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Bob Puglia and Baseball

Bob Hemond*

A central figure played by James Earl Jones in the movie, *Field of Dreams*, describes baseball almost exactly the way Justice Puglia felt about the greatest game in the world:

The one constant through all the years, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It's been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game, is a part of our past, it reminds us of all that once was good, and that could be again.¹

Justice Puglia—Bob—became a friend of mine, and of Art Savage and Warren Smith, while our partnership to bring the River Cats to Sacramento was still on the drawing board. We knew him to be a life-long baseball fan and, thankfully, a River Cats fan. He was also a world-class baseball expert. Spending time at a ballpark creates memories, friendships and, of course, wonderful stories. With Bob this was truly the case.

Indeed. Once, Bob pre-ordered a ticket to a game at Jacobs Field in Cleveland. That ballpark was, at the time, sold out every day, every year. When Bob got to Will Call, there was no ticket for him. He was promptly taken to the front office, amid profuse apologies. After a few moments, one of the team's top executives came in and told him there were no more tickets. He was teasing. Momentarily, he told Bob, "You can, if you wish, sit with the baseball scouts." Bob knew that was really the place he wanted to be. Imagine him there sitting quite comfortably; and with five innings still to be played in the game several veteran scouts realized Bob knew more about their teams than they did.

Bob loved baseball, but then, he loved all sports. He was well-informed, whether the game was baseball, football, or basketball. In particular, he supported his alma mater, the Ohio State Buckeyes, to the hilt. He often attended their games, including New Year's games, at the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans, and the Rose Bowl in Pasadena.

Bob knew of the stars in all sports, but he had his personal favorites. He was partial to Bob Feller in baseball, Otto Graham in football, and Jerry Lucas in basketball, because of their admirable personal traits on and off the field of play. All three Hall of Famers sent regrets when they could not attend his retirement dinner in 1998. And, of course, it may not have been politically correct, but Bob was always in favor of admitting Pete Rose to baseball's Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. Bob knew his baseball statistics, just ask the scouts at Jacobs

* Executive Vice President, Sacramento River Cats. Memorial Service for Presiding Justice Robert K. Puglia, Sacramento Memorial Auditorium, Monday, March 21, 2005.

1. *Field of Dreams* (UNIVERSAL 1989).

Field. For example, he knew Rose to be the player with the most hits in history—4256—65 hits more than Ty Cobb.

You might not connect judicial collegiality and baseball, but Bob did. He always enjoyed attending games and knew the other justices on his court did too. That's why, for several years, he facilitated attendance by rotating quartets of his colleagues at Oakland A's games. Bob was everyone's favorite companion because, without fail, he wanted to drive his big, comfortable Cadillac. One year, on *Law Day*, his colleagues arranged, during the seventh inning stretch, for the A's Jumbotron to read: "Welcome to Presiding Justice Robert K. Puglia on Law Day." He had been asking during the entire game why a camera had been brought along; finally he knew.

When but fifteen years old, Bob and his best friend, John Tingley, took a trip to New York. It was just after World War II ended. Ticker tape still littered Times Square. The boys visited Coney Island and rode the largest roller coaster in the world. John's dad, a lawyer for the Columbus Redbirds, a farm team of the St. Louis Cardinals, had arranged earlier for the boys to attend a Brooklyn Dodgers game and to get a visit with Mr. and Mrs. Branch Rickey, in the front office of Ebbetts Field. Mr. Rickey, also a lawyer, was President and General Manager of the Dodgers. He had been the Cardinals General Manager and signed the key players who comprised the Gas House Gang there. He talked with the two boys for a good long while. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Rickey signed the great sports star at UCLA, Jackie Robinson, to break Major League Baseball's color barrier. Bob and John admired Rickey greatly.

More recently, Bob became friends with Mr. Rickey's grandson, also named Branch Rickey, who is President of the Pacific Coast League, the league in which the River Cats play. Late last year, Bob was consulting with Mr. Rickey and the Pacific Coast League on how to improve civility in baseball, on and off the baseball field. Mr. Rickey deeply regrets he cannot join us today. He came to revere Bob, as did we all. He asked me to say, "As a human being, and as a judge, he is clearly irreplaceable." Several weeks ago, Mr. Rickey arranged for Bob to get a truly personal letter from one baseball man, President George W. Bush, to another, Bob. There was no signature machine.

Bob was undeviating in his commitment to ethics and civility, to playing by the rules, in sports, and in life. For several years, Bob's ethics and civility have provided a beacon for young baseball and softball players in Northern California.

With the help of Justice George Nicholson, the *Robert K. Puglia Award* was established during the inaugural season of the River Cats. Each year a committee of former players and executives recognizes eighty of our region's most outstanding high school baseball (boys) and softball (girls) players for sportsmanship and playing by the rules of the game during an on-field presentation. During our committee meeting when discussions about the players took place, Bob always reminded the committee, "don't forget they need to hit and drive in runs." Bob loved to meet these young people and take the time to encourage them as they

entered college. Those who won Puglia Awards agree. They all now use them as aids in gaining admission to college and extra-curricular activities.

I always enjoyed this night at season's end, not just for what it meant to the kids, because I always knew, around the eighth inning, Bob would come by my seat, thank everyone for the night, and say to me: "Now, Robert, for next year's spring training, I need to buy three tickets for me and my sons. I'll call you." I am going to miss that.

Bob loved baseball until the end. Only two weeks ago, Presiding Justice Arthur Scotland, Bob's successor, arranged for Stockton lawyer Al Ellis to visit Bob. Mr. Ellis is a collector of high-end sports and Civil War memorabilia. Art arranged the visit because Bob was unable to visit Mr. Ellis at his home where he maintains a wonderful museum full of "the real thing" in sports and in the Civil War. When he visited Bob, Mr. Ellis brought several displays with him, much to Bob's delight. Even more to Bob's delight, Mr. Ellis gave him a grand jury transcript signed by Pete Rose.

Now, shortly before a new season gets fully underway, Bob has become part of our past, just like baseball. He and baseball are, and will always be, part of our future, too. Bob and baseball remind us of all that once was good, and that could be again. Bob—Presiding Justice Robert K. Puglia—is more, he reminds us of what *is* good, *and will always be so*.

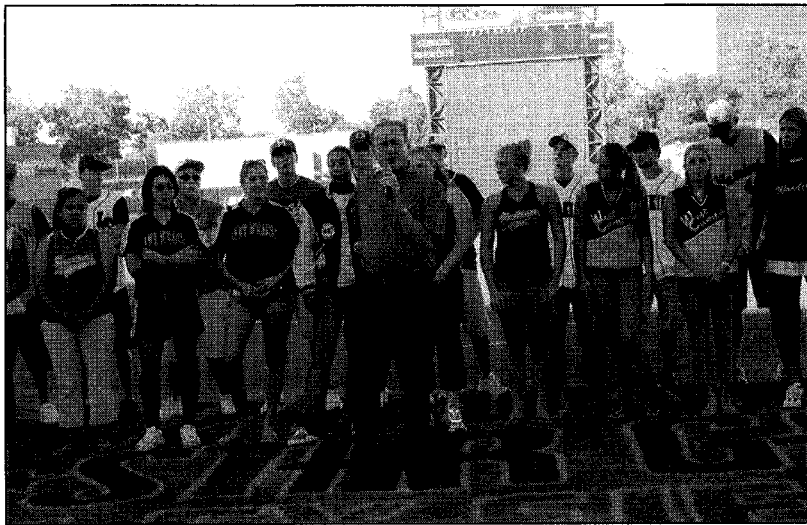


Figure 1. Raley Field, West Sacramento, CA

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