

*(This account of Ron Santo at the Cubs home opener appeared in the Daily Southtown on April 6, 2002).*

By Paul Ladewski

Ron Santo had another great day at Wrigley Field on Friday.

It started when the Cubs broadcaster woke up early in his Bannockburn home. After a brief struggle, he made it to an upright position at the side of his bed. He swallowed some pills and took his daily insulin shots.

Then he put on his right leg.

A few hours later, the former All-Star third baseman did one of the most difficult things he ever had to do on a baseball field – balance on his prosthesis long enough to throw the ceremonial first pitch at the home opener.

Heck, a few months ago, Santo had thought any mention of his name would result in bowed heads and a moment of silence.

“Absolutely, I didn’t know if I’d be here,” admitted Santo, who also led the crowd in singing Take Me Out to the Ballgame during the seventh-inning stretch. “I didn’t know if I was gonna make it. It’s almost like – and I really mean it – a second life.”

“He really is the story today,” Cubs marketing chief John McDonough said.

Just four months after he underwent the amputation of his right leg below the knee, Santo hobbled to the mound. The sellout crowd roared. Former teammate Billy Williams embraced him. Santo threw a one-bouncer to Randy Hundley, the old Cubs catcher. Then Santo blew kisses to the crowd on his way to the home dugout.

It was hard to tell who cried more – Santo or the 40,000 fans in the stands.

“I’m way ahead of the game,” he said. “I thank the Lord that I’m here.”

Santo’s eighth and most recent surgery was nearly his last. When an electrical function in his heart failed, it appeared that Santo had seen his final pitch.

“The operations were the worst times of my life,” said Santo, who was diagnosed to have diabetes when he was 18 years old. “Every time there had to be another one and another one. I agonized over them, and because of it, I went into cardiac arrest. But they brought me back, so I’m supposed to be here.”

Santo no longer can click his heels the way he did in the heat of the 1969 pennant race. But the way he figures it, who needs to when he has so many family members and friends to lean on now?

Santo is so emotional to begin with, he can get choked up by a sacrifice fly. When he received thousands of e-mails, cards and letters from fans – “therapy,” he called them – Santo knew he couldn’t quit on them or himself.

Then there was Sam, who made his 62-year-old grandfather feel like 26 again.

“Grandpa, wanna ride our scooters today?” the kid would say to him.

“The competitiveness (of sports) helped me get through it,” he said, “but it’s not only baseball. How you’ve been brought up and what you’re made of have a lot to do with it. If you give up, you don’t have a chance.

“My family said, ‘You don’t have to try out for a ballclub. You can do without one leg but not your life.’ They were exactly right. Because of technology, I’ll always be able to do the things I always did – ride my horse, play golf, broadcast and enjoy my grandson.”

While isn’t quite there yet, the first road trip to Cincinnati was another step in forward. Except for the fact that he couldn’t take a morning shower, there was only one problem.

“My wife (Vicki) packed so much clothes, and after I took them out (of the suitcase) for five days, it took me two hours to get them back in,” he said with a smile.

More good news: Friday was the fourth day in a row Santo was able to move around without the aid of a walker.

When McDonough brought up the first pitch thing several weeks ago, Santo didn't know what to expect. It was almost as if he had been asked to face Bob Gibson again. Or as he put it, 'To be honest with you, I've never gone to the mound on one leg.'

When was the last time McDonough had seen Santo so nervous?

"When we told him there would be a three-man booth and he would be joined by Steve Stone," McDonough kidded. "You don't know that was the day that Ron almost quit and hit me."

"To see him walk into my office today, he looks great," McDonough turned serious again.

Figures to feel and look even better in the days to come, too.

"Baseball takes my mind off it," Santo said. "I don't even think about it up there (in the broadcast booth). I don't even know that I have a prosthesis on. When the bases are loaded with two outs, I have more important things to worry about."

Because if you're Ron Santo, there are no bad days, really.