



## ***Piersall and Uncle Bobby? What a morning jolt that would have been***

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Posted Tuesday, April 23, 2013  
First in a two-part series.*

Slick-fielding, all-time center fielder. Ticket salesman and go-fer for Charlie Finley. Raconteur/analyst for Harry Caray in a guerilla-theater-of-the-air format. Sports-talk show host. Roving minor-league outfield coach.

You had a job, Jimmy Piersall would take it. Never possessed of a silver spoon in his mouth, always imbued with a work ethic, one of baseball's most colorful and controversial characters ever always was oriented toward a steady paycheck.

Except one gig. His buddy, Don Zimmer, always said if you're early, you're never late. But Piersall never desired to be this early.

"Bob Collins -- he offered me a job when he went to (morning drive) to be his sports guy," Piersall recalled. "I said I wouldn't get up at 3 o'clock for the pope."

Both a revelation and the usual stunning Piersall word association. "Uncle Bobby Collins," the old WGN morning ratings monster who succeeded Wally Phillips, teaming with sports sidekick Piersall circa 1986? You wouldn't have needed coffee to jolt yourself awake. Throw in some phone visits from Piersall running mate Caray along with commentary on Mike Ditka and Michael Jordan, and the prim and proper departed WGN voices would have been spinning six feet under at 78 rpm. The Collins-Piersall pairing never happened, but it was delectable just in the concept.



**Jimmy and Jan Piersall, who have been together 35 years.**

Sit with Piersall at the kitchen table in his Wheaton, Ill., home for an hour. You're entertained, enlightened, enthralled. At 83, he hasn't lost the gift of gab or an aptitude for analysis. He leaves you wanting more – hours more. If you had half the day with Piersall, he'd still only scratch the surface. The man said he was crazy and had the papers to prove it, but also had no filter – then and now -- in his style, the same as his autobiography, "The Truth Hurts."

For the first time in his life, Piersall now keeps a low profile. He is retired but not unengaged. He and his soulmate, wife Jan, live year-round in Wheaton after they sold their Arizona home, where they used to winter, and where Piersall could hang his hat while coaching Cubs rookie-league players. Piersall has the aches of an octogenarian. But having played in the baseball macho-man 1950s, he has learned to live with pain.

"They want to do an operation (on left knee), but I'm 83 years old and I'm afraid to go the operating table," Piersall said at the kitchen table, the centerpiece of which was a plate heaping with Jan's famed home-baked brownies and coffee cake.

"I have way of putting a bandage on and putting on (an ointment). It stays on to give relief for a couple of hours. I walk every day about a half a mile at the mall. Thank God it doesn't hurt while I walk with it, but it hurts while I stand around. I learned to work with pain. I played with pain in my shoulder for three years."

There's no reason anymore to split time between Wheaton, where he cherished a nearby fishing hole, and Arizona. Now, the Piersalls are closer to family members on which they dote.



**A plate of Jan Piersall's famed home-baked brownies, with coffee cake an added delicacy.**

"It was fine when I was coaching in the rookie leagues out there," Piersall said. "I have enough money for the rest of my life."

"Jan runs everything. She's a great housewife, a great cook, she's a great handler of all my bills. She keeps herself busy, goes to the health club."

He rarely misses a baseball game on TV or radio. That enables Piersall to kick into analyst's mode. In turn, Piersall processing baseball provokes the kind of opinions that kept viewers and listeners enthralled and his employers enraged, sometimes to the point of showing him the door.

There likely never will be a rapprochement with White Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf, under whose ownership Piersall and Caray lasted just one year (1981) in the broadcast booth. Piersall still has good words for Reinsdorf partner Eddie Einhorn, but the bitterness still boils hot for Reinsdorf. The two men simply were of opposite styles. Reinsdorf wanted a radically different kind of Sox broadcast than Piersall could have given

him.

A relative newcomer to Chicago baseball also draws Piersall's derision. Mind you, Piersall is an advocate of player development, having been hired by the Cubs to coach their young outfielders smack dab in the middle of their only successful run of producing their own players, in the 1980s.

### **Raised eyebrows about Theo**

"(Theo) Epstein's a phony," he said. "I call him 'Einstein.' He got more publicity than Michael Jackson the first four days (after his 2011 hiring) he had his picture in the paper. I'd get mad as hell. He's such a con artist. He could con the pope. He's signing all these donkeys."

Piersall, though, likes two Cubs who came into the organization prior to Epstein's arrival. Remember, his style isn't just savaging baseball folks. He'll enthusiastically endorse players with talent and hustle, with caveats.

"(Darwin) Barney's a good player," he said. "The kid (Starlin Castro) at shortstop's going to be a great player, but he doesn't want to listen to anybody."

The Sox provide plenty of agitation for Piersall.

"(Alexei) Ramirez at shortstop, the only good player they got, and they have all these other donkeys," he said.

"How can they pay that guy (Adam Dunn) all that money? He couldn't hit me if I threw the curveball down and in. He's not flattening the bat out like (Ted) Williams did. He said he was changing. He can't change with that stance.

"When I watch this guy (Alex) Rios, he's a good hitter, but he couldn't field my wife. The trouble with him, he backtracks on balls. He doesn't get a jump on the ball in front of him. He's a great athlete, but somebody's got to reach him how to turn."

Piersall was as much connected with the Sox and Cubs in his long life as he was with the Boston Red Sox. On his original team, he starred playing next to Williams. Piersall's mental breakdown in 1952 provided the grist for his first book "Fear Strikes Out," turned into a memorable 1957 movie starring Anthony Perkins. Don't get Piersall started on Perkins, who played the ultimate crazy man himself three years later in Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho."

Fans who followed the White Sox in the 1970s will never forget Piersall's pairing with Caray in the booth. Their beyond-outspoken broadcasts wouldn't be allowed in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century of team control of play-by-play and color analysts.

## **Jan talked him into broadcasting**

Piersall always could talk, and periodically did media work on the side dating back to his Boston days. But signing on with the Sox was no slam dunk, and oddly Piersall had an uneasy relationship with then-owner Bill Veeck, who logically should have welcomed the analyst's attention-getting style.

"I didn't want to do this job, but Jan talked me into it," he said. "I was full of (bleep), I could talk all day, but I was scared my language wasn't good enough. I used to talk like the guys sitting on the sofa.

"The GM's of Channel 44 and WMAQ (Radio) wanted me to audition for Harry... Harry liked me because I knew the game and I wasn't afraid to say what I wanted to say. I went from there to an interview with Bill Veeck. He didn't like me all because I threw the ball at the (Sox exploding) scoreboard (in 1960) after I got hit with an orange. And it exploded. He's talking and talking and talking. I said what's going on? He said we don't have much money, we'll give you \$35,000. I said I'll take it."



**Jimmy Piersall in a favorite stance -- about to consume a Jan Piersall brownie.**

Piersall's pairing with Caray lasted five seasons. In the end, his mouth nailed him. In an infamous TV interview, Piersall proclaimed baseball wives "horny broads" eager to snare players. That was it for Sox broadcasts, but the Reinsdorf/Einhorn-backed SportsVision pay-cable channel then re-hired Piersall for post-game studio analyst duties. Of course, Piersall angered Sox manager Tony La Russa. The emotional La Russa gathered his coaching staff to go over to the studio after one game to confront Piersall. Nothing untoward happened other than Jim Leyland tearing at his own shirt while he emotionally expressed himself. Piersall got a huge laugh out of La Russa's visit.

A few years later Piersall kicked around the idea of being re-united on Cubs broadcasts with Caray.

"Harry wanted me on the Cubs, but they (Cubs and Tribune Co. management) didn't want me because I was too controversial," he said. "He signed a contract saying he wouldn't get on the players." Indeed, Cubs general manager Dallas Green and Tribune Co. honcho Jim Dowdle firmly told Caray he could not jump on Cubs players in the same manner he did with the Sox. Caray agreed, and became bigger than ever as the most popular Cubs figure of his time.

## **Piersall a quick hire as outfield coach**

Green, though, did not mind having Piersall apply his baseball knowledge in the farm system he and top aide Gordon Goldsberry were rebuilding.

“I went to Dallas Green, and made a presentation,” Piersall said. “He gave me the job (as roving minor-league outfield coach), but everybody in the front office worried about me taking their job. I told (front-office veteran Salty) Saltwell I don’t want your job. I said I just want a job and coach. I worked with (marketing chief) John McDonough.”

Piersall thrived in his coaching job. He’s counts 14 players he tutored making the majors, either with the Cubs or other teams. Most prominent were two who now are broadcasters: White Sox radio analyst Darrin Jackson and ESPN analyst Doug Glanville.

He taught Jackson and others to fire the ball as hard and quickly as they could throw back into the infield, then let the cutoff men worry about what to do with it from there.

“I can make you better if you want to play better,” Piersall recalled of his advice. “I’d go out at 7:30 in the morning. I’d have 28 outfielders. Darrin Jackson was playing at Pittsfield. I got him onto the side. I told him, ‘You have a chance to be a good ball-player, you have a chance to make some money.’ He had great ability. He made himself a good living (in the majors).”

Piersall liked the smarts of Glanville, an Ivy League alum from Penn. His best pupil? Fernando Ramsey, a Panamanian who had an 18-game cup of coffee stint with the Cubs at the end of the 1992 season.

“Ramsey was a track star, he never played baseball,” Piersall said. “He could run faster than anyone alive. I taught him how to play ball. He didn’t know how to catch the ball.”

Piersall had to fend off interference from Cubs general manager Jim Frey, who unraveled all the player-development progress Green and Goldsberry had made. The Cubs farm system somehow has never fully recovered. Piersall used his own strongest personal epithet – which has to be censored here – on Frey.



**A portrait of Jimmy and Jan Piersall with their late, beloved shar-pei Mushie.**

“Jim Frey was a (jerk),” Piersall said. “One of the biggest in the whole world. He wanted to work out with me and the kids. He starts telling them what to do. I ask him where did you ever play center field? He said Buffalo. I said ‘Whoopee!’ He wanted to fire me, but ‘Zim’ (Don Zimmer) wouldn’t let him. We exchange Christmas cards all the time. His wife (Soot) is one of the most wonderful people in the world.”

Zimmer, a childhood friend of Frey's in Cincinnati, was one of many Piersall backers who staved off the "Turk" from bouncing him from his job. Amazingly, Piersall lasted 14 years as Cubs outfield instructor, much of the time doubling as baseball analyst on "The Score" all-sports radio station. Eventually, his mouth got him into trouble, especially when talking via the media about fellow Cubs higher-ups. Going into a new millennium, Piersall lost his Cubs job. Eventually, The Score ended his deal. He briefly worked for rival ESPN-1000. Ever since, his voice has been stilled on the air.

No matter. Jimmy Piersall is as candid as ever in a kitchen conversation. He knows no other way.

*Part 2: Piersall and Charlie Finley: A strange match that got Jimmy a ring.*