



Piersall never politically correct, always a great listen

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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The term “politically correct” pervades our society.

Fortunately for Jimmy Piersall’s later claim to fame, he burst on the broadcast scene before on-air personalities had to practically weigh every word and who it might upset. He could have not become the wild, and crazy (as Piersall said he had papers to prove) guy the liberal Bill Veeck barely could allow on the air on White Sox broadcasts, and the far more conservative WGN did not dare re-unite with Harry Caray on Cubs games in the mid-1980s.

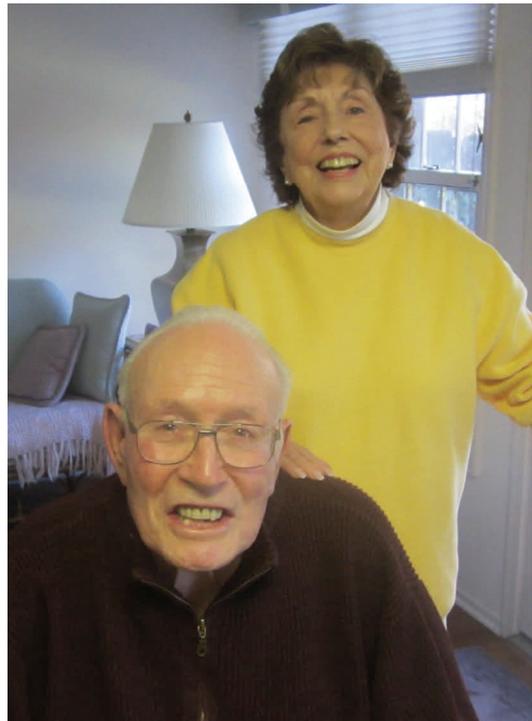
If anything, sometimes Piersall – who died June 3 at 87 -- was too hot to handle. The first in-depth interview I conducted with Piersall at his Wheaton home in 1985, when he hosted a WIND-Radio talk show, featured one stream of consciousness about prominent Chicagoans, and by connection to me, so far beyond politically correct that I did not dare use it in a local article.

Fortunately, Piersall had mellowed just a tad by 2013, when through the assistance of longtime Chicago media mainstay Tom Shaer I returned to the Piersall homestead. With wife Jan producing her trademark brownies to sweeten the deal, Piersall still had his rapier style sharpened at 83, yet he was as informative and revealing as an octogenarian can be. The session ended up with the last in-depth interview Piersall conducted:

<http://chicagobaseballmuseum.org/files/CBM-Jimmy-Piersall-part1-20130423.pdf>

<http://chicagobaseballmuseum.org/files/CBM-Jimmy-Piersall-part2-20130426.pdf>

We’ve heard back that Piersall appreciated the finished product on the Chicago Baseball Museum web site. In between bluntly candid opinions, Piersall knew baseball cold. He soaked up the game through his long career filled with stunts such as heaving a



Jimmy and Jan Piersall at their Wheaton home.

baseball at the new exploding scoreboard at old Comiskey Park in 1960 and running the bases backward for his 100th homer, off Dallas Green, as a New York Met in 1963.

Piersall had a special dual identity with the Sox and Cubs. He and Caray provided a well-remembered, and never-duplicated, guerilla theater of the air presentation on Sox broadcasts from 1977 to 1981. His baseball savvy overcame his oddball persona, so the Cubs hired him as a minor-league outfield instructor in 1985. Home-run victim Green, who put him on the North Siders' payroll, obviously held no grudges. Piersall lasted through four general manager regimes and the farm-system instability those changes provoked. Finally his tongue got the best of him, as his ongoing baseball-pundit status on 670The Score led to criticism of Cubs personnel that just could not be tolerated. Piersall was ousted from his coaching job in 1999.

In between his histrionics as a player and broadcaster, Piersall was really good at what he did. One of the best defensive center fielders in the game and a competitive hitter, he improved the outfielding of a number of Cubs prospects, who sung his praises. Shaer, who knew the Piersall back story growing up a Red Sox fan in western Massachusetts, had this reminder about his glove work:

“Piersall really was a superior defensive talent. He started as a right fielder and moved to center field. Piersall was Dwight Evans before Dwight Evans was Dwight Evans. Jimmy's defensive stats are amazing, even after all these years.”



Among other baseball dignitaries, Jimmy Piersall shows a baseball magazine to President John F. Kennedy at the first Washington Senators game at DC Stadium (later RFK Stadium) in 1962.

Better fielding percentage than Mays, DiMaggio

According to the Elias Sports Bureau, in 1,614 games as an outfielder, mostly in center, Piersall's fielding percentage was .99022 -- better than Willie Mays, Joe DiMaggio and other Hall of Famers. In fact, as of 2013, Elias listed just 20 men in MLB history who played at least 1,000 games in the outfield and fielded .990 or higher. Piersall is the on-

ly one to debut prior to 1963, before fielding percentages generally increased due to oversized and more flexible gloves.

Piersall robbed many home runs from opposing batters. After Yankees outfielder Joe Collins' would-be homer was hauled back over over a Fenway Park bullpen fence by



Jimmy Piersall samples one of wife Jan's famed brownies.

Piersall in July 1953, manager Casey Stengel told the Boston Post: "Piersall is the best I've ever seen, including (Hall of Famer) Ross Youngs." The same week, Red Sox coach Bill McKechnie, also a Hall of Famer, said to the Boston Globe, "I've seen the great (outfielders) like Tris Speaker and Harry Hooper, and this kid is the best.

Piersall was the Boston defensive glue in center in between Ted Williams in left and Jackie Jensen in right. Unfortunately, that talent was not matched elsewhere on the roster, and thus the Red Sox were perennial also-rans to the Yankees in Piersall's time.

In a way, Piersall was the outfield equivalent of Omar Vizquel, whose longtime defensive brilliance at shortstop could make him Hall of Fame-worthy, a la Ozzie Smith.

Oddly enough, Piersall's shift to shortstop by manager Lou Boudreau in his Red Sox rookie season had a connection to his nervous breakdown that formed the basis of his "Fear Strikes Out" story. The up-and-coming Anthony Perkins, later the way-beyond-Piersall wacko of "Psycho," portrayed the rookie as climbing the screen as part of his breakdown. Worse yet for Piersall was what he called an inaccurate portrayal of his father, played by Gary's Karl Malden.

Fans might think Piersall played for a Chicago team with his close identification with the Cubs and Sox. But for all his baseball stops, he never alighted in the Windy City as a player. He performed for the Red Sox, Mets, Cleveland Indians, the second Washington Senators and wrapped up with the Los Angeles Angels. Amid his baseball travels, he worked as a newspaper columnist during the World Series, became friendly with President John F. Kennedy – a Boston native -- while with the Senators and guested on "The Lucy Show" in 1965.

His pairing with Caray, who had just begun singing in the seventh inning, catapulted Piersall to his controversy-filled second career. I came into possession of many hours of 1977 audio of the duo on the old WSNS-TV (Channel 44). They did six innings on TV and three on the radio.

Caray, Piersall provoke, entertain

Caray was a prime provocateur in his own right, dating back to his Cardinals days when he roasted franchise icon Ken Boyer. Piersall added the hot sauce to Caray's play-by-play. In one segment, Piersall basically called the Tigers' Tito Fuentes a hot dog. The pair could be hilariously funny, too. Another segment had the two speculating on why the wind blew out at Arlington Stadium while Steve Stone pitched. Mike Hargrove, the Human Rain Delay, worked the count full, permitting a full verbal discourse of Caray and Piersall. Finally, Hargrove slugged a homer off Stone. What a collection of famous names on one play and in one ballpark.

Piersall could not stay out of trouble, on and off the air, as Veeck eventually sold out to the Jerry Reinsdorf-led ownership group.

Given Sox outfield coaching duties in addition to his analyst work for Veeck, Piersall dodged serious legal trouble when he tried to choke Daily Herald beat writer Rob Gallas in the clubhouse in 1980. A decade later, Gallas became Sox marketing chief.

After Reinsdorf took over as Sox major domo, Piersall ruffled the baseball world by calling player wives "horny broads" in a 1981 TV special. Caray then fled to the Cubs, and Piersall was somehow retained as the Sox post-game studio analyst on the new subscription SportsVision channel. His analysis was so off-putting to Tony La Russa that the manager brought Jim Leyland and several other coaches to the studio post-game to confront Piersall. No physical contact was made, with Piersall almost daring a lawsuit if La Russa and Co. touched him.

Cut loose from SportsVision, Piersall landed his own talk show on WIND as part of its gabfest format. In this era, he got to know Shaer well. His "soft" side included a big welcome to young broadcasters, a stance that The Score's David Schuster confirmed on a June 3 talk show.

"I met Jimmy shortly after moving to Chicago for a job alongside Jack Brickhouse at WGN," Shaer said. "Jimmy was immediately very kind and welcoming to me, especially after he heard I was from Boston, where he'd enjoyed great success. I reminded him that his highest batting average, however, was with Cleveland.

"Jimmy treated all the other broadcasters great. Never an ego-trip or big-foot attitude. He was particularly nice to the younger guys such as I, who arrived in Chicago at age 24. Jimmy just wanted to be respected and, yes, loved. He didn't have a mean bone in his body and never intentionally did anything to make a splash. He was just himself."



Jimmy Piersall and Tom Shaer worked together when Shaer was the first morning voice on The Score in 1992.

Piersall punctual, informed on The Score

When The Score signed on in Jan. 1992 as Chicago's first full-time sports-talk station, Shaer was the first voice heard on the station as its morning host. Piersall was quickly signed as baseball guru.

"I loved having him on my morning radio show because he was so well-informed and really worked at it, but he was also entertaining," Shaer said. "We tried to expand our baseball analyst roster with two popular recently-retired Chicago players, but they both bombed because they would not do the work. They didn't watch enough games or read enough newspapers, quite the opposite of Jimmy's worth ethic.

"Jimmy never missed a show, a deadline or any other scheduled appearance. He would be on the road during his 14 years as a roving outfield instructor in the Cubs organization and often called from whatever minor-league city he was working in during a given week. His wife, Jan, would send him faxes of the Chicago newspapers so he knew what was going on in addition to his having watched WGN or listened to radio games over the phone (no Internet or smartphones back then)."

In spite of his image, Piersall had depth to his persona, from which Shaer benefited.

"Jimmy experienced so many incredible things in his life and the stories were plentiful," he said. "He liked to tell those stories and he had a keen understanding of complex personalities such as Ted Williams and Harry Caray. I believe that was because, Jimmy, too, was a complex person.

"We spent a lot of time together and I accompanied him to the Red Sox Hall of Fame Induction in 2010 and the Chicagoland Sports Hall of Fame in 2012. He taught me how to play golf and about why his 35-year marriage (to Jan) was so enduring, which has helped me in my second marriage."

Colorful characters who staked their claim to fame in the mid-20th century, like Piersall or Hawk Harrelson, are passing or retiring. We truly won't know what we're missing until they are all gone.