



‘Steely eyes,’ chaw in cheek, dressing-down style – Zimmer had many faces

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Everybody knew the multiple sides – and resulting expressive faces – of Don Zimmer when they shoehorned themselves into his Wrigley Field manager’s office the late afternoon of Friday, Sept. 8, 1989.

All had seen and enjoyed the cherubic, cheeky chaw-cradling “Popeye” image of Zimmer as he held court, telling stories of his already-astounding 38-year journey through baseball. He had taken the Cubs a long way already, to first place with three weeks to go in this shocking season, and had won friends and influenced people.

Yet the media masses also had witnessed the darker side of Zimmer. There was the quick temper and jump-down-the-throat style of an old-school baseball lifer with few personal refinements. Above all, the eyes had it, transforming the cherub into something seemingly a lot more sinister.



Don Zimmer (left) confers with Andre Dawson at spring training before the memorable 1989 season. Photo credit [Boz Bros.](#)

“He had those steely eyes,” said then Cubs outfielder Gary Varsho. “When he was mad, his eyes opened wide and they penetrated through you. One day I got picked off after

leading off ninth with a single. Oh, my God, coming back to the dugout facing those steely blue eyes.”

On this day, the assembled media waited for the bulging eye sockets, the reddened face and the possible verbal outburst.

Zimmer and buddy Jim Frey, doubling as Cubs general manager, appeared as if they lost their best friend. On this day, the visiting Cardinals stormed back for an 11-8 victory to cut the Cubs’ first-place lead over the Redbirds to a half game. The Cubs held a 7-2 lead going into the top of the seventh. But then the Cards tallied four in the top of the inning. The Cubs tacked on one more in the bottom of the seventh for an 8-6 lead.

Yet the boom was really about to be lowered. Two Cardinals reached against lefty reliever Paul Assenmacher in the top of the eighth. Zimmer summoned closer Mitch Williams to face slugger Pedro Guerrero. Neither wasted any time. Guerrero belted a three-run homer into the right-field bleachers to grab a 9-8 St. Louis lead. Two batters later, Terry Pendleton powered a two-run homer off the Wild Thing for the eventual final score.

After the sixth, I recall mentioning to pressbox colleague Bruce Levine that Cubs lefty Paul Kilgus, who hadn’t started a game in several months due to injury and ineffectiveness, had already had done his job holding down the Cards. Isn’t Zimmer, who already had an iffy reputation for handling pitchers, tempting fate sending Kilgus back out there for the seventh?

Temptation was hurled back in Zimmer’s face. Kilgus allowed a walk, single and double to lead off the seventh, so the Cards were rolling. Maybe they don’t score four if a fresh pitcher started the inning and Zimmer had told Kilgus, “Good job, you’re done” after six.

So when all crowded around Zimmer’s desk, with Frey, head down, shuffling his feet in the back of the room, the first question needed asking. But there was a long, pregnant pause of at least 30 seconds. Silence enveloped the cubbyhole of an office. No one wanted to go first. They knew how loudly Zimmer might react and how lasers could possibly shoot out of those eyes, sci-fi-style.

Why did you stretch out Kilgus?

Somehow, courage was summoned. “What went into your stretching Kilgus into the seventh?” or words similar to that effect, came out of my mouth. The explosion never took place. Zimmer provided a reasonable, albeit brief answer. And the interrogation began without strain or backlash.

The above was a lasting image recalled when the news flashed on June 4 that Zimmer, who appeared to be fated to live to 100, died at 83 following post-surgery complications in the Tampa area. Zimmer forever will have Cubs' fans' gratitude for the 1989 NL East title, which the team hung on to win after the Kilgus/Guerrero disaster. "The Boys of Zimmer," a team of home-grown players developed by the regime of GM Dallas Green, Frey's predecessor, teamed with their manager's unconventional, hunch-filled strategy.

Zimmer won over the majority of Cubs fans and media after more negative controversy-filled seasons as Red Sox manager in a much tougher media town. Both commentators and some of his players roasted him over the coals or spoofed him. Zimmer picked up his second nickname "The Gerbil" in Boston, while dissenting Red Sox, including Hall of Famer Fergie Jenkins, formed the "Buffalo Head Gang."

He finally finished first in the more laid-back Midwest after his talented Boston teams always fell short in the end in the tough American League East in the late 1970s. With his hero's reception here as his dominant public image, Zimmer professed his everlasting love of Wrigley Field, Cubs and its manager's job as the best in the business.

Zimmer had distinction as one of a select group of men since 1921 to play for, coach for and manage the Cubs. He joined Rogers Hornsby, Gabby Hartnett, Stan Hack, Bob Scheffing, Joey Amalfitano, Jim Marshall and El Tappe. Only Zimmer and Hartnett brought the Cubs home in first place.

Zimmer was hired and fired by the Cubs three times. His first tenure in Chicago, as the starting third baseman-turned-two-time All-Star second baseman in 1960 and 1961, started and ended in controversy.

Ron Santo, just turned 20, believed he'd break camp in '60 as the starter at third after just one pro season, at Double-A San Antonio. Suddenly, he was informed by GM John Holland and manager Charlie Grimm he'd be sent down to Triple-A Houston after Holland dealt for veteran Zimmer from the Dodgers.

Perranoski-for-Zimmer 'unnecessary'

"An unnecessary trade," Santo huffed 40 years later. Holland traded Santo's San Antonio roommate, top lefty pitching prospect Ron Perranoski, to LA in the Zimmer deal. But by July 1960, Santo was up to play third base for a 13 1/2-year run. By '61, Perranoski began to establish himself as the NL's best lefty reliever, a status he held through three Dodgers World Series appearances and two championships.



Don Zimmer was an All-Star Cub in 1961, but trading future relief star Ron Perranoski for him was branded an "unnecessary" trade by Ron Santo.

Then, near the end of the College of Coaches first season in '61, Zimmer popped off about the chaos of the system on Lou Boudreau's pre-game radio show. That First Amendment action earned Zimmer a place on the NL player expansion list from Holland and a spot on the infamous 1962 original New York Mets.

Such unfiltered comments were the accurate Zimmer. It was possible to love him, hate him and endure all the emotions in between, sometimes in the same day.

"Sad day. A huge loss for all of us," said Hall of Famer Andre Dawson upon hearing of Popeye's death. Zimmer let Dawson – two years removed from the NL Most Valuable Player Award -- virtually manage himself in 1989, when he came back early from his latest knee surgery to help guide fellow outfielders Jerome Walton and Dwight Smith through their rookie seasons. Walton and Smith ended up one-two in the NL rookie of year balloting in '89.

"He was popular because he had simple rules," Dawson said. "Come in on time and give it your best. And if you're struggling, go out and have a beer, come back the next day ready to play."

Indeed, Levine always paraphrased Zimmer in explaining why he arrived early to the pressbox for games: "If you're early, you're never late."

Zimmer earned all-time Chicago sports renown for his unconventional strategy, the most famous of which was hitting-and-running with the bases loaded. His 1989 hunches usually worked out, until the very end when the San Francisco Giants won three straight games in the NL Championship Series to again bar the door to a World Series appearance.

Dawson laughed remembering the oddball strategy, which fortunately did not affect him. Zimmer would never ask him to bunt or hit-and-run.

'You shook your head, it defied logic'

"Craziest thing about it is a lot of times it would work," he said. "But you shook your head, it defied logic. He managed and made moves and did things on instincts. He had a good instinct."

And if Zimmer had asked Dawson to bunt?

"Absolutely," he said without hesitation. "I had the utmost respect for him. We had our relationship and never questioned what he did. He'd been around the game and seen it all. He wouldn't hesitate (to do something unconventional)."

“Zimmer was never cut and dried,” said 1989 pitching coach Dick Pole, instrumental in Greg Maddux’s development at the time. “He didn’t play conventional baseball. Vance Law squeezed in five or six runs with a 2-2 count. I remember when reporters asked if he played by the book, and Don said, ‘Show me the goddamn book!’

The manager also had hunches about umpires, and his emotionalism helped make them come true.

“One time Sandberg hit the ball (down the left-field line for a homer),” Pole recalled. “(Giants manager) Roger Craig went out there. Zim said: ‘The umps are going to change the ruling and my ass is going to be out of this game.’ Sure enough, that’s what happened.”

Old middle infielder Zimmer could not take credit for developing pitchers. Pole helmed a 1989 Big Three of Maddux, surprise 18-game-winner Mike Bielecki and Rick Sutcliffe, whose best fastball was four years in the past. The trio combined for 53 wins. The starting rotation tapered off to Kilgus and Scott Sanderson. At one point, Zimmer and Frey experimented with a four-man rotation, but the retrenchment lasted only briefly.

Zimmer’s bedside manner was often gruff when he visited the mound to lecture a struggling pitcher.

“I heard him say, ‘You got yourself into this (bleep), now get out of it,’” Pole said.

Maddux, just 22 when Zimmer was hired, won 52 games in his three full seasons as a manager. He already was self-motivated with old-school values in protecting his hitters and pitching inside. In 1987, he won over his teammates by retaliating against Padres catcher Benito Santiago, costing himself a sure victory, after starter Eric Show had hit



Shawon Dunston (left) and Ryne Sandberg as Cubs spring coaches 15 years after serving as Don Zimmer's 1989 double-play combo. Dunston and Zimmer had several shouting – and crying – sessions together as Zimmer tried to round Dunston into a top shortstop.

Dawson in the face, touching off a melee in the infield. Yet Maddux's development was independent of any particular manager. After Zimmer departed, Maddux said he still was working on his "stretch mechanics" under Pole successor Billy Connors.

Zimmer molds Dunston

If Zimmer could be credited with any particular player's development, it was shortstop Shawon Dunston's. Once the No. 1 pick in the entire 1982 draft, Dunston by 1989 was not the next "Ernie Banks" as some predictions had stated. When Mark Grace first came up in 1988, he worried about Dunston's scatter-rocket-arm, which he witnessed "knocking over Bull (Durham) at first" the previous two seasons.

Zimmer, with Dawson's big-brother-type help, focused Dunston on both sides of the ball. His scatter-arm quieted down. Dunston also became a more consistent hitter in 1989 to the point a creative fan began displaying his batting average in the left-field bleachers via a daily-revised "Shawon-o-Meter" sign.

"It was fascinating to see how Shawon and him went at it," Dawson said. "Ryno was the quiet one. Zim kept emphasizing things until he hit home. Sometimes they'd get into shouting matches. That made him feel that much closer to Zim. I've seen them talking and they'd both be shedding tears. Zim was an emotional individual. He'd sit down and shoot from the hip. He made his point and got on people."

As many instances as players heard the tough Zimmer, he displayed acts of kindness and sensitivity that belied his appearances and his players remember fondly to this day.

Most outstanding was handling future White Sox broadcaster Darrin Jackson, then a home-grown Cubs outfielder recovering from two surgeries related to his case of testicular cancer after the 1987 season.

"In the spring in '88, we're doing stretching, do or die stuff," Jackson recalled. "The surgeries were all in my abdominal area. I remember Zim walking by me after workouts. He said, 'Kid, just do all the stuff you can do, don't overdo it. If you cannot do certain things, do not push yourself.' I said, 'Zim, I'm doing fine. The only hard thing was doing situps.' He said don't do situps. He cared about me as much physically as he could."

The regal, dignified Dawson was the last man Zimmer would push to return to the lineup after knee surgery in May 1989.

"He always gave you the luxury (of deciding when to come back)," Dawson said. "He said, 'You know your body better than I do. When you tell me you're ready, you'll be ready. One thing I don't want you to is rush.'"

After a career as a utility player sometimes working on baseball's fringes, Zimmer often found it difficult to tell a player he was being demoted or left out.

Demoted 'DJ' consoles Zimmer

"I had an emotional exchange with him in '89," said Jackson. "I was not playing a lot. He calls me into office to send me to Des Moines so Les Lancaster could come up. He's all choked up, getting teary, I patted him on the shoulder and said, 'It's OK, I'll be fine.' He was that emotional of a person. He could be chewing you a new butt. It made it so much fun, he could put his arm around you for a hug."

Varsho witnessed the same side.

"Deep down, he just had a real caring heart," he said. "You just had to figure it out a little bit. He really was a sweet, gentle man. He demanded a lot of you. He liked to have fun, but it was hard to see that side of him.

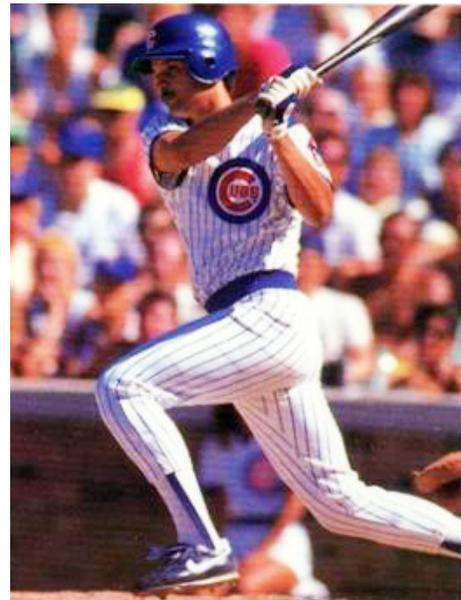
"One thing he did for me in '89, I got sent out, then was recalled, and finally I was not on the postseason roster. I told him I got nothing to do. He marched all the way out during BP against the Giants. He said I want you to stay, you earned this right to stay.

"When he traded me to Pittsburgh (in 1990), he found me a spot. I was in his office, and he said you're going from one son of a bitch to another (Jim Leyland). I'm very privileged to play for him. Great heart."

Zimmer was not known as a pitchers' friend, as his Buffalo Heads in Boston might attest. But lefty Assenmacher, who credits Zimmer for boosting his career by pitching him regularly as no worse than the second relief option, recalls Zimmer saying he was sorry.

"It was in LA, we're hopping on the bus after we lost the game," said Assenmacher, now a high-school pitching coach in suburban Atlanta. "He must have gotten on me after the game, but it was a family trip. He saw my kids on the bus waiting. My wife was upset. By the time we flew back to Chicago, he apologized to me for getting on me.

"I like and respected all my managers, but the best was Zim."



As a Cub in 1988, Darrin Jackson remembered Don Zimmer letting him ease up in workouts after two cancer surgeries.

Also witnessing the reforming-in-short order personality was Sharon Panno, who was the No. 2 Cubs media relations person when Zimmer was hired. Panno was promoted to the top job as Chicago sports' first female media relations director starting Zimmer's final season in 1991. She now is vice president of East Coast publicity for NBC-TV, with the New York-based "Tonight Show" as part of her responsibilities.

Zimmer kicks female PR official off bus

"I remember I was traveling with the team on a road trip and he kicked me off the team bus," Panno recalled in an e-mail interview. "He said it was because I was a 'girl' and he was afraid I would hear 'bad' things (lol). He just couldn't quite understand women working in sports and being part of what was a real 'boys club' at the time back in the (1980s).

"I was really angry with him at the time at this blatant discrimination, but the more I got to know him, we developed a mutual respect for each other. By the time he left the Cubs, I was on the bus and he treated me like a daughter. He was a very special character. I think if he had made it too easy for me, I wouldn't have worked as hard as I did to earn his respect and that made me successful in this business in the end."



Sharon Panno, now an NBC-TV publicity VP in New York, was thrown off the team bus by Don Zimmer because of her gender. But she stood her ground, and soon earned Zimmer's respect.

With Panno and the players, Zimmer showed hints of his darker side. That was on much fuller display with members of the media, but the dark side was not generally reported with beat writers and TV reporters needing Zimmer's cooperation – and storytelling skills.

Some of his public comments contrasted with reality. For example, in his introductory press conference, Zimmer said he never contacted Frey, whom he had known since age 14 in Cincinnati, to campaign for the Cubs' job. In reality, Zimmer back-channeled through a Cubs official to relay the message to Frey he wanted the job.

“He was very often not a good person,” said a reporter who covered Zimmer for 12 years in multiple markets, but who also declined to be identified. “He was among the most calculating celebrities I ever encountered. He did not have a quick mind, but he could size up personal situations very accurately. He knew who he needed to be nice to and who he didn’t. If he didn’t have to be nice, he treated people like garbage very often.

“If a person could help him, he could be nurturing and coddling. He knew he needed the beat writers and he treated them like royalty. Everyone else, especially if you were not over 50, he was suspicious. He lied constantly. I personally witnessed 25 to 30 times where he abused someone verbally in front of other people to embarrass them. I was that person only two times. But the other 25 or so I witnessed disgusted me.

“If the person was young and not a regular on the beat, he would abuse them. I always felt he was trying to establish power, but I later realized he was an uptight guy incapable of dealing with pressure. He freely admitted he wasn’t an intellectual guy. The problem was, he felt threatened by those who are.”

Zimmer never sought hero’s status. Moving on from the Cubs, his image only got cuddlier through his wrasslin’ match with Pedro Martinez and wearing an Army helmet after a ball hit in the head. All our baseball gods sometimes have feet of clay.

Popeye was no different. He left Chicago with more smiles than frowns, but there were plenty of both. In the end, he brought home a winner, and that puts him in select company in Cubs history.