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Remembering Jerome Holtzman

Colleagues remember Jerome Holtzman

'The Dean' shared his vast knowledge with his colleagues

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A small envelope would come once in a while, familiar Evanston return address on the outside, familiar insight on the inside. Any word from Jerome Holtzman was welcome.

He was a gruff man but a gentleman, a newspaper bulldog but an old softie, a U.S. Marine to his core but a kind, considerate, cultured soul who always looked to me as if he should have been on his way to meet Damon Runyon, Grantland Rice and Ring Lardner for lunch.

"You know what Jerry Holtzman looked like?" baseball broadcaster Charley Steiner blurted out Monday when I was a guest on his satellite radio show. "One of those characters from 'Inherit the Wind.' "

Yes. Perfect. Spencer Tracy, Fredric March, take your pick. A tight, white, starched collar. A set of suspenders, thumbs inserted, poised to snap. A cigar as large as a clarinet.

Chicago's kind of guy. And certainly baseball's kind, back in the day and for all time. A student of the game and a teacher as well.

"Jerome Holtzman, just like Jack Brickhouse, Bob Elson, Vince Lloyd, Lou Boudreau and Harry Caray, taught generations of Chicago fans baseball," said one of them, Dodgers general manager Ned Colletti, when I broke the news to him that Jerome had left us at a much-too-young 81.

"He did it differently. He did it with the written word, which can last a lifetime."

Amen to that, as those inheriting the wind would say.

Some of our most esteemed baseball men of summer have recently fallen by the wayside: Bobby Murcer, a classy Yankee and Cub; Johnny Buzhardt, a durable right-hander; Neil Hohlfeld, a noted chronicler from Chicago to Houston, and even Eliot Asinof, the storyteller of "Eight Men Out."

That one was Holtzman's kind of book. He included it in a collection he personally bound in red leather, along with venerable works by Ed Linn, Jim Brosnan and others. Beautiful tales of the ballyard, gathered together like encyclopedias. Jerome blessed me with a set.

His own "No Cheering in the Press Box" was required reading, as necessary to some of us as a how-to-read instructional book to a child. It was the who-what-when-where-why of baseball literature. I can tell you the names of many who need to reread it.



When we were Sun-Times teammates, Holtzman was astounded to hear a boss half his age complain: "Your writing is filled with cliches."

"But they're *my* cliches," Jerry argued. "I invented them."

Baseball was his game. He gave it everything he had, and very few gave it more.

Mike Downey

Cigar stories

Jerome Holtzman was not only a sportswriting legend, but a friend and a mentor to many aspiring baseball writers, including this one.

We traveled together in my early years on the White Sox beat in the mid-1990s, and I'd often have to come help fix his computer whenever something went wrong, as it often did.

Jerome had a habit of flicking cigar ashes and sometimes they'd fall onto the computer keys. I'm sure it was never a problem in the days of the typewriter, but Jerome tried to keep up with technology as best he could, and since I was considerably younger, he considered me a computer expert.

I remember one day in a hotel room in Arlington, Texas, when an old-model computer that looked like it was developed by NASA went on the fritz.

"Jerome, try not to smoke cigars when you're writing," I suggested.

"But what else should I do?" he asked.

I was stumped. When he wasn't smoking cigars while writing, he was humming. He needed something to do while writing, and I didn't want to change his mojo.

"OK," I said. "But try to keep the ashes away from the keyboard, all right?"

He shared a million stories and taught me how to deal with players and managers who considered us a nuisance. We remained friends after he left the Tribune, and when he was selling his huge baseball library last winter, Jerome asked me to come by and pick out a book.

After spending an hour going over the thousands of books in Jerome's massive third-floor library, I chose "Ball Four," a book I'd read when I was a teenager and was thinking about a career as a writer.

Jerome was perplexed. There were so many more famous titles to choose from, classic books like "Veeck As In Wreck." I told him Bouton's book was the first I'd read that made me realize ballplayers were just as human as the rest of us, and it changed my attitude about the game.

I don't know if he really approved, but he let me have it nevertheless. It wasn't until I got home that day that I discovered the book was given to Jerome by Bouton, with the inscription: "Best wishes to Jerry Holtzman—a helluva writer and a great guy. One of the truthsayers. Smoke 'em inside."—Jim Bouton.

That was Jerome Holtzman—the ultimate truthsayer, a helluva writer and a great guy. He inspired a generation of writers, and made a million friends along the way.

Paul Sullivan

'Best job in the world'

Surely the keeper of the Pearly Gates greeted Jerome Holtzman with a "doff of the chapeau" and Jerry returned the gesture with a cigar, having "arrived in good time."

Jerome loved his favorite phrases, and when editors would complain that they were clichés, he replied, "Yeah, but they're *my* clichés." And so they were, just as Chicago's baseball scene was his for more than 40 years.

And boy, did he enjoy it. He loved the people, the excitement, the games, the profession and knowing he had a story before anyone else.

During our travels, we would talk family, life and business and Jerome would always say, "Do you know this is the only job I ever wanted? We have the best job in the world."

From the school of suits, suspenders and white shirts, Jerome started covering baseball when writers still rode the "iron horse," as he called trains, and filed stories via Western Union. He was the last of a breed, a unique character who grew up without worldly goods but came to have it all in his chosen profession.

Who knows how many Chicago baseball writers he broke in over the years, but whatever the number, each one became a disciple. The new guys also learned fast that while Jerome could be overly kind to them, he was also competitive.

The lesson was learned the hard way by this "new guy" years ago when he broke the story that Dallas Green was being hired as president of the Cubs. Not only did Jerome have all the facts, but in one of the more remarkable scoops in history, itemized what Cubs officials and Green ate for lunch in the basement of O'Hare Airport.

Oh, the stories he would tell, many late at night over a poker game, when Jerome would appear in a hotel bathrobe, cigar in hand. Oh, the stories they'll now hear behind those Pearly Gates.

A doff of the chapeau to Jerome Holtzman, in farewell.

Dave van Dyck

A gracious man

Sportswriters reach a certain age and don't like to hear "I grew up reading you" from ever-younger scribes, even when it's meant to be a compliment. It can imply fogey-ism, a condition to be avoided in this age of "relevance."

Not that it would have mattered, but I was careful to avoid the sentence when I met Jerome Holtzman for the first time as I was starting out as a baseball writer. I merely offered that I was from Chicago and I'd always appreciated his work.

Jerome could not have been nicer, or more gracious. He immediately introduced me to every baseball figure he knew in the general vicinity of Mesa's HoHoKam Park, which was everybody. He tried to repeat the gesture every time we crossed paths in subsequent years, and the Jerome Holtzman seal of approval was as valuable to an aspiring baseball writer as Peter Gammons' Rolodex or a midnight deadline.

When we became colleagues several years later, that seal of approval became even more important. Jerome was a pro, and it meant something to be playing in his league.

Difficult travel, impossible deadlines, cranky athletes, obtuse editors ... Jerome endured the occupational hazards with remarkable good cheer. He was, simply, a good man who considered himself blessed to be making a living doing something he loved. In that regard he was not only a colleague, friend and mentor, he was an inspiration.

Dan McGrath

Humming at the keyboard

Jerry Holtzman was especially fond of a couple of phrases, which he adapted to suit the occasion over his 56-year career as one of the country's pre-eminent baseball writers.

One was "in the voice of Poe's Raven," which he used to describe something ominous.

The other was "He's as good a man as you'll find in a long day's march," which Jerry credited to John Tunis, the kind of author who could turn a young boy on to reading because he wrote many sports novels for kids.

Jerry never told me whether those books were part of his inspiration for taking up sportswriting, but the link between him and them was clear, because he became the man whom Tunis had described.

As a young baseball writer coming to Chicago 30 years ago, when Jerry was a decade older and a millennium wiser than I am today, I felt like a kid from the bushes about to face a Hall of Famer—which Jerry became in 1989, when he won the J.G. Taylor Spink Award for "meritorious contributions to baseball writing."

I mean, the guy had invented the statistic that became the save, for which generations of wealthy relief pitchers should be grateful.

He not only welcomed me to Chicago, he introduced me to dozens of people I needed to know in baseball, which made them look at me with respect I had yet to earn.

It seemed odd that Jerry rarely smiled, giving him the mien of Bob Gibson about to throw a purpose pitch. What Jerry always did was hum as he wrote. In the typewriter age. The computer age. Made no difference. In the quiet that descended on press boxes after a game, when everyone was fighting to make deadlines, his humming rose and fell like the sound of cicadas on a midsummer's afternoon.

I never asked Jerry if he was aware of his humming, and I certainly never told him to tone it down. Sometimes, if I became stymied by an attempt to turn an overwrought phrase, I would simply listen to him, tapping relentlessly on the keyboard, humming along, then hope my words would flow as easily as his accurate, unadorned descriptions of the game.

That is how I want to think of Jerry now, as he embarks on the long day's march into the beyond. Humming all the way, surrounding himself with the natural music of endless summer, of a good man getting his just reward: a baseball season that is eternal.

Philip Hersh

'Good for the city'

The setting was the 1993 American League Championship Series, Toronto Blue Jays-White Sox, at the new Comiskey Park.

In the press box, the Chicago writers were seated near those from Toronto. Jerome Holtzman, "the Dean," was an involved observer.

"Come on, Robin," he'd say when Robin Ventura came to the plate.

If Toronto had a runner on first base, he'd urge Ozzie Guillen and Joey Cora to turn two. "Let's go, Karko," was his mantra for White Sox catcher Ron Karkovice.

It is rare but not unheard of for sportswriters to openly root for the team they cover, but Holtzman had written a book considered the road map for sportswriters. The title: "No Cheering in the Press Box."

A couple of innings into the game, Bob Elliott of the Toronto Sun kidded Holtzman about his lack of objectivity. "Uh, Jerome?" Elliott said. "What was the name of that book you wrote?"

Holtzman didn't skip a beat. "Hey," he replied, barely looking up from his keyboard. "This is good for the city."

Holtzman was a Chicago guy, all right. He was also one of the kindest men in a business full of egomaniacs and grumps.

I don't remember when I met him exactly, but I would have been in my 20s, covering the woeful Texas Rangers for the Dallas Times Herald. He made a point to call me by name. Later, when I started popping up at owner's meetings and covering baseball's contentious labor negotiations, he never failed to introduce me to owners or labor lawyers. He was a gentleman.

I close my eyes and still hear him badgering Donald Fehr. "Hey, Donald," he'd say, as a briefing ended. "How about you take something off the table, they'll take something off the table and we can all go home?"

If only he had been in the meetings, not out in the lobby.

Phil Rogers

Witnessing history

I didn't meet Jerome Holtzman until he was in the ninth inning of his celebrated career. I was a young pup on the White Sox beat, and he would occasionally appear for manager Jerry Manuel's pregame sessions with reporters.

Manuel would stop in midsentence, smile and call out: "Hello, Mr. Holtzman."

Jerome surely appreciated the show of respect, but he called himself a "fringe guy" and encouraged Manuel to take care of the beat writers. His questions could wait.

"The Dean" didn't come by as often after he became baseball's official historian. But Manuel's respect never wavered.

"If Jerome ain't here to see it," Manuel would say with a smile, "it ain't history."

Teddy Greenstein

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