



La Russa's lord of the rings, but 'Winning Ugly' Sox cuts to his soul

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Pride in Tony La Russa's life is weighted by wearing his 2006 and 2011 Cardinals World Series rings on his right hand, with his 1989 Athletics Fall Classic ring adorning his left.

La Russa wouldn't trade all of his jewelry for a different ring won had his 1983 White Sox somehow gotten past the Orioles in the American League Championship Series, then upended the Phillies in the World Series.

There can't be a transaction at all. La Russa's memories of running the "Winning Ugly" team that lifted a generation-long monkey off Chicago baseball's back can't be traded or sold. They're ingrained in his very soul, in a class by themselves.

Thirty years have passed, but La Russa's impressions of '83 might as well have been yesterday. This man sees all and knows all in baseball, and doesn't miss anything. As an example was a trivia question, offered at the Pitch and Hit Club's 67th annual banquet on Jan. 27 in Lombard, Ill. The question, promoting the new E-book, "Alou Makes the Catch: An Alternate History of the Chicago Cubs," involved La Russa pinch-running for Ron Santo in the ninth inning and scoring the winning run on Opening Day 1973 at Wrigley Field. That was La Russa's only game as a Cub.

"Mike Marshall walked in Jim Hickman," La Russa flashed back, the 40 years intervening having no effect on memory and detail amid a flurry of people he greeted at the Pitch and Hit Club's dinner.

With the same powers of recall, he won't forget any detail of the team that put him on the map as a manager.

"That team, for the personalities and the quality of the coaching, the combination of wonderful veterans and terrific young players who wanted to learn – the chemistry that developed," he said.



Tony La Russa shows off his World Series rings: the 2006 and 2011 Cardinals on the right hand, the 1989 Athletics on the left.

“The fun, it was a lot of fun mixed in with trying to learn how to play the game and compete in the proper manner.

“I’ve heard players like (Greg) Luzinski after winning in Philadelphia, Tom (Pacoriek) in LA and Koos (Jerry Koosman) in New York and even (Carlton) Fisk in Boston. They say it’s the most fun they’ve ever had. I believe it was the most fun summer. We won in Chicago for the first time in a long time.”

‘Winning Ugly’ broke Chicago’s also-ran streak

Indeed, the Sox had so many frustrating near-misses, in 1964, 1967 and 1972, since their last pennant in 1959. The Cubs had been barren since 1945. The new ownership group headed by Jerry Reinsdorf and Eddie Einhorn, backing longtime general manager Roland Hemond, had feverishly ramped up a Sox organization strapped by Bill Veeck’s thin wallet ending the 1970s. In the third season of the new regime, it all came together, the team being nicknamed “Winning Ugly” by Rangers manager Doug Rader.

The ’83 Sox did better than that, lapping the American League in the second half and packing 2 million into a Chicago ballpark for the first time in history.



La Russa handling one of hundreds of autograph requests at the Pitch and Hit Club's banquet.

“They liked challenges,” La Russa said. “That challenge about the June Swoon – they were going to beat that up a little bit. They just walked all over it.”

The fans haven’t forgotten the “Winning Ugly” role of La Russa, then in his fourth full season of a 33-year managerial career. After holding some 400 Pitch and Hit Club banquet attendees spellbound with his remembrances and answering questions from the audience, he had to satisfy a long line of autograph seekers. Some offered up Cardinals No. 10 jerseys, but far more thanked La Russa for his Sox days that ended prematurely in 1986 in a firing Reinsdorf said he has lived to regret.

All-Star coaching staff in ‘83

“What I learned is I had great coaches. We had a lot of support from the staff, and they really related to the players,” La Russa said of an ‘83 staff that included Jim Leyland, Dave Duncan and the late Charlie Lau. Also on staff were Davey Nelson, Eddie Brinkman and Art “Cave” Kusyner, who still was around the 2012 White Sox as a sounding board for rookie manager Robin Ventura.

The Sox coaching staff was Leyland’s last stop to his own managerial career that includes one World Series title with the Marlins and two more Fall Classic trips with the Tigers.

“He’d already managed a dozen years in the minor leagues,” La Russa said of Leyland. “So he really knew managing. I think what he learned in ’82 and ’83 was the demands of the media, the attention you get, the interest the fans get through the media. I think that was very helpful to him.”

La Russa was part of a Sox organization that tried to establish a winning tradition from the ground up. When he went to the Cardinals in 1996, he joined a franchise that had a built-in tra-

dition.

“If you don’t have quality veterans and legendary figures who want to share (their experiences), if you don’t have ownership that understands the importance of connecting history to the present, it doesn’t happen,” he said.

The Cardinals were all of that, and the incomparable Stan Musial led a Hall of Fame cast of past Redbirds who reminded La Russa’s players of the organization’s history. La Russa interrupted his long weekend in Chicago, attending SoxFest and the Pitch and Hit banquet, to attend Musial’s memorial service in St. Louis.

”Each team feels the responsibility and the obligation to add to the history,” he said of the Cardinals, who were only rarely out of contention in his 16 seasons at the helm.

Everlasting friendship with Reinsdorf

The Sox don’t quite have the Cardinals’ winning cache, but not because the team chairman lacks passion for the game. La Russa and Reinsdorf remain close friends, with La Russa ensuring he visits Reinsdorf in his rare free moments.

“I had an up-close-and-personal opportunity to see how much Jerry loves the game of baseball,” La Russa said. “His support of the Brooklyn Dodgers (stood out) over the years. And he made no secret he’d trade all his Bulls (NBA championship) rings for one World Series ring with the White Sox. That’s his sport. I was really happy for him and I was really happy for the city of Chicago, especially the South Side fans, were rewarded with a (2005) championship. I think that did a lot for their credibility. And it continues to move forward.”

After a year away from the dugout, La Russa said he does not miss managing at 68. Almost a decade ago, he claimed he had no aspirations beyond working on the field staff. That has changed with La Russa realizing he has many productive seasons still ahead of him. Now, he’s kind of in a way-station job working for the commissioner’s office.

“I miss the winning and losing,” La Russa said, “which means at some point there would be a good front-office situation, where they figure I can help. I like responsibility. I had my time down there. I passed the torch to Mike (Matheny). There can be some other way I can contribute to baseball.

“In every situation I’ve been , there’s always been a great sense of community, whether Chicago, Oakland or St. Louis. I miss people in the office, I miss people in the clubhouse. Players, we’ve always had a very strong relationship. You do miss being around the people and competing as a unit. You can still have that being in the office.”



Tony La Russa is joined by Washington Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo (left) and Pete Caliendo, his contact at the Pitch and Hit Club, at the club's 67th annual banquet.