

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## *Wrigley always was tough homecoming for Capra*

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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Buzz Capra finally has come home, permanently.

But that process was oh-so-hard when he was a big deal, the local boy wanting to make good in baseball, back in the 1970s.

Capra, now 68 and a Hoffman Estates resident, has settled into a routine of coaching kids at Elite Sports Training on Randall Road in St. Charles. None of his students, though, likely know how hyped his grand entrance was on Wednesday, May 24, 1972 at Wrigley Field as starting pitcher for the New York Mets.



**Buzz Capra (left) with Cubs radio voice Pat Hughes at January's Pitch and Hit Club Banquet.**

Not too many Chicago products make it to the big leagues. Even in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a bulk of big leaguers came from the Sunbelt, where they could hone their skills year-round. Yet here was Capra, product of Lane Tech High School and Illinois State University, trying to crack a rotation with big names and big fastballs like Tom Seaver, Jerry Koosman and Jon Matlack. He certainly had the recommendation of the Mets' farm director of that time – Whitey Herzog.

“It’s nerve-wracking,” Capra recalled. “They always gave me the big buildup here, no matter what team I was playing for. But especially the Mets, because of the rivalry with the Cubs. I could hardly sleep the night before (at the family home in the Belmont-Austin neighborhood on the Northwest).

“But all the people were nice to me. All the broadcasters were nice to me.”

Capra just wishes the Cubs were as good to him as Jim West and Lou Boudreau as they queried him on pre-game WGN shows. The biggest Buzz he created in his homecomings were from the Cubs' home-run bats.

I found myself witness to several of these gopher-ball performances. I don't know why I wasn't in my junior-year classes at Mather High School in Capra's first Wrigley Field game on that 1972 spring afternoon. But there I was in the right-field upper deck among more than 15,000 fans. Jose Cardenal slugged a pair of two-run homers, one onto Waveland Avenue, and Billy Williams added a solo blast. Burt Hooton, who had the Mets' number at the start of his career, beat him 5-1.

I was stuck at work downtown as a stockboy at Belscot Retailers' headquarters on Friday, June 29, 1973, so I could not witness another Mets visit. Entrusted to protect a potential Tom Seaver victory, Capra instead served up former No. 1 Cubs draft pick Gene Hiser's only big-league homer, a pinch-hit job with two outs in the ninth to tie the game at 3. Fittingly, present-day businessman Hiser crosses paths with Capra from time to time in the northwest suburbs as a reminder.

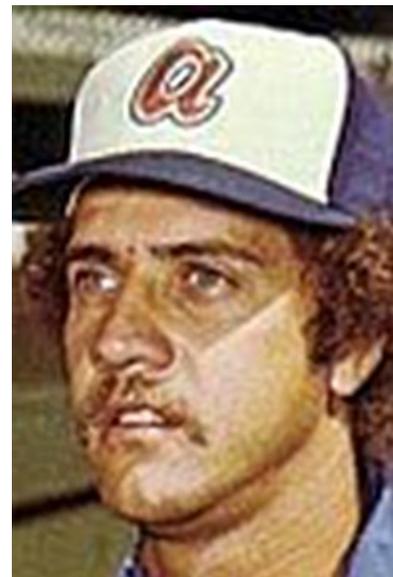
Then, to prove his aphorism that it ain't over 'til it's over, Mets manager Yogi Berra brought Capra back for the 10<sup>th</sup>. He gave up a single and two walks leading off the inning, and of course lost again after Tug McGraw came in the game.

A trade to the Atlanta Braves did not bring Capra better luck at Wrigley Field in 1974. On Sunday, July 7, he was matched against the Cubs' Rick Reuschel. This time, on four hours' sleep after my all-night Tribune copy clerk shift, I was a bleary-eyed witness. Bill Madlock homered early, then Rick Monday tagged Capra for a two-run shot as the game-decider in the seventh. Reuschel gave up 12 hits in 8 1/3 innings, but he held off the Mets enough for a 4-3 victory.

By '74, Capra had found himself – briefly. His loss to Reuschel dropped his record to 9-3 and “upped” his ERA to 1.64. He'd go on to lead the NL in ERA with 2.28, backing a 16-8 mark, in that launching pad known as Fulton County Stadium.

Mind you, even though Capra had shoulder surgery in 1976 that effectively cut short his career, he has few complaints.

“I was very fortunate to play with Willie Mays and Hank Aaron, catch these guys near the end of their careers,” he said. “I made an All-Star team. I was in the World Series (on the '73 Mets roster).”



**As a Brave, Buzz Capra led the NL with a 2.28 ERA in 1974.**

And Capra was on the mound for history. He lost the game (no, not in Wrigley Field) in relief that Aaron hit his Babe Ruth-tying 714<sup>th</sup> homer on Opening Day – in Cincinnati – on April 4, 1974. Four days later in Atlanta, Capra pitched a three-inning save to lock down the Braves' 7-4 victory over the Dodgers, a contest far better known for Aaron's 715<sup>th</sup>.

“Not a lot of people know that,” he said. “That lineup card is in Cooperstown.”

Capra won't soon forget his participation in the pair of historic games – or the surrealistic atmosphere of Aaron reaching for the all-time record.

“Hank had a lot of people on him all year,” he said. “Things were a little rugged in the South. “He had a full-time bodyguard wherever he went.”

Aaron had another tie-in to Capra in '74. Hammering Hank slugged his final Wrigley Field homer off Reuschel in that July 7 game.

Capra went on to become a minor-league pitching coach, a two-decade tenure that ended in 2000. “I got a little tired of riding the buses,” he said. Ever since, he has worked in youth coaching and home remodeling. He still attends Mets Fantasy Camps for the camaraderie of old teammates.

Fortunately, the camps are in Florida. Move 'em to Chicago, and you know what Capra might have done with one of his trademark curveballs. Souvenir time in the bleachers. Some ballparks, even one close to home, just give you the hoodoo no matter how hard you try.