

[www.chicagotribune.com/sports/chi-22-holtzman-obit-chicagojul22,0,6453919.story](http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/chi-22-holtzman-obit-chicagojul22,0,6453919.story)

## chicagotribune.com

Jerome Holtzman 1926 ~ 2008

### Famed Chicago baseball writer Jerome Holtzman dies

Hall of Fame former Tribune reporter was game's official historian and a true original

By Paul Sullivan

Chicago Tribune reporter

July 22, 2008

Jerome Holtzman, who went from copy boy to Hall of Famer in a distinguished career as a Chicago sportswriter, died Saturday after a long illness. He was 81 and was affectionately known to colleagues as "the Dean," a term reflecting his stature as a baseball-writing "lifer" and his numerous accomplishments over four decades.

"It's a sad day for everybody in baseball," Commissioner Bud Selig said. "Jerome was a Hall of Famer in everything he did, in every sense of the word."

Holtzman was a baseball beat writer and columnist at the Chicago Sun-Times for three decades, starting in 1957, the year before the Dodgers' and Giants' migration from New York to California turned baseball into a truly national sport. He moved to the Tribune as baseball columnist in 1981 and was inducted into the writers' wing of the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1989, perhaps the most notable of the countless honors he achieved over his remarkable career.

It was Cubs great and fellow Hall of Famer Billy Williams who dubbed him "the Dean."

"He wrote about sports, but he cared about people—that was the thing that stood out," Williams said. "When you developed a friendship with Jerome, it lasted a lifetime."

Holtzman was author of six books, including the classic "No Cheering in the Press Box," an oral history of baseball as recounted by 24 sportswriting legends such as Paul Gallico, Shirley Povich and Red Smith. The book was reissued in 1995 with six new chapters and remains a popular text in college journalism classes.

"He was the consummate writer," said George Vass, a former colleague and friend who collaborated with Holtzman on two books. "No one was ever more dedicated and clear-minded about the sport, those who played it and wrote about it. He was a great writer, but more important, a great friend."



Holtzman chronicled the seasons of the White Sox and Cubs for more than 40 years at Chicago newspapers, beginning in 1957 at the Sun-Times. He was responsible for the institution of the "save" rule in 1966, a move to acknowledge effective relief pitching that was the first major addition to baseball statistics since runs batted in were recognized in 1920.

"The reality is, he revolutionized baseball," former Sun-Times columnist Bill Gleason said. "He glamorized the relief pitcher, who was just another guy before [the save rule]. Jerome said not long ago that he was sorry he'd come up with the concept, that it wasn't necessary. But there was no need to apologize. If there were more people who thought like Jerome Holtzman, the newspaper business would be in better shape."

After Holtzman retired as the Tribune's baseball columnist in 1998, Selig hired him as baseball's official historian.

"What I will miss most is not only the friendship, but the knowledge," Selig said. "He was a historian's historian. He was an unmatched resource for baseball. I will miss his counsel."

## Loyal friend

Raised in an orphanage, Holtzman grew up to become a prolific writer whose name was synonymous with baseball. He began his newspaper career as a copy boy in the Chicago Times sports department at the age of 17 in 1943. He served two years in the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II, and returned to cover high school sports at the Times and Sun-Times before moving onto the baseball beat in '57.

It was at the Sun-Times that Holtzman met the love of his life, the former Marilyn Ryan, whom he married in 1949. They raised five children in their Evanston home.

"Romance prevailed, and romance succeeded," Gleason said. "They had a beautiful relationship."

Holtzman traveled with the Cubs and White Sox for the next 28 years, usually changing beats at midseason. He was an influential leader in the Baseball Writers Association of America and a longtime member of the Hall of Fame Veterans Committee, which voted on candidates who had been overlooked in voting by the baseball writers.

Holtzman famously looked out for his friends, even the ones who were trying to beat him on stories, such as the late Wendell Smith, a pioneer among African-American sportswriters. The two became fast friends and fellow Hall of Famers.

"Wendell and Jerry covered baseball together for years," said Wyonella Smith, Wendell's widow. "They went to spring training together and remained very close friends. Jerry was very instrumental in getting Wendell elected into Cooperstown [in 1993]."

Mary Frances Veeck, widow of former White Sox owner and baseball maverick Bill Veeck, said "trust" was the operative word in Holtzman's dealings with people. He never broke that trust with a friend or a source.

"You develop friendships in the game, and I think the thing between Bill and Jerome was they could always count on what the other one was saying," Mrs. Veeck said. "There was mutual respect, and when something came up and they wanted answers, they could count on each other being truthful."

## Determined reporter

Holtzman was always primed for a big scoop, including the news during the 1974 World Series the Oakland

pitching star Jim "Catfish" Hunter would be granted free agency after A's owner Charlie Finley failed to honor certain provisions in his contract.

"He beat everybody on the beat," Gleason said. "It was during a World Series, and he was so far ahead of everybody it was amusing."

Holtzman was also a hard-bitten reporter who didn't back down from those he covered, most notably former Cubs manager Leo Durocher. Holtzman once bragged he'd spent an entire season not talking to Durocher because the volatile manager had slighted him.

"Leo thought the writers were trying to get him kicked out of Chicago, and he thought Jerome was the ringleader," Williams said.

Holtzman and Durocher eventually made their peace, but only after Durocher initiated it.

Colleagues recall Holtzman never backing down to anyone, including editors, and his stubbornness became one of his most memorable traits.

"Jerome was a little testy at times," former Associated Press sports editor Joe Mooshil said. "He could never admit that Michael Jordan was a great basketball player. He once said Jordan was not a team player, they could never win with him. After the [six] Bulls championships, he'd never say, 'Hey, I was wrong,' as anyone would, because that was Jerome. He was testy and tough."

Former White Sox general manager Roland Hemond believes every relief pitcher in baseball is beholden to Holtzman because the "save" rule has dramatically increased their value.

"Pitchers owe him," Hemond said, and he recalled introducing Holtzman to one reliever who was "pleased to meet the man who made me a lot of money."

"Jerome should have gotten a percentage from all the closers for creating the save," Hemond said. "He helped a lot of relief pitchers become wealthy."

## **Courted by Tribune**

After 38 years at the Sun-Times, Holtzman ran into a sports editor named Lewis Grizzard who believed his style was too old-fashioned for modern-day readers. Grizzard wanted a fresher, hipper approach to sportswriting.

Just when Holtzman feared his career might be over, Tribune sports editor George Langford conspired with editor Jim Squires to bring Holtzman across the street and make him the featured baseball writer at the Tribune in 1981. He immediately rewarded their faith by breaking the story of the settlement of the 1981 baseball strike.

"The Sun-Times was treating him badly," Gleason said. "All the young editors there said they didn't understand what he was doing, which revealed to me they didn't understand what they were doing."

A Sun-Times editor made a last-ditch effort to persuade Holtzman to stay, showing up on his doorstep to plead his case.

"There's something odd about this," Holtzman said. "In all the years I've lived here, you've never come to my door." With that he closed the door, literally and figuratively beginning a new chapter in his life.

"Langford rescued him, brought him to the Tribune, and from there he blossomed as a national writer," Mooshil said.

Holtzman's M.O. was to arrive at the ballpark early, stay late and outwork the competition. Williams said he stood out from most of the other writers because he was tough but always fair, even when criticizing a player.

"I started calling him 'the Dean' because he was the senior writer," Williams said. "We talked baseball all the time. Players didn't hesitate to give Jerome a story, because they knew he was always fair."

Baseball writing has changed, and old-school types like Holtzman are few and far between. He had no interest in promoting himself on TV or radio, preferring to let his words speak for him.

"He was a true original," former Sun-Times colleague Ron Rapoport said. "I never knew a writer who loved baseball more. They'll never call anybody else 'the Dean' again, that's for sure."

Holtzman is survived by his wife, Marilyn; two daughters, Alice Barnett of California, and Janet Holtzman of Wilmette; a son, Jack Merrill of Los Angeles; and five grandchildren. A private funeral will be held on Tuesday at Rosehill Cemetery at 5800 N. Ravenswood Ave., Chicago. A memorial service is to be announced at a later date.

[psullivan@tribune.com](mailto:psullivan@tribune.com)

Copyright © 2008, [Chicago Tribune](http://chicagotribune.com)