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REMEMBRANCE

Jerome Holtzman made his reputation at Sun-Times

Holtzman admired as both a writer and person at Sun-Times

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A seat in the Comiskey Park press box awaited me one sweltering July afternoon in 1983. My exalted title at the Sun-Times back then was deputy sports editor. I did not wear a badge, but on occasion brandished a microcassette recorder.

Billy Martin's Yankees were in for a series, and we'd given our beat reporter a day to wash his socks. Whenever Martin's Yanks were encamped, an extra reporter was assigned to patrol the visitors' clubhouse.

The Yankees beat the White Sox 12-6 in 11 innings. Martin was ejected in the fifth after Yankees catcher Rick Cerone bumped home plate umpire Dan Morrison. Cerone was thumbed too. It seemed like the entire South Side erupted in glee.

In the steam and sweat of the office reserved for the out-of-town manager, Martin's anger revved like a Harley. The New York press corps already had fled when I walked into a maelstrom. Martin was ripping third-base umpire Dale Ford, calling him "an incompetent" and a "stupid liar."

Dutifully, I recorded the tirade, asked some follow-up questions ("Has he always been incompetent or just today?") ran to the press box, and handed my recorder to the reporter writing the game story. He took the best from Martin's rant and I wrote a sidebar that ended up being the lead story on the back page of the Sun-Times. The AP picked it up, it ran as a second-day story in Gotham and in the Tribune, and Martin was suspended for three games.

For me, it was a happy accident. But for Jerome Holtzman, then of the Tribune, it was like his long-lost son had done something wonderful. He smacked me on the back the next time he saw me and said how proud I had made him. Here I was, 29 with a child at home and one on the way, feeling like a 10-year-old boy who had pleased his dad. Jerry meant it when he said, "I couldn't have been happier if I had gotten that son-of-gun Martin suspended myself."

Like so many who worked with him, I respected and loved Jerry Holtzman. That may explain the pain of awakening Tuesday morning to read his obituary posted on the Tribune's Web site. The story suggested Jerry had been run out of the Sun-Times in 1981, into the welcoming arms of the Tribune. It implied he had been a victim of neglect at the hands of know-nothing editors on Wabash Avenue.



While it's true Jerry was shunted aside in the mid-1970s by sports editor Lewis Grizzard, within a few years his career bounced back as if he had Flubber on his heels. He reached new heights at the Sun-Times under Marty Kaiser, who was named executive sports editor in 1979. Marty's calm prevailed over a sports department embattled in internecine warfare, following a merging of staffs precipitated by the death of the Chicago Daily News.

Because there were only so many teams to cover and so little news hole, some writers were sent to the copy desk or otherwise displaced. Jerry simply went about his business, humming an atonal melody and chomping on his cigar.

Marty had grown up on the North Shore, delivered the Sun-Times as a boy and read Jerry Holtzman every morning before starting his route. He understood what a jewel we had.

Top assignments followed, and we were rewarded by Jerry cracking the competition on the coconut with baseball news.

He led the way on the sale of the White Sox to Jerry Reinsdorf and broke nearly every major story about the 1981 baseball strike for the Sun-Times, including the late-summer settlement. You can look it up.

Jerry performed so brilliantly he wrote himself a ticket to Ka-ching City. The Tribune dangled a great sweet deal for him to work from the Tower.

We matched the salary, but Jerry accepted the new challenge, cashed in his Sun-Times retirement, and the rest is baseball history.

He cried in Marty's office the day he told us of his decision. "You guys saved my career," he said. He left with our blessing and gratitude.

On a bookshelf, never far from reach, is my copy of Jerry's incomparable oral history of sportswriters, "No Cheering in the Press Box." Whenever I take it down, it reminds me of my days in Chicago, working with an astounding collection of sportswriters and editors. Some of them had egos that could have applied for statehood, but not Jerry.

He believed he was only as good as his next breaking story, and the man understood a secret of life is to let your work speak for itself.

If anyone thinks Jerry got the bum's rush in 1981, check the clips.

They say it all.

Michael Davis is completing a history of "Sesame Street" for Viking.

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