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Jerome Holtzman: Baseball reporter and historian

July 22, 2008

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BY [CHRIS DE LUCA](#) Staff Reporter

Ron Santo prefaced the story by saying how much he loved Jerome Holtzman. That said...

It was 1973, the Cubs were in Cincinnati and Santo's teammate Randy Hundley was in a terrible slump. Hundley hit a ball in the hole. Reds shortstop Dave Concepcion backhanded the ball, fired to first and Hundley beat the throw. But the first baseman dropped the ball, and Concepcion was charged with an error.

Santo thought his struggling teammate deserved a hit. So when Holtzman, who was covering the game for the Sun-Times and working as the official scorer, arrived in the clubhouse after the game, Santo calmly approached.

"He must have been in a bad mood or something," Santo recalled Monday. "I said, 'Jerry, you know, the ball' -- and this is how I said it [calmly] -- 'the ball that Randy hit in the hole, Concepcion's an All-Star, and he did his best, and I thought Randy beat it.'"

"He says, 'Who in the hell...'"

Once Holtzman raised his voice, Santo grabbed him and threw him against the wall.

"And then he lifts his arm like this with his pen," Santo continued, "and says, 'I got the pen, don't forget.'"

Holtzman always knew the power of the pen.

Holtzman, who began his career as a copy boy for the old Chicago Daily Times before landing reporting stints with the Chicago Sun-Times and Chicago Tribune, was more than a sportswriter. He was an innovator who created the formula for save statistics and later became Major League Baseball's first historian.

Holtzman died Saturday in Evanston. He was 81.

"Baseball lost a great advocate and fan today, and I lost a dear friend," White Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf said. "Jerome truly left his mark on the game he loved and followed passionately for decades. Perhaps no one other person has done as much to promote the game of baseball to millions."

Relief pitchers from Mariano Rivera to Goose Gossage adore Holtzman to this day. To prove his point, Holtzman relished relaying the conversation he once had with former Cubs closer Lee Smith.

"If it weren't for you," Holtzman quoted Smith as saying, "my wife wouldn't be out shopping now."

Holtzman created the formula to credit relief pitchers with saves in 1959, and MLB adopted it as an official statistic in 1969 -- becoming the first major new statistic since the RBI was adopted in 1920.

"He was a giant in his industry and a much-deserving member of the writers' wing of the National Baseball Hall of Fame," commissioner Bud Selig said, referring to the honor given to Holtzman in

1990.

Holtzman grew up on the West Side and got his first newspaper job as a 17-year-old the day he graduated from Crane Tech High School in 1943, working as a copy boy. He served two years in the Marines during World War II and returned to the newspaper business in 1946. He covered high school sports for 11 years before getting assigned to the baseball beat for the Sun-Times in 1957, covering the Cubs.

For 28 years, he covered the Cubs and Sox, switching teams each season at the All-Star break. He was the national baseball writer for the Sun-Times when he was coaxed across the street to work for the Tribune in 1981.

A nationally known baseball writer who regularly covered the game's jewel events such as the All-Star Game and World Series, Holtzman wrote six books, including *No Cheering in the Press Box*, which he called his proudest achievement.

"He did a lot of things for baseball," Sox manager Ozzie Guillen said. "He gave his life to baseball, and we'll always remember how great he was."

"The Dean" -- as he was known in press boxes across the country -- retired in 1999 and immediately was hired to be MLB's first historian.

"Like a lot of people, I grew up reading Jerome Holtzman in the Sun-Times," longtime Sun-Times baseball writer Toni Ginnetti said. "He seemed as integral a part of the local baseball scene as the players.

"He was 'The Dean' to us, the master of the profession, an 'old-school' sportswriter, cigar and all, a Hall of Famer who would go toe-to-toe debating or questioning any player, manager or owner. But he was also a reporter to his core. I often thought Jerome would have done just as well covering City Hall as a clubhouse."

During an interview with Tribune colleague Bill Jauss for a story that appeared in 1990 celebrating Holtzman's trip to Cooperstown, N.Y., the veteran writer summed up his life on the beat.

"Covering baseball is the most demanding job on the paper. Yes, I mean it. The City Hall guy goes home at 5 p.m.," Holtzman said. "It's an eight-month season. We live with the club. There's a game to cover every day. It's not like football, one game a week.

"Why, there were times when I spent more time with Ron Santo and Ernie Banks and Billy Williams than I did with my own children growing up."

Holtzman attended Northwestern University and the University of Chicago. He was married to his wife, Marilyn, for 59 years, and they had five children and five grandchildren. A memorial service is pending.

Contributing: *Gordon Wittenmyer, Joe Cowley and Toni Ginnetti*

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jack stoner wrote:

Another icon passes. I ran in to Mr. Holtzman at a Cub game one day and he took the time to chat with me. A class act. He will be missed and remembered for a long time.

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