

Resting at Wrigley

*A lifelong appreciation for the Chicago Cubs
inspires valuable lessons in life*



BOB LATHAM

This is the story of a Chicago Cubs fan, and like all stories involving Cubs fans, this one has a bittersweet ending. This particular Cubs fan was born in 1921, 13 years after the Cubs won their last World Series, which was, as George Will put it, “two years before Tolstoy died.” She was born and raised in a small town in Iowa,

the second of two children in a family of limited means. Her father was a station agent for the Rock Island Line, and one of the few benefits he could pass along to his children was a railroad pass. When the World’s Fair was held in Chicago in 1933, he used his pass to take his family to the biggest city west of New York. And that’s when, on a side trip from the World’s Fair, she saw it for the first time: Wrigley Field.

The World’s Fair was such a success that it reopened in 1934, and she again returned to Wrigley Field, this time as her teenage years were beginning. As the ‘30s went on and the Cubs made it to the World Series every three years (’32, ’35, ’38), she used her father’s rail passes and ventured into Chicago with her older brother to see the shrine that she heard described on the radio in Iowa by a local announcer who went by “Dutch” Reagan.

These forays from Iowa to Wrigley Field instilled in her not only a lifelong devotion to the Chicago Cubs but also a lifelong knowledge and appreciation of sports. Fueled by the knowledge that dreams could come true and that the imagination could be turned into reality, she put herself through Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, with the benefit of scholarships and by working as manager of the basketball team. When she graduated in 1942, she moved to Chicago to take a job in the accounting department of a major insurance company, and as she described it, “deliberately” secured an apartment within walking distance of Wrigley Field. In that first summer, she attended every Cubs weekend home game. In 1945, she was there for the Cubs’ last World Series appearance; she and her girlfriends banded together to support a friend who could not afford the \$6 admission.

The Cubs’ now-legendary futility would soon kick in and she found other pursuits, including marriage. Together she and her husband raised three children to whom she passed on her passion for the Cubs and her knowledge of sports. She taught her children how to keep score at baseball games,

and her knowledge of baseball was unrivaled. Indeed, when the coach of her son’s Little League baseball team had to be out of town, he didn’t look to one of the other fathers or assistant coaches on the team for a replacement; he selected her. And this was the 1960s.

When one of her children would get upset at losing a sporting event, she spoke about maintaining an even keel—not getting too impressed with yourself when you win nor too down on yourself when you lose (the latter being critical to a Cubs fan). When her two sons built an ice rink every year in the back yard, spending hours in the freezing cold and cracking numerous garden hoses, she offered only support, in verbal or hot cocoa form. When her oldest son

played in his first U.S. Tennis Association tournament and drew a highly seeded player in the first round, she was there. But when that opponent began to deal with the unfamiliar feeling of losing by making questionable line calls, supported by an overbearing mother, she hung back.

When her son won that match, her only words to him were “I’ll bet that felt especially good,” thus teaching him that he had to fight his own battles and that victory includes maintaining your integrity.

ON A SIDE TRIP FROM THE WORLD’S FAIR, SHE SAW IT FOR THE FIRST TIME: WRIGLEY FIELD.

Through all of this, the Cubs were never far from her mind. It must have been a special day for her in 1965 when she first took her children to Wrigley Field to see the Santo-Kessinger-Beckert-Banks-Williams-Jenkins Cubs play the Mays-McCovey-Marichal Giants. And when the Cubs appeared to be breaking out of their futility in that magical summer of 1969, she re-engaged with the resourcefulness she used 24 years earlier and secured tickets for the first National League playoffs—playoffs that everyone thought the Cubs would be in. She didn’t tell her children until Christmas of that year, four months after the Cubs surrendered first place to a surging New York Mets team, rendering her tickets worthless. She had known enough about the fate of the Cubs to spare her young children the disappointment of having playoff tickets in hand but no playoffs to attend.

Even that catastrophic season didn’t dampen her enthusiasm for the Cubs. Two years later on a family trip to the

Northern Ontario wilderness she directed a side trip to Montreal to see the Cubs play the Expos, then in only their third season. It was poetic validation when the family pulled into Jarry Park in Montreal to pick up tickets at will call and Ernie Banks ("Mr. Cub") arrived in a cab for batting practice right behind them, waving and smiling broadly to the car with Illinois license plates and the family of Cubs fans. That the side trip to Montreal would be the highlight of this particular family vacation was made clear a week before, at the family "talent" show. Her only known fear was of mice, and sure enough, at the rustic cabin where she and her family were staying, such a critter scurried through the kitchen (she calmly summoned her husband, who dealt with the situation in medieval style). Strumming a ukulele at the fireplace before the excursion to Montreal, she paid homage to the late rodent as well as to the Cubs' Hall of Fame broadcaster by singing, "I will have to leave my friend the mouse, to see the Cubs and Jack Brickhouse."

In fact, one of the many pursuits she taught to her children was the scrutiny of sportscasters. In the late '60s, when NBC's Curt Gowdy once lauded the potential of a player by saying to his broadcast partner, "Yes, Al, he's got his future ahead of him," she roared, "Ha! There's a revelation. Where else would his future be?!" In one of life's great ironies, her daughter would marry a sportscaster, albeit one with a thorough command of the English language.

When her children were old enough to get around on their own, she re-entered the workforce. But rather than jump back into accounting, she took the opportunity to do something she loved and became the assistant recreation director of the village outside Chicago where the family lived. She and her husband retired to the South in the early days of cable TV, and she was able to spend several decades of retirement watching the Cubs on WGN. She lived a long and exemplary life—a life that recently came to an end in its 90th year. Her last day of consciousness was the day former Cub first baseman and 1945 National League MVP Phil Cavarretta died. That evening, a barely audible sound came from her bedroom. As her daughter moved closer, the faint sound became recognizable—she was humming the melody of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame."

Before her death, she instructed her children to scatter part of her ashes at Wrigley Field, a place where, to her, hope always sprang eternal and a small-town girl from Iowa could actually see what she had only pictured from Dutch Reagan's radio call. Last month, with tears in our eyes and love in our hearts, my sister, my brother and I carried out her wishes. ■

Bob Latham is a partner at the law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P.
Myrna Latham passed away peacefully of natural causes at age 89.



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