



## ***Ice cream runs, brownies and late faith: the many sides of Piersall celebrated***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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We all know the many public sides of Jimmy Piersall – the crazy guy, the beacon of controversy, the brutally candid color analyst and, elsewhere on this site, the crafty, very effective minor-league outfield instructor.

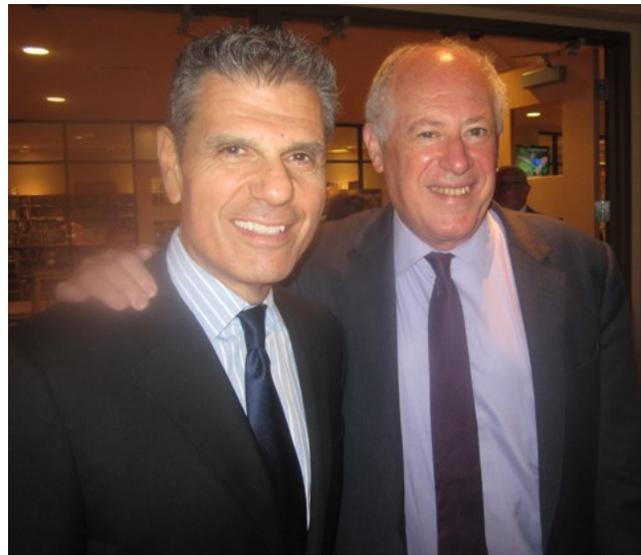
What about Piersall’s tender side? He was a doting grandpa – and great grandpa.

“He taught us how to fish,” grandson Steve Jones, a lieutenant in the west suburban Geneva, Ill. fire department, said after Piersall’s June 23 memorial service at his Wheaton Bible Church. The grandkids wanted to play with Piersall’s dog Mushy and go with him to the local Dairy Queen. But Jones figured Piersall wanted the ice cream more than the kids.

“He loved us unconditionally,” Jones said. “If I was hurting, he was hurting. If my son (Teddy) was hurting, he was hurting. He worried about him climbing on stuff, telling him to get down.”

Sweet treats were always close to the Piersalls. Becoming close friends with John F. Kennedy, Piersall’s expansive brood of kids went with JFK and his posse of junior Kennedys on ice cream runs on 1960-vintage holidays in Hyannisport, Mass.

Piersall was also proud of wife Jan’s well-publicized brownies. His young Cubs players got invited to his home to sample the brownies. Others were invited to spring-training dinners with the Piersalls in Mesa.



**Tom Shaer (left), a friend of the Chicago Baseball Museum, put together the memorial program at Wheaton Bible Church, in which former Gov. Pat Quinn (right) was a speaker.**



**Jimmy Piersall's Red Sox jersey (left) and a collection of his baseball cards greeted attendees at his memorial service.**

And there was Piersall introspective, contemplative side, 180 degrees from his more typical public volubility. Always learning – a must if he had any consistency as an outfield instructor – he realized in his 80s he had to square things up.

### **Worried about forgiveness**

“Jimmy said, ‘God could never forgive me – I did too many bad things,’” said buddy Keith Lindley. He feared death. But he acquired a newfound strong faith as his clocked ticked. Lindley said the proof was in this Piersall statement: “I don’t swear any more. I’m a Christian now.”

Faith questions and the marking of Piersall’s June 3 passing were of course prominent at the service, attended by several hundred family members, friends and fans. But as with anything involving the man of many faces, the event was a celebration of life – or multiple existences.

“(Wife) “Jan said Jimmy had nine lives and he used up every one of them,” said Tom Shaer, Piersall’s friend and publicist, who choreographed the memorial service that included delicious audio and video highlights of Piersall’s baseball body English and verbal talents.

A good talker himself, Shaer uncharacteristically choked up on the pulpit as he began the program. “I’m a proud friend of Jimmy Piersall,” he said as he then suffered a failure to launch. Former Piersall Cubs farm system outfield pupil Darrin Jackson then dashed to Shaer’s side, whispering a reminder to “be happy,” said the speaker, regaining his composure.

Jackson, now White Sox radio color analyst, showed up early at the Friday morning services after his team got in late the previous night after a five-hour rain-delayed game in Minneapolis. He wasn’t going to miss this tribute under any circumstances. Neither was Cubs Hall of Famer Billy Williams, who was a coaching mate of Piersall’s in spring

training and often crossed paths with the Wheaton resident by living in neighboring Glen Ellyn.

“Jimmy was a great, great outfield instructor,” said Williams. “He came out of left field. He kept the guys loose by some of the comments he said.”

In the coaches’ locker room at Fitch Park in Arizona, Piersall hardly toned down in his private side.

“He was himself,” said Williams. “He was always outspoken. He often said I can do a lot of stuff because I have the papers (showing he had been mentally ill), and they forgive me.”

Two seats away from Williams was former Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn, who credited Piersall with “breaking down walls” about understanding mental illness. He also lauded Piersall with “being righteous in telling the truth.”



**Eric Hill, Jimmy Piersall's caregiver in his final months, shows off a Piersall No. 37 Cubs jersey.**

In his dying days, Williams took care to visit Piersall in his sickbed.

“Dick Wagner, a friend of mine, and I visited Jimmy on County Farm Road,” he said. “We had a great time talking baseball. We had something in common. I think we brought a lot of enjoyment to him that day.”

Also attending was Karen McDonough, wife of Blackhawks president John McDonough. Having known Piersall from his Cubs days, John McDonough would have appreciated coming, but was tied up with the NHL draft and a big trade that reacquired winger Brandon Saad.

### **Upsetting, then befriending Lombardi**

Piersall understood other sports. He once was general manager of a semi-pro football team. He wrangled an invitation to a Washington Redskins practice under the brief coaching tenure of Vince Lombardi. Louder than Piersall at his peak, Lombardi spotted him along the sidelines and ordered aides to “get him out of here,” according to Shaer. But once the two men met moments later and calmed down, they got along fabulously and lunched together.

Piersall broadcast stories could have kept the service going all day.

Shaer recounted how Piersall co-hosted a WMAQ-Radio (whose 670 frequency is now occupied by The Score) talk show with stalwart station voice Nancy Turner. Piersall often came on from the ballpark or another remote location. He did not tolerate overly long callers. When one gabbed too long, Piersall broke in during mid-stream of consciousness to order, ‘Push the (dump) button, Nancy.’”

Piersall was a born entertainer and raconteur. His “Fear Strikes Out” book came out in 1955, just three years after being hospitalized for a nervous breakdown in his rookie season. He covered the All-Star Game as a newspaper columnist when not playing in the contest. He quickly soaked up endorsements in New England. Original Red Sox fan Shaer, who possesses a treasure trove of vintage Piersall clips, said he made as much money (\$23,000 annually) peddling pickles and relish for a regional company as he did playing baseball in Boston back in the day.



**WBBM-Radio program director Ron Gleason (left) and Zanies manager Rick Gieser attended the service. As The Score’s program director in the early 1990s, Gleason hired Piersall as voluble baseball analyst while Gieser produced some of his broadcast segments.**

Appropriately, the service took place on the 54<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Piersall’s running the bases backward in the Polo Grounds for his 100<sup>th</sup> career homer, off the Phillies’ Dallas Green, who would later hire him for his Cubs outfield instructor’s job. Few could outshine Piersall on a June 23. Ryne Sandberg did, via his two homers off Bruce Sutter on June 23, 1984 at Wrigley Field.

The overriding theme was if you were Piersall’s friend, or an apt baseball student, you would get back more than you’d give. Jackson recalled how a heckler during Cubs spring training batting practice was unmerciful daily to younger players such as himself.

Piersall figured enough was enough. He jumped the fence and charged the loudmouth, who quickly fled the ballpark.

And in an honoring of 87 years of constant life transformations, Piersall still kept providing value in his presence, even if he was not there in body. In a church, among the faithful, three weeks after his passing, he was still the whole show.