



Riggleman: No reason for mistrust between baseball celebs and media

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Jim Riggleman is truly a baseball treasure.

But most team officials and media don't realize it.

While Cubs manager some 15 years ago, Riggleman said managers have a great opportunity, if not the obligation, to promote their teams and the game itself. That statement stuck through the intervening years, through all of Riggleman's different jobs during that time and the steady tightening and choreographing of access between players and ballclub officials, and media.

Riggleman is probably the last Chicago manager on either side of town who saw the good in inviting media members he got to know into his office for chats not only on baseball, but also current events, the state of culture, parenthood, anything that comprises what Irv Kupcinet used to call "the lively art of conversation."

I recall sitting in "Rigs" tiny Wrigley Field office, at his invitation, all the way up to 12:55 p.m. for a 1:20 p.m. game time – against all the prevailing access rules of the time. And I would be the one to dismiss myself, slipping out a back door into the concourse with the hope I wouldn't be spotted. Try that now, and you get yourself in extremely hot water.

"Rigs" was not alone. He believed in good one-on-one relationships, the better to promote his game. Jack McKeon disliked the group pre-game manager's press conference.



Jim Riggleman believes there should never be an adversarial relationship between team officials and players, and the media. Photo credit, [Pat Pfister](#).

So did Bobby Cox. They'd just as soon have chewed the fat on the bench or in their office. The colorful Lou Piniella hated sitting behind a table pre- and post-game, facing a battery of lights and mics. "They took me out of my comfort zone," Sweet Lou said of his former routine of sitting in his skivvies behind his desk, a beer at the ready, pontificating with media. More recently, Mike Scioscia rued for more informal days rather than the group manager media talks, held with team sponsors' logos in the background, that are practically mandated by Major League Baseball.

Riggleman did not change through the years, as demonstrated in the late afternoon of April 28, 2010 with the Washington Nationals in town.

That day, I agitated Piniella after a tough 3-2 Cubs loss by asking if he considered bunting Marlon Byrd over to third with the tying run in the eighth. Byrd had led off the inning with a double. Mike Fontenot came to bat. I had always been taught by Jack Brickhouse on hundreds of Cubs telecasts two things: play for the tying run at home and there are nine (or more) ways to score from third without a hit.

Piniella expected the left-handed hitting Fontenot to simply roll the ball to second, advancing Byrd to third. But I had no such confidence Fontenot, a little guy who was not an expert bat-handler, could do that. Mindful of Brickhouse's timeless education about baseball, I wondered about a surer way to get the tying run to third – via a bunt. The best way to ask Piniella would have been somehow taking him aside to ask him one on one about considering calling for a bunt, or querying in a smaller group in his office. But in the 21st Century of control of access and message, that isn't possible post-game.

'What kind of baseball are you playing?'

I had to ask the bunt question in the group setting. Piniella, never a good loser, was steamed over the one-run loss. The question touched him off and his shouted response was the ESPN sound bite of the day. "What kind of baseball are you playing?" he belted at me. Sweet Lou the clutch Yankees hitter would have rolled the ball to second – that was his performance standard. He could not have automatically applied the same to Fontenot the journeyman player.

My question was ripped by more than one individual in the presser. I knew Piniella would calm down by the next day and not hold any grudges. To verify the query was legit, I made a beeline to the visiting locker room. Surprisingly, even though the Nats were racing out of the clubhouse to catch their flight, Riggleman executed an old, famil-



Bobby Cox definitely promoted his Braves and the game via his chewing-the-fat sessions with individual media members in the dugout.

iar move by inviting me into the visiting manager's office. Informing him of Sweet Lou's reaction, "Rigs" not only said the bunt question was a fair one, but also he had employed both strategies over the years – either bunt or swing away – in a similar "game" situation.

That's how I knew this modest man from suburban Washington, D.C. had established himself as one of baseball's finest representatives. There's a good reason why he eagerly greeted a steady stream of admiring Chicago media on May 26, 2000 at U.S. Cellular Field. Rigglesman must have spent much of the pre-game time prior to batting practice handling the receiving line. He was making his first trip back to Chicago, as a Cleveland coach, after being dismissed as Cubs manager following the 1999 season. The pen-and-mic crowd really appreciated being treated with respect during his Wrigley Field years, and let Rigglesman know as much.

Move the clock forward 13 years from that South Side encounter. I wondered if Rigglesman felt the same as the gulf between team employees and media had widened while access narrowed. Now he's manager of the Louisville Bats, Cincinnati's Triple-A affiliate, and he elaborated in even more detail than he did in the 1990s.

"It's kind of like dealing with umpires," Rigglesman said. "There seems to be a trend for the last 15 years (where) players don't trust the media, managers don't trust the media, front office doesn't trust the media. It's kind of like it's supposed to be understood.



Jim Rigglesman doesn't believe the stereotypes that managers and umpires should be in conflict. Photo credit, [Pat Pfister](#).

'Snake-and-a-mongoose relationship'

"It's supposed to be a snake-and-a-mongoose relationship. It's supposed to be a snake-and-a-mongoose relationship between managers and umpires. I've never believed that. What I was saying to you before was in context (about relationships with media)...was the organization has a great opportunity to promote the ballclub.

"Look at the millions of dollars companies pay for advertising their product. Here we are in major-league baseball, and the other sports of course, we get a chance to promote our organization for nothing, free of charge. We get a chance to talk about how great our organization is. IBM and Apple are paying millions of dollars to advertise their product, and we get a chance to do it on a daily basis with major newspapers and other outlets to promote our product.

"There's an opportunity for a great relationship between uniformed personnel and front-

office personnel, and the media. But some people (feel like) it's boo the umpire, you're supposed to hate the umpire. Well, I don't hate umpires. I don't hate the media. It's something I saw Whitey Herzog do. Whitey had a great relationship with the media. I watched what he did and tried to see if I could have the same type of relationship with the media. I think the overall result is you can get a chance to talk to the public through the media about your ballclub on a positive note."

Riggleman did well enough with that philosophy with the Cubs, although he had too much crisis management on his hands. His strengths as a good communicator and well-prepared manager were overlooked as the Cubs kept backsliding due to a mediocre farm system and a restrained big-league payroll, thanks to team president Andy MacPhail's conservative philosophy.

Lots of ups and downs with the Cubs

He kept his first 1995 team marginally in wild-card contention. Then Riggleman had to deal with the nightmare of a 2-14 finish in 1996 that preceded an all-time worst 0-14 start for 1997. Two wins in 30 games was paltry even by lowly Cubs standards. His job seemed in jeopardy, but he got a temporary boost from the surprise 1998 wild-card team after MacPhail was shamed into raising the payroll. He broke in Kerry Wood in '98, and faced a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't scenario in handling the then 21-year-old's pitch count given his strikeout sprees.

A prodigious 24-64 three-month collapse in 1999 finally did in Riggleman as Cubs manager, finishing with a 374-419 record. He still ranks as the longest-serving Cubs pilot since Leo Durocher's 6 1/2 seasons from 1966 to 1972.

Riggleman moved on to the Indians as third-base coach, then the Dodgers as bench coach from 2001-04. During the time, he desired another manager's job, but despaired about not having the right connection to a general manager. So he rejoined the Cardinals, his original organization, as minor-league field coordinator from 2005-07.

Riggleman's career curve picked up in 2008. Hired as bench coach of the Mariners, he finished out the final 90 games as manager for the fired John McLaren. Named bench coach of the Nationals in 2009, he experienced déjà vu, named as manager for the last 75 games after Manny Acta was dismissed. As full-time manager in 2010, Riggleman could start to see the franchise's young crop of talent advance to the majors in a 93-loss season.

Mum's the word on departure from DC

But he enmeshed himself in controversy with a 38-37 record in 2011. Riggleman suddenly resigned, apparently upset GM Mike Rizzo, a Chicago native, would not grant him a contract extension. That is the one issue the normally forthright Riggleman will not discuss to this day.

True to his career, he kept on going on. Riggleman signed on as manager of Double-A Pensacola in the Reds' system in 2012. This season, he was promoted to Triple-A Louisville, once the longtime top affiliate of the Cardinals. They cannot be called Redbirds as in their St. Louis-oriented days, so the team is nicknamed the Bats.

Dusty Baker seems solid as Reds manager. Still, at 60 Riggelman still would like to manage in the majors again. There would be no pressure getting back, and in turn staying there.

“Pressure is the mother and father of five raising kids on \$40,000 a year,” Riggelman said. “What we do is scrutinized and tightly analyzed, but I don’t consider it pressure. As much as I love this, I do hope to get back to the major leagues.”

But while in Louisville, Riggelman knows how to speak the language of player development from his past experience as a minor-league manager, instructor and farm director. One task is putting the final touches on the grooming of switch-hitter Billy Hamilton, who opened eyes the past three seasons with his base-stealing prowess.

Hamilton stole 103 bases in low Class-A in 2011. He put his foot on the gas in 2012 with 155 thefts at high-A and at Pensacola under Riggelman. This season, Hamilton had 71 steals, but hit just .257 – not a number that will earn a quick promotion to Cincinnati.

“Billy’s really made a lot of progress,” Riggelman said. “He’s stealing bases very efficiently – not at the record numbers as in the past, but as efficiently as in the past. He’s running smart. For Billy to finish off his player development to become the major-league player that we think he can be is refining his left-handed swing. He’s made great progress. He was a natural right-handed hitter in high school, and when he signed, he became a switch hitter. That transition is very tough.



Billy Hamilton will be capable of stealing bases in the majors if he hits, according to Jim Riggelman. Photo credit, [Pat Pfister](#).

“I think he’ll be able to steal bases at the major-league level. But at that level in today’s game, there’s going to be a number of instances where you can steal this base, but the risk-reward is not worth it. There’s going to be times where his speed plays...certainly in the stolen base...but also in the scoring from first on every double, scoring from second on every single, advancing on any ball that’s slightly misplayed. You’ve got to score runs, and Billy scores runs.”

Old Cubs colleagues shown the door

Although he hasn’t always possessed his desired job, Riggelman has had employment in baseball in every season of his pro career. There are no gaps. He’s willing to move around the country. In contrast, a host of old Cubs colleagues kept their jobs at Wrigley Field all the way until Theo Epstein’s hiring as baseball president. He cleaned out the

front office of the majority of holdovers, including Scott Nelson and Chuck Wasserstrom, veteran employees who got their start in the mid-1980s under Dallas Green. Their institutional memories will be sorely missed. But Riggleman knows that managers aren't the only baseball types who are essentially hired to be eventually fired amid regime change.

One of his old Cubs coaches, Dave Bialas, had stayed on in minor-league capacities. He, too, got swept out.

“They know the nature of the business,” Riggleman said. “I always feel bad for those in the industry who lose spots. But somebody else is getting a spot. I’ve lost spots before, but I got a spot somewhere else, so somebody lost a spot. It’s a tough industry that way, but we all know it when we sign on for it.”

True. And yet the one spot – not a job, but a state of mind – that should have lifetime security is the accessibility and promotional bent for baseball folks reaching out to their consuming public. Riggleman shows the bricks used in the increasing walls put up between MLB and the fans, with the media in the middle, are best used elsewhere.