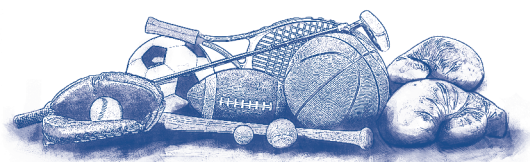


UP FRONT



WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA SPORTS MUSEUM

By Anne Madarasz
Co-Director, Sports Museum

Making the Right Call

After hard rain the night before, players on the Valley High School softball team were fairly confident that they would have to wait at least one more day to add to their unblemished 22-0 record by winning their quarterfinal game of the PIAA championships. But late in the morning of June 10, 2010, as the team's seniors headed into their end-of-year awards ceremony, the school received a call. The quarterfinal game had been moved from Slippery Rock to North Allegheny High School and would indeed be played that afternoon. Players rushed to gather their equipment and catch the bus. They arrived at North Allegheny, then waited patiently as the field crew spent two hours repairing the weather damage of the night before.

Finally, around 3:00 in the afternoon, Valley took the field against Wilmington. The lead bounced back and forth and the game went to extra innings. Tied 4-4, with one out in the bottom of the ninth and runners at second and third, Valley decided to walk the next Wilmington batter and load the bases. Valley catcher Casey Bonk stepped out of the box before pitcher Caitlyn Nessler delivered the ball. Plate umpire Bill Dithrich correctly ruled the pitch illegal, advancing the runners. Wilmington's Ashley Gardner touched home for the 5-4 victory, ending Valley's perfect season and their bid for a state championship.

The girls were devastated and many of their fans angry that the season had ended so abruptly, decided by a call from behind the plate on a little-known rule. Valley's seniors raced back to school for graduation that night. The rest of the team waited for their bus, arriving dirty and heartbroken back at school. The game was over, and the dream of a perfect season had ended. But the story was just beginning.

In the days that followed, umpire Bill Dithrich thought about his decision and came to believe that he had made the right and only call. "We cannot choose which rules we like and which rules we don't like," he said. Others too came to realize the important lessons that could be learned from that moment in sport. WPIAL umpire Eric Felack, a Valley softball booster, suggested that the team ask Dithrich to be the keynote speaker at its banquet June 29. Others agreed and the team issued an invitation. Stunned by the invite, Dithrich, a

22-year veteran umpire, accepted. He spoke to 75 attendees that night, 13 of whom had seen their championship dreams die on that softball field at North Allegheny. Some cried, including catcher Casey Bonk, who still felt the sting of the loss. But no one booed; in fact Bonk later remarked that she appreciated Dithrich's attendance, saying, "It showed a lot of pride on his part." She approached him after the banquet to shake his hand and they shared a hug.

Sportsmanship transcended wins and losses that night. The local press in New Kensington and Pittsburgh shared news of the event and the National Federation of State High School Associations, based in Indianapolis, took note. Each year the organization recognizes individual players and teams from across the country that exemplify the best in sport—integrity, ethics, and sportsmanship. The Valley team fit those qualifications, and in 2011 both the team and



**Replica of 2011 National High School Spirit
of Sport Award, awarded to Valley High
School Softball team.**

Gift of New Kensington/Arnold School District, HHC2012.31.

umpire Dithrich were awarded the National High School Spirit of Sport Award by the NFHS. And still the story continued.

In 2011, Valley softball moved up a class, from AA to AAA, playing against larger schools and tougher competition. But that didn't stop the team's winning ways. On June 17 last year, Valley took its 17-2 season record into a state championship game against Manheim Central. Valley won the game 3-1, claiming the school's first PIAA championship since 1979, when the

boys' basketball team went all the way, and becoming the first team in the state to move up a classification and win a championship in its first year. In December the team visited the Sports Museum at the History Center to sign the Wall of Champions and donate materials that document this story of winning, losing, and the importance of how you play the game.



A book for baseball fans of all ages!

Maz, You're Up! is a heart-warming new children's book written by Bill Mazerowski's daughter-in-law Kelly Mazerowski with watercolor illustrations from Pittsburgh artist Judith Lauso, and photographs from the History Center's and Pittsburgh Pirates' archives.

The book is available for \$12.95 at the History Center museum shop and e-store at www.heinzhistorycenter.org.

Pick up your copy today!

