



One woman's 'journey' to hear her late father Rube Walker's voice

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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The relationship between father and daughter is special. More importantly, it's crucial and necessary.

Sever that bond in any way, and there are long-term negative consequences.

Leigh Ann Young lost her relationship with her father, Verlon Walker, the Cubs' pitching coach, at age 3 when he died of chronic myeloid leukemia at 42 in March 1971. She spent decades trying to play catch-up ball in making up for this heartbreaking loss. In some ways, she succeeded, establishing her own family and career. Young still keenly feels the void in her life in other respects. But it did not stop her from trying to reestablish a special connection, to craft a new relationship with her father in a kind of spiritual form.

Walker is on a "journey" to hear her father's voice. And with its considerable archive of vintage baseball audio and relationships with former Cubs players and officials, the Chicago Baseball Museum is trying to help her, even if the quest might be a million-to-one shot.

"I have a few reel-to-reel-films of him and my mom on vacation before I was born," said Young. "But no sound. In the video age, I can't believe that. When I started having children, I would watch them with their father and just think -- the sound of a father's voice.



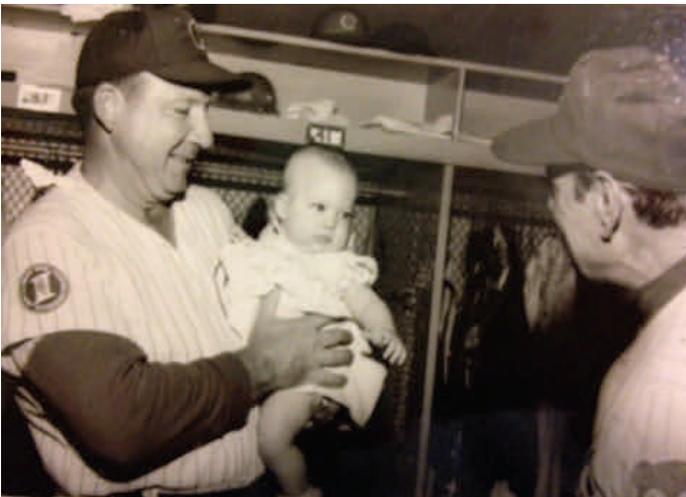
Walker (named after his grandfather), Dennis, Leigh Ann and Christopher Young

“Anyone can close their eyes and recall his father’s voice. Somehow, his voice was never recorded by the family. It’s just a huge part of life. His story was he had leukemia, he went into remission, he thought he’d be fine. He died when he was 42 – he was super young. You just don’t think about preserving that kind of stuff. From my mother, I’ve got incredible newspaper clippings and photographs. Also a pair of glasses and a ring (along with other Walker baseball memorabilia).

“That’s the missing piece for me – his voice.”

‘BaseballLoveStory.com’ chronicles journey

Young, a professional writer in Charlotte, is putting into words her search for Verlon Walker’s North Carolina drawl. She has begun a blog, www.baseballlovestory.com, to channel her emotions and record her coast-to-coast quest.



Verlon Walker shows off baby daughter Leigh Ann in the old Cubs clubhouse down the left-field line in 1968.

The basis for Young’s effort was her father, a good ol’ boy from the rural western North Carolina town of Lenoir. “Rube” Walker bore the same nickname as brother Al Walker, a coach with the New York Mets at the time. He was a near-lifer on the Cubs coaching staff, hired around the time of the introduction of the infamous “College of Coaches” experiment in 1961. But Verlon “Rube” Walker had staying power. He was the bullpen coach beyond the end of the “College” system, remaining on the staff when the imperious Leo Durocher became manager in Oct. 1965.

Daughter Leigh Ann was born to Verlon and Ann Walker on April 1, 1968 – no foolin.’ A proud pops showed his infant child around the tiny home clubhouse down the left-field line later in the ’68 season. Other photographs of father and daughter were snapped the next two seasons.

But Walker was stricken with leukemia in 1970. He was born three decades too early, as Leigh Ann noted in BaseballLoveStory.com.

“I have researched this type of leukemia all my adult life,” she wrote. “I have followed survival rates and the drug treatments. In 2000 a new drug therapy (Gleevac) was introduced that increased the survival rates of CML in a major way. A diagnosis is no longer a death sentence. In 2009 Kareem Abdul-Jabbar announced he had this type of leukemia. Abdul-Jabbar is now an advocate and spokesperson for the disease. Prior to the drug therapy, a patient could only hope for a bone marrow transplant, and when my father was diagnosed the options were slim.

“Upon my father's death the Cubs donated huge sums of money to Wesley Memorial Hospital (now called Northwestern Memorial Hospital). The money would establish the [Verlon "Rube" Walker Leukemia Center](#). The center still exists today.”

Young quotes Victoria Secunda, author of *Women and their Fathers*, in summing up the dilemma of daughters who are deprived of their dads:

"Losing a father in childhood forever changes the shape of a daughter's identity---how she views the world and herself. Not only is her connection to the first and most important man in her life sharply extinguished, but all her perceptions, all her decisions, all her future relationships are filtered through that early unimaginable loss.”

Dealing with anger over loss

The blog enabled Young to vent. Anyone who has lost a parent too young on both ends can relate:

“I was resentful of my girl cousins that had sat on my father's lap. They could recount for me how beautiful his blue eyes were. I don't remember sitting on his lap... looking at his eyes. Someone recounting that story for my benefit would make that anger slither out. See how that works.

“My anger has gotten the best of me at times. Sometimes in the form of explosions but mostly sabotage and sadness. A mind game rooted in abandonment. I have been angry at God too. I was 5 when a woman told me that my father was needed in heaven and that is why God took him. ‘Impossible,’ I thought. There is no way God needs him more than me.”

Young cannot summon her father back in corporeal form. But she ardently feels she can cut into the unfairness of life – an illogical part of the concept of existence created by “intelligent design” -- by searching for the ultimate needle in a haystack. Did any baseball fan possessing a reel-to-reel tape recorder or an early tape cassette (introduced around 1968) machine record an interview Rube Walker did, such as on the old “Leadoff Man” pre-game TV and radio shows on WGN?



Leigh Ann and Verlon Walker at Wrigley Field in 1969.

“I just went on this quest,” Young said. “I started this blog. Cubs fans for me are like none other. I do really feel someone would pull together a reel-to-reel and tape these games, and preserve it. I set out on this journey to try to find it. I started a year and a half ago, writing the blog, this is my dad, can you help me? I’ve gotten a little bit of traction in my hometown.”

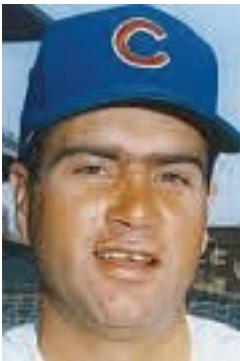
Young already contacted Evansville’s John Miley, the top vintage baseball audio collector in the country. Miley unfortunately did not have any Rube Walker interviews in his vast archives. The Cubs were cordial with her, but could not help. Then WGN-Radio started some momentum.

“The last e-mail I sent to WGN-Radio, someone took pity on me, maybe help this girl,” Young said. WGN forwarded her request to Cubs announcer Pat Hughes, who has produced a series of CD tributes to Hall of Fame baseball broadcasters.

“Pat actually reached out and called me,” Young said. “He was such a wonderful person. This is part of my journey. Maybe there are things to learn from the journey itself. If I don’t ever necessarily find his voice, I’m learning a lot about him, I’m learning a lot about the history of baseball.”

Pat Hughes key supporter of ‘journey’

Hughes in turn contacted this writer, in my status as Chicago Baseball Museum historian and possessor of a sizeable archive of vintage baseball audio and some video. Unfortunately, it was a case of close, but not close enough. I began taping Cubs highlights off the 10 p.m. WGN-TV news in June 1971, when I received my first Webcor tape cassette recorder for my birthday. That starting point was three months after Rube Walker’s death.



Thanks to the San Francisco Giants, Joey Amalfitano, a Cubs player and coach with Verlon Walker, called Leigh Ann Young.

But among the hundreds of hours of audio I’ve collected from other sources through the ensuing four-plus decades, there were no Rube Walker interviews. Several explanations are at hand.

Walker was the least-prominent Cubs coach, so he did not do as many broadcast interviews compared to, say, first-base coach Joey Amalfitano or pitching coach Joe Becker. Individual fans, not stations or teams, are the sources for many mid-20th Century baseball audio. As with my cassette tapes, they had limitations on recording time. Typically, the games and highlights themselves were taped, but not pre-game interviews, given the technology of the time.

In the archives, now part of the Chicago Baseball Museum collection, are such rare clips as Jackie Robinson working as the first African-American network baseball announcer on an ABC telecast from Dodger Stadium on Labor Day 1965. Also included is a “Leadoff Man” radio interview with Cubs general manager John

Holland on Opening Day 1969, part of the entire famed Willie Smith pinch-homer game taped then by Chicago west suburban collector Gary Parker.

Yet another segment is audio of Jack Brickhouse's WGN-TV "Tenth Inning Show" on Sept. 1, 1963, featuring probably the last broadcast interview Cubs second baseman Kenny Hubbs did before his Feb. 1964 death in a plane crash. I have several minutes of Jerry Doggett's post-game interview of Sandy Koufax minutes after his Sept. 9, 1965 perfect game against the Cubs in Dodger Stadium. A gag clip, not intended for broadcast, features Durocher, with Vince Lloyd, mocking and insulting the Cubs' traveling beat writers, Chicago Daily News editor Roy Fisher and Lloyd broadcast partner Lou Boudreau. But no Rube Walker interview.

Realizing that finding such a clip would be a daunting task, I referred Young to Gary Parker and the John Ring family of Galesburg, Ill. The latter was the source of some rare mid-1960s clips, including the 1965 Robinson and Koufax segments.

Parker did not have any Rube Walker interviews. He had taped a Cubs broadcast here and there in the 1960s, yet usually started his reel-to-reel going around the National Anthem. However, Parker located a collection of off-the-beaten path sports interviews in Kalamazoo, Mich. He has no idea if Rube Walker's voice is tucked away there.

Will interview of Walker brothers surface?

One possible source of a Walker voice would be any interview he'd have done with his brother when the Cubs and Mets played each other. I suggested Young get in touch with the Mets and Ralph Kiner, who is reputed even into his 90s to have a good memory for the pre-game interviews he conducted.

If Young falls short in her quest, she'll at least have some personality pictures of her father painted by Cubs players and coaches who worked with Rube Walker. On behalf of the Chicago Baseball Museum, I gave Young contact information for many of her father's Cubs contemporaries.

I asked Billy Williams -- with Walker for an entire decade on the Cubs and remembered visiting him when he was ill in the winter of 1970-71 -- to call Young. Fellow Hall of Famer Fergie Jenkins was very gracious, giving the OK for Young to call him. She did, and his memories of Walker brought tears to Young's eyes.



Fergie Jenkins graciously accepted a call from Leigh Ann Young. His word picture of her father moved Young to tears.

Through media relations director Jim Moorehead, the San Francisco Giants came through magnificently. Young contacted the Giants in an attempt to reach Amalfitano, now a Giants senior advisor. Amalfitano was with Walker as a Cubs player and coach for seven seasons starting in 1964, second-longest tenure of any living ex-Cub after Williams. He called Young, and the pair had a wonderful chat.

Both George Altman, a Cubs All-Star outfielder in 1961-62, and former WGN sports editor Jack Rosenberg, who would have booked Walker on the pre-game shows, both will welcome a call from Young.

“I would love that, to talk to them, hear some stories,” she said of the ability to reach those who knew her father. “That’s all I’ve ever had, family members and friends of his who would tell me stories. I’ve pieced it together in my mind that way. That’s just been really special for me.”

Such prospective oral history is vital for Young. Not even 3 when he died, she has no clear recollection of Rube Walker.

“I have to be honest and I’m not really sure at this point,” she said. “I don’t think I have any memories of him. I’ve had stories told to me and I want to have a memory of him. Maybe I’ve conjured it up. I don’t honestly have any recollection of him. It’s more a void, the loss, the lack. It’s not as much a loss as much of a lack of something that I never had.”

Another Walker in next generation

The name “Walker” lives on in the Young household. She named her oldest son, now 11, after her father.



Ann Walker, a spry 83, at Walker Stadium in Lenoir, N.C.

“I couldn’t get my husband (Dennis) to sign off on Verlon,” Young said. He went for Walker.” Her younger son is Christopher, 5.

Another standing reminder of her father is the Walker Stadium in Lenoir. Formerly Davenport Stadium, the ballpark was re-named on his behalf and that of Al Walker in 1971. More recently, the stadium has undergone a needed renovation.

Young’s journey has to route around her mainstay work.

“I’m a blogger and free-lance writer,” she said. “I do this when I can. I get a good burst of energy and I’ll work on it, get lots of feedback, then I get kind of deflated. It’s two

steps forward, one step back for me. I’m muddling through, but meeting tons of people.

“I don’t know how long I’ll keep this up. I get a lot of encouragement. Sometimes I want to give up. Then I get a little nugget, a little morsel and it keeps me going. My goal is to eventually write a book about it. But it’s taken on a kind of a different twist.

“First I thought it would be about my dad. Now it seems about the pursuit of him. Kind of a time-travel piece, and my pursuit of putting my life together without him. I’m letting it flow organically.”