



Ginnetti eases up on her keyboard, goes to the dogs a little more

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Tuesday, June 3rd, 2014*

Toni Ginnetti did not need Jim (Frenchy) Lefebvre's affirmation that she belonged in his Cubs manager's office, the locker room down the stairs or any other part of Wrigley Field.

After all, Ginnetti by now was a 20-year veteran of journalism. She'd been in city halls, cop shops, tough neighborhoods, anywhere news had to be covered.

"People would say it's a man's world," Ginnetti said of the reaction to her moving about a ballpark. "It's (society) a man's world. You find a way how to work in these situations."

But at the same time, Ginnetti wasn't about to turn down then-Cubs manager Lefebvre's 1992-vintage acceptance of Ginnetti, then in her early years covering sports for the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

"He used to always apologize when he used bad language," she recalled. "Then he would look at me and laugh and say, 'Toni, I just think of you as one of the guys.' I said that's fine. He meant it generically."

Just another scribe doing his/her job.

"I never thought of myself as a woman reporter going in," Ginnetti said. "I thought of myself as a reporter."



Toni Ginnetti has scaled back to free-lance status -- but has not "retired."



Don Zimmer (left) treated Toni Ginnetti equally -- he yelled at her. Jeff Torborg's (right) well-roundedness was admired by Ginnetti. Torborg photo credit Chicago White Sox.

And doing it the old-fashioned way that won Ginnetti respect and admiration in all corners of baseball and college basketball, the two sports in which she specialized for the better part of three decades at the *Sun-Times*.

“I’ve always found in life you’re treated as you treat others,” she said. “Conduct yourself professionally.”

‘Retirement’ not the accurate term

There will be a little less professionalism in the pressboxes and clubhouses of Chicago going forward with Ginnetti leaving the staff of the *Sun-Times* on her own terms. Just as Ginnetti eschews the “trailblazer” tag put on her as a female sportswriter in the 1980s, she insisted recent reports of her “retirement” at age 63 aren’t entirely accurate.

In a business where the management CYA attitude of achieving profits through layoffs is an industry-wide epidemic even in an economic recovery, Ginnetti has decided to take matters in her own hands. Instead of waiting for the “Turk” to tap her on her shoulder with a nod to visit Human Resources, she has opted to dictate her own scale-back, reducing her hours to make time for the other passions in her life.

After 33 years overall on the staff and with Obamacare providing a health-insurance cushion for several years prior to Medicare qualification, Ginnetti is working on a freelance basis. She’ll be around for some weekend game-story fill-ins and features. In the vacated time, she’ll work with her beloved three dogs – collie Marnie, sheltie Bowie and three-legged mutt Trey -- for therapy duties to assist those from 8 to 80 and beyond.

“In order to work (less) at the *Sun-Times*, you have to leave the *Sun-Times* and come back as a free-lancer, Ginnetti said. “They’re continuing to cut back at the paper. I

don't think I would have been laid off. They were starting to consider layoffs. They told me that by my leaving, I would not be replaced. It's gotten to that point. They had told people (ahead of more layoffs) if anyone's thinking of leaving, let us know."

Ginnetti's focus and dedication to her craft was so strong she soldiered on through seemingly endless rounds of layoffs. So many cutbacks afflicted the *Sun-Times* through multiple ownerships it was a wonder anyone was left to actually put out the paper. A previous ownership managed to gut the seniority provisions of the Newspaper Guild contract, so the likes of nice-guy sports columnist Elliott Harris and other older, higher-salaried employees were targeted. Then, the entire photography staff, including Pulitzer Prize winner John H. White, was axed in an idea apparently endorsed by Michael Ferro, bossman of *Sun-Times* owner Wrapports.

"I had thought about this for the last few years," Ginnetti said. "It bothered me the way a lot of our colleagues had been let go, people who had been there a long time, people who had contributed a lot. The letting-go of the photographers was really an eye-opening (event), and tells you the perspective of the people running the place. That did more to hurt the *Sun-Times* over the long haul, even in the eyes of people who don't know much about newspapers.

"If they told me they didn't want me to write for them anymore, I would have been fine with that, too. I was always a person with a lot of interests. I covered news, did feature writing. To me it was almost like a beat change."

Fewer staffers meant more demands on those who remained. On the job, you must tweet and file on-line. Everything must be filed quickly. Immediacy, threatening the concept of accuracy, became the byword.

"The last few summers it has become all-consuming," Ginnetti said. "You have no time for anything else. As much as you can love your job, it can be difficult to have that. There are fewer people to do that.

"(Baseball's daily grind) can wear you out. There are other demands. I understand as a reporter you're sort of on-call. There are so many pressures on the editors so they're constantly calling. They know the couple of people who can reach people. That pool becomes smaller as the number of people shrinks. You start looking at other things. There's got to be a balance.



Ryne Sandberg invited Toni Ginnetti as one of three writers that toured the Hall of Fame with him.

“Twenty-five years ago, in some ways you could do a better job. You had time to step back and think a little bit. Get to know people more. There’s something to be said that everything’s so immediate now and thrown out immediately so you can’t step back. I was still the type who would (try to) step back. You under the gun of someone saying ‘So and so is saying this on Twitter.’ But I (replied) don’t have this confirmed. The whole immediacy thing has trumped (good journalism).

Ginnetti, an Elmwood Park native, now lives with her pooches in Park Ridge. She began her journalism career on the news-side staff of the suburban *Daily Herald* in 1972. Joining the *Sun-Times* in 1981, she transferred to the sports department four years later, starting out on features and news before moving to baseball work to complement beat men Joe Goddard and Dave Van Dyck near the end of the decade.

Not welcoming for female sports journalists

The environment for a woman in the locker room was not inviting coming into the 1980s.

In 1972, White Sox executive VP Stu Holcomb physically removed *Waukegan News-Sun* writer Linda Morstadt from the Comiskey Park pressbox. Instead of outright supporting her, *Sun-Times* baseball legend Jerome Holtzman took a vote among the traveling beat writers whether Morstadt should be admitted. The vote was positive – only because Morstadt had once worked for *Chicago Today*, Tribune Co.’s afternoon daily. Writers for smaller newspapers were considered second-class pressbox citizens, an attitude that lingered on into the present.

Sports Illustrated had to sue Commissioner Bowie Kuhn and Major League Baseball to get a female reporter clubhouse access in 1977. Even though the courts then ruled in *SI*’s favor, Cubs general manager Bob Kennedy barred *Joliet Herald-News* sportswriter Karen Chaderjian from the tiny home clubhouse in Wrigley Field’s left-field corner in 1979.

In the boys club of the locker room, some players flat-out refused to talk to women. Others intentionally dropped towels from their mid-section when a woman entered. Exiled Cub Dave Kingman sent a rat as a pot-shot gift to sportswriter Susan Fornoff while playing with the Oakland Athletics in 1985. Meanwhile, young Atlanta Braves media relations director Robin Monsky was verbally harassed and undermined by manager Chuck Tanner, prompting more litigation after she lost her job.

Truth be known, nobody was going to mess with Ginnetti. She’s verbally low-key, but inwardly tough. She was around the block many times as a journalist by the time she covered baseball.

Interestingly, Ginnetti was set apart from her colleagues not by gender, but by the territorial ferocity practiced by the traditionally entitled, elitist baseball writers. She had not come up through the sports ranks.

“What’s this city-side person coming in?’ That’s’ how you were branded,” she said. “Do we need someone from city-side coming in, not (due to) gender?”

“When guys would complain about the (free) food at different ballparks, I just looked at them and asked, ‘They feed you?’ And they laughed. That was the difference with a city-side person coming in.”

Still, Ginnetti was among just a handful of women covering baseball at the time. They included Carrie Muskat (now with MLB.com) and Cheryl Raye-Stout (now with WBEZ-FM). Her timing was fortunate. All were regarded as “one of the guys” by players simply because they were at the ballpark almost daily. Players will accept you if you’re in attendance on a regular basis and take care to get to know them as people, not just interview subjects.

Mic jockeys stocked pressboxes in 1980s

The composition of media was far different near the end of the 1980s. Conflicts erupted between the entrenched writers and an expanding cadre of radio reporters, who could get their sound bites on the air many hours before the scribes’ stories rolled off the presses. Almost every FM station in the era had a news department with a sportscaster covering games. At least half a dozen AM stations covered games regularly. Suburban daily papers first began staffing home games, then even traveled in the fat days of the 1990s.

Then, broadcast de-regulation wiped out most of the FM news departments while the AM stations scaled back. The majority of the mic jockeys disappeared. The suburban papers began pulling back as the Great Recession hit in 2008. Now only three dailies regularly cover Chicago baseball games. The lost coverage has not been replaced one-for-one by MLB.com or on-line adjuncts of cable TV sports networks like ESPN and Comcast SportsNet Chicago.

Through all the changes, Ginnetti persevered and won admirers. She liked her first two Sox managers, Jim Fregosi (“could be a tough guy, but was also so fair”) and Jeff Torborg (“just wonderful, very well-rounded person”).

Ginnetti knew how to handle the often-grumpy Don Zimmer. She had covered his type on the news side.



The Ginnetti "kids" at repose. From left, Marnie, Bowie and Trey.

“I always tried to give the old-school guys a lot of leeway,” she said. “Their baseball world was very different. I got chewed out by them as much as anyone else. Gosh, yes (by Zimmer, who yelled at almost everyone).”

Among Ginnetti's favorite players were Andre Dawson, Ozzie Guillen, Bobby Thigpen, Rick Sutcliffe and Ryan Dempster ("just a prince"). She had good rapport with incoming Hall of Famer Frank Thomas, but one day had to give him a quiet lecture.

"He was upset about something that was written about him, and did not talk to media," she said. "I remember pulling him aside (along with colleague Dave Van Dyck) at one point and said, "You can't not talk to the media. He was mad at someone on the *Sun-Times*. I said, 'Frank you're the face of the White Sox, you can't not talk.'"

Ginnetti also saw the other, accurate side of Gary native LaTroy Hawkins, whose one-plus seasons in the Cubs bullpen was an unmitigated disaster from a public-relations standpoint. Cubs GM Jim Hendry had to trade him to the San Francisco Giants for his own good.

"LaTroy Hawkins was a big DePaul fan," Ginnetti said. "I covered DePaul as long as baseball. He came to the Ron Santo golf outing. He saw Coach Ray (Meyer), he was so thrilled and asked if he could meet him. He asked Coach Ray to sign a baseball and said he couldn't believe I'm talking to you. He picked up his cell and asked Coach Ray to talk to his mom. LaTroy said, 'You don't know what this means to me.' Coach Ray was the epitome of humanity, someone I respect and love beyond words. When you see another side of a person, you could never dislike LaTroy."

Sandberg's choice to tour HOF

Perhaps Ginnetti's greatest honor as a writer came from Ryne Sandberg.

"Someone who I didn't talk to too much as a player was Sandberg," she said. "He changed after his playing career. I was one of three reporters asked to accompany him on the player's tour of the Hall of Fame a couple of months before (2006) induction. I was floored I was chosen. It was Barry Rozner (*Daily Herald* and Sandberg book co-author), Dan McGrath (*Chicago Tribune* sports editor) and me. It was a great experience and I was so appreciative."

Four years later, Ginnetti received the same honor from Dawson.

The Hall of Famers took care of a true Chicagoan with institutional baseball memory. Ginnetti started out going with her mother, Helen Ginnetti, and sisters Nancy and Lu on the long Addison Street bus trips to Ladies Day several times a year at Wrigley Field. The trips graduated to the sisters making regular Saturday excursions to the bleachers, her male cousins tagging along, during the famed 1969 season. In the off-season, the Ginnettis would go wherever the Cubs, many of whom lived in the area year-round, made a promotional appearance such as with their basketball team. Later, the family got Cubs season tickets.

"Mom was a Cubs fan through the newspaper," Ginnetti said. "You remember the people sitting around you, the smokie link vendor with the cart going down the aisles. I remember how Wrigley Field looked so huge."

Making the trip to ballgames was part of the American immigrant experience. "I'm first generation," Ginnetti proudly said. Her father, Nunzio Ginnetti, hailed from the Italian

state of Abruzzio. He served in the Italian army during World War II. After the war, he met Helen, Italian-born but raised in the U.S., when her family came back to the old country. Then the couple moved to the United States for good.

The Ginnettis did not host a houseful of pets in Nunzio's lifetime. But his daughter fell in love with Lassie at 6 p.m. Sundays on TV. Eventually the family acquired Cindy, their first collie. "Cindy was Lassie, she had perfect temperament," said Ginnetti.

After Cindy's passing, Ginnetti got Missy, a black tri-colored collie. Now she has Marnie, in the collie tradition and the dominant dog of her brood that includes Bowie, a smart sheltie who is retired from canine agility competition.

Joy comes to her in 'threes'

Baseball helped deliver the most unique Ginnetti dog, Trey, the ultimate survivor.

While bringing treats to the canine visitors at the Sox for Strays program at U.S. Cellular Field in Sept. 2011, Ginnetti talked to a volunteer from a pit-bull rescue organization. "I made the mistake of saying someday I'll own a three-legged dog because they teach you bad things happen in life and you just move on," she said with a laugh. Sure enough, the volunteer said a terrier-poodle mix was living at Chicago Animal Control at 28th and Western Avenue.

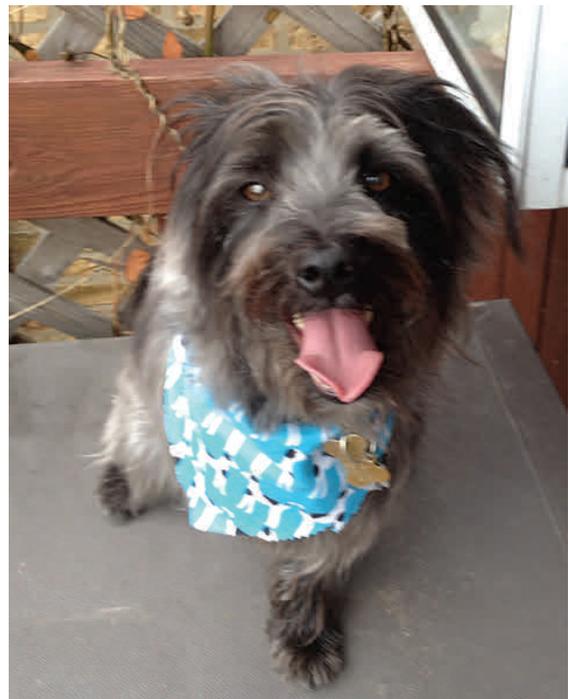
Ginnetti visited the dog and agreed to foster him. His left front leg had been crippled by an undetermined calamity, so the veterinarians amputated it. He also suffered from pneumonia. She fostered him for one month, but her nieces said she couldn't adopt him out. He stayed and found out three was his lucky number.

"Tre means 'three' in Italian," Ginnetti said. "I also said he'd be the third one. He's a tripod." She added the "y" to his name for style.

Now Trey could help others, using his nimbleness – three-legged dogs usually get around just fine – as a positive example.

"I got interested in agility with Missy," Ginnetti said. "Bowie was a whiz at agility, but is retired from competition. When got Trey, people at the agility club said get him involved in therapy work.

"I signed him up, he's still work in progress. He's also involved in agility."



Trey gets around just fine with three legs.

Ginnetti works with Rainbow Animal Assisted Therapy, which focuses on little children.

“Trey’s still a little afraid of kids,” she said. “But Bowie is perfect with it. I always say he’s bullet-proof, nothing bothers him. Marnie loves people.”

Dog mom and “kids” are working with children in classes for autism and special needs in a Park Ridge school. Bowie is doing adult therapy work at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital.

“You get to do things with your dogs and help people,” Ginnetti said.

Sure beats a four-hour, nine-inning, deadline-busting night game with 15 walks and 10 pitcher changes. Actually, both have their proper places if you work long enough. Toni Ginnetti finally is positioned just right.



Toni Ginnetti preps sheltie Bowie just before an agility competition.