mike Rizzo (left) and Pete Caliendo, present-day president of the Pitch and Hit Club, at the club's Jan. 2013 annual banquet.

“I think he was like a lot of the fans: ‘Who is this guy? He’s got no credentials. Let’s make him earn something.’”

Caray bailed for the welcoming arms of superstition WGN-TV and the Cubs after two-plus seasons second-guessing La Russa. Then a new dynamic took over in the fans’ perception of their manager, according to Liptak.

One was a seemingly identification with Reinsdorf and partner Eddie Einhorn, even though Bill Veeck had promoted La Russa from Triple-A. Old-line fans did not like a lot of the early changes the new owners had implemented, and La Russa was caught up in that image.

Too slick for South Side?

And he seemed too slick for the blue-collar South Side.

“Tony was the antithesis to everything Sox fans thought a manager should be...he was handsome, educated, starting using computers and hitting charts...i.e. a stat-head...and that rubbed many the wrong way,” Liptak said. “Billy Martin, Earl Weaver, even Herman Franks...those were the type of guys many Sox fans wanted managing the team. A guy hewed in the ‘Chicago image’ of toughness.”

Liptak got La Russa’s long-form take on those times in a recent two-part Chicago Baseball Museum series. [Read part 1 >>](#) [Read part 2 >>](#) The new Hall of Famer was generous with his time – two hours on the phone.

“Tony himself said in my interview with him that he had to prove himself and he was correct,” said Liptak.

As intense as any manager in history, La Russa was no affable dugout gabber like fellow 2014 inductee Bobby Cox or Jack McKeon. He had a very vocal confrontation with the late writer Bob Glass, a short-but-feisty type, in his U.S. Cellular Field office about 20 years back. Even though our own relationship always had been cordial, I was hard-pressed to get a sound byte as long as 20 seconds out of La Russa when I tried to tape him for my Diamond Gems baseball radio show.

Perhaps La Russa was simply in his game mode, trying to out-prepare the opposition. And maybe that’s how he had to get ready for the game. The final vote on that style is exemplified on the lectern in Cooperstown.

I’m just glad once La Russa – who 10 years ago seemingly did not envision a front-office career – mellowed once he exited the dugout. His prodigious courtesy to Liptak is a great example. Ditto with my interview with him at the 2013 Pitch and Hit Club Banquet. I would have killed to have gotten those 6 ½ minutes for the radio show back in the day.

Like a player, La Russa changed with the job and with continual maturity. He altered his goals to desiring a front-office position after he walked away a winner with St. Louis in 2011. Running a front-office, as he is doing in Phoenix, requires people skills.

They're talents he always had, but were too often glimpsed only behind the closed doors of the clubhouse.

Animal-rights endorser La Russa has even done a radio commercial promoting prospective pet owners to patronize shelters. He would have had an even greater impact recording that spot as a manager.

But always it's better late than never. La Russa the accessible man is just another quality worthy of Cooperstown to go along with that sharp mind and steely determination. And, yes, those traits were always prized by knowledgeable fans who put some distance between themselves and the broadcast-booth noise at old Comiskey Park.