A Personal Debt to the Pirates

by James C. Reynolds

With the approach each year of spring training, dedicated Pittsburgh Pirates fans brace for another season of living or dying with each game of the beloved Buccos. But perhaps I have more reasons than most to be a loyal rooter, for my life and career were forever changed by my brief association with the team.

It was 1959. The world was much younger and more innocent. Eisenhower was president. John Wayne rode tall in the saddle. Harvey Haddix had just pitched 12 perfect innings in a losing effort against the Braves, and I was graduating from Beaver Falls High School. I was also madly in love with a girl named Martha.

What I was not was a baseball fan. I knew very little about the game, had swung a bat only a few times, and had no idea about major league history, nor cared to. Oh, I had heard of Ralph Kiner and Babe Ruth and recognized Ted Williams. I was also familiar with former Pirate sportscaster Rosey Rowswell and his colorful expressions, especially the sad tale of Aunt Minnie and her broken window whenever a Pirate blasted a home run. But that was the extent of my baseball knowledge.

But romance can make a person do strange things. For all of my love for Martha, she seldom noticed me. She’d flash me a smile and I’d melt. We were close friends, occasionally dated, but nothing more. I had to do something outstanding to impress her.

During those years, the Pirates annually co-sponsored a Jr. Sportscaster contest, along with the Atlantic Refining Co. Local stations on the Pirate radio network accepted letters from hopeful contestants and held interviews. They submitted one candidate and in turn the Pirates selected eight finalists to attend a game, with each person broadcasting — on tape, but not live — a single complete inning. The tapes were compared and at a post-game banquet, the winner was announced; he got to return to the stadium for a second game to broadcast one inning over the radio network and do a pre-game show with Pirate announcer Bob Prince.

I heard about the contest and decided to go for it. I had taken speech and dramas courses in school and had no fear of a microphone. It was, I felt, a perfect way to impress Martha.

I had only one major problem. I knew absolutely nothing about baseball and had only three weeks to learn.

I therefore went to the local Carnegie Library and checked out every book on the sport. I read day and night and began intensely listening to Pirate broadcasts. I read every available history of every club in the National League; biographies of Ruth, Cobb, DiMaggio, Gehrig, and Rogers Hornsby; books highlighting baseball’s greatest pitchers, hitters, managers, and teams. This was a real crash course.

Within a few days, I became a walking encyclopedia of the game. I could quote every statistic from Joe Jackson’s bat weight to Walter Johnson’s fastball speed to Ty Cobb’s stolen base record.

But most importantly, I discovered a drama that has grown into a lifetime love affair — the beauty of the game, the greatness of the legendary players, the often tragic events of their lives. There was also the “background” — the deals and the pressures, as well as the color, glory, and romance. A whole fascinating, exciting world that continued each year with a new cast of characters opened before me.

I was exceptionally lucky the night of my local station interview. There were 15 of us aspiring to be the one selected. I was last.

Chuck Wilson was the sportscaster at the local station, WBVP. He was considered one of the finest high school and local college play-by-play announcers in the state. By the time my turn arrived, he was quite obviously bored.

One of the questions was, “Who is your favorite ballplayer and why?” So far Chuck had logged eight Willie Mayses and six Mickey Mantles. I caught his attention, however, with my selection of Ted Williams. I overwhelmed him with statistics and the fact that Williams was an even greater hitter than indicated because he missed six years due to military service. I’ve always felt I owed Ted Williams at least a dinner, because Wilson later informed me that my knowledge and colorful description of Ted was why I
was picked. Obviously it must have also impressed the
Pirate officials because two weeks later I was notified
that I was one of the eight finalists. I was on my way
to Forbes Field.

Now you must remember that up to this point, I
had never seen a major league game. I didn’t even
know where Forbes Field was located in Oakland.
(All I really recall was Bob Prince talking about home
runs “rattling the dinosaur bones at the Carnegie.”)
On the appointed day, Frank Smith, owner of WBVP
and one of the true giants of the early Pittsburgh-area
radio industry, picked me up, along with my parents
and Martha. I had talked her into going along — for
good luck, of course. I wasn’t sure which made me
more nervous, having her along or broadcasting the
game. I decided it was the combination.

I’ll never forget the pure thrill of my first gaze at
the playing field, the incredibly intense green grass
nestled so beautifully within the confines of the gray
girders. Huge trees loomed beyond the unbelievably
distant outfield wall with the Carnegie Museum even
more distant. The massive left field scoreboard, the
towering three-deck stands, but most of all, that mani-
cured green grass — I was hooked for life on base-
ball.

Before the game, they took us down on
the field. Unless you were ever
down there, I doubt
you can

imagine the awesome dimensions of Forbes Field. It
seemed impossible that any mortal could hit a home
run there. Even the most powerful sluggers were
intimidated: 365 feet down the line in left field to the
scoreboard and 300 feet to the wall in the right field
corner, angling sharply to 330 feet toward center.
The nightmare for hitters was left-center, the deepest
part of the park where the wall stood an unbelievable
457 feet from home plate.

Even now it’s hard to describe the overwhelming
thrills and sensations of that day — the colorful
sounds and sights of the fans, the graciousness of the
Pirate players and front-office management to a
group of overwhelmed youngsters, and the expe-
rience of actually sitting in a professional press box.
This is the first time I have ever admitted publicly
that I entered the booth having never seen a game.

Before me was, of course, the Pirate team that
would go on the following season to win the World
Series on the famous home run by Bill Mazeroski.
Rugged Danny Murtaugh was at the helm of a team
that included some of the most colorful, beloved
players in Pirate history. The infield featured the er-
ratic but always dangerous Dick Stuart at first base,
backed up by gigantic Ted Kluzewski and Rocky

Nelson. The “Tiger” Don Hoak played third,
future league MVP Dick Groat

was the steady

The author — in the suit,
with glasses — as a Beaver Falls High
School senior in 1959, with other Junior Broadcaster
contestants at Forbes Field. The stars are Pirate relief ace
Elroy Face and one of the game’s greatest hitters, St. Louis
Cardinal Stan Musial.
Moments after being selected the top Junior Broadcaster. Smoking from left are two greats now gone, “color” announcer Jim Woods and voice of the Pirates Bob Prince, and veteran WTAE reporter Paul Long.

At the banquet after the game came the announcement that I had won. My parents were proud and thrilled, Mr. Smith was delighted, and Martha was impressed. The next week, Mr. Smith, my folks, and I returned for my professional announcing debut.

This time it was for real. I would be broadcasting a full inning on the Pirate radio network of some 25 or so affiliated stations. I was scheduled to tape a pre-game television warm-up program, the live pre-game show on KDKA radio, and of course, the game with Bob Prince and color man Jim Woods.

Oddly enough, I wasn’t at all nervous. It was just a game and I was too young to really appreciate the importance of it all. Pirate management from GM Joe L. Brown on down were on hand wondering how I’d do and even manager Danny Murtaugh wished me luck. Just before air time, the “Gunner” Bob Prince winked at me, shook my hand, and said, “You’re going to be fine, kid. Just have fun.”

The Bucs played the Los Angeles Dodgers that night and again, fortune smiled on me. The Dodgers went one, two, three behind the pitching of Bob Friend, but the Pirates exploded for four runs and again, I was able to describe a lot of action. It couldn’t have been more perfect.

That was many, many years ago and the world has turned countless times since. But the events of that contest changed my life forever. I was immediately hired by Mr. Smith at WBVP and KISS (FM), where I would remain for 28 years, becoming a morning personality deejay and station sportscaster for high school and local college baseball games. I also spent a period anchoring news at KQV in Pittsburgh.

Today, I am the mayor of Beaver Falls and earn a living as an after-dinner speaker and lecturer. I also write for the local newspaper, the Valley Tribune.

My father died a few years after I won the contest and Mr. Smith several years later. My dream girl, Martha, never became my sweetheart, remaining a close friend until she married and left the area 30 years ago.

But because of the Pirates, I entered a fascinating career and a life with more than its share of surprises, adventures and recognition. I doubt if I ever would have entered a radio career (which then led to politics) had I not bluffed my way through that first race in 1959.

I would, however, give up everything I have achieved if I could sit behind the mike one more time to do an inning of Pirate baseball.