



A. BARTLETT GIAMATTI

**TRIBUTES TO
A. BARTLETT GIAMATTI
(1938-1989)**

Editor's Note:

Seton Hall School of Law was delighted to have A. Bartlett Giamatti, then Commissioner of Major League Baseball, participate in our 1989 Sport Law Symposium as the luncheon speaker. Along with the rest of the nation, we were shocked and saddened by Commissioner Giamatti's death a few short months later. During his visit the Commissioner shared his vision for the future of Major League Baseball and affirmed his commitment to keep our nation's pastime in the hands of the people.

In this inaugural issue of the *Seton Hall Journal of Sport Law*, we have invited a few of the late Commissioner's friends from the world of baseball to pay tribute to A. Bartlett Giamatti. The essays that follow are by Francis T. Vincent, Jr., Commissioner of Major League Baseball; Philip F. Pepe, nationally-known author, sportswriter, and immediate past President of the Baseball Writers Association of America; and Allan H. Selig, President and Chief Executive Officer, Milwaukee Brewers.

Francis T. Vincent, Jr.

Late in his life, William Wordsworth, one of Bart's favorite poets, tried to define the characteristics of the creative mind. He failed, of course. However, he gave us an insight into a person like Bart Giamatti. One of the characteristics of such a creative person, according to the poet, is watchfulness: "They build up the greatest things/ from least suggestions." It was said of Wordsworth that he was "a poet that listened." That helps one think of Bart. He was certainly "watchful" and he listened as well as he talked.

To Bart, nothing was inconsequential. Bart noticed how someone wrote and often had a comment about it. I recall him telling me that his friend, Joe Garagiola, had a "lovely hand" and that Joe must have "learned it from the good nuns." Another time he pointed out a correspondent had a "fine Palmer style." "Cursive and neat isn't it?" he said. His own writing was bold, large and powerful, but it was clear and easy to read. As for mine, he never said.

He wrote everything out in that strong handwriting. All his speeches, books, and letters were written out and carefully polished. His love for the language came out as he sought the proper words. The ease with which he wrote did not lead him to easy edits. He told me he had learned to organize a paper by "correcting all those freshmen essays." He often amazed me with the ease with which he would take something submitted to him and move

and reorder sentences and paragraphs to produce a better product. One time he changed a word I had used and wrote on the margin, "not up to your usual standard of freshness." He was correct of course, but I told him I was now learning some of his professional tricks. He laughed because he knew the marginal notation was a very clever one, but he was also embarrassed that he had reverted to his previous life. "I'm sorry I did that," he said. However, the notation told me a great deal; it corrected but did so with a compliment. This was no ordinary grader of papers.

His skill as an orator and communicator was dazzling. He loved to talk and to find the phrase or word that was different - "fresh" was his term for it. "I can talk," he told me. "It's the thing I do best." As a result he enjoyed being with the press or students or indeed with anyone who would engage his interests and provoke him into discourse. Fundamentally, of course, he was a traditionalist and a conservative in the classic sense. He was above all else a teacher, and he never stopped trying to educate.

One of the joys of working with him was to read his correspondence. His letters should be published. Again, the man shone through. To children and fans, to students and admirers, he would be patient, respectful and responsive. The best letters were to those who complained or chided him, as then that great wit would marry the fine stylist and the riposte would be memorable.

One of his many skills was his ability to be regular; to talk and connect with ordinary people. Despite his academic credentials and his fundamental commitment to the life of the mind, he enjoyed and was loved by working people. He had a special fascination for police and relished talking to his security agents about their former lives as detectives. He knew their lingo and took great delight in using confidential police terms. They, of course, responded to his warmth and obvious affection.

His devotion to baseball is now legendary. But, in fact, it was the people of baseball as much as the game itself that delighted him. He had great patience for the fans who wanted his autograph. He had affection for umpires and he never visited a ballpark without going to the umpires room to have, as he put it, "a little chat." His respect for the players was measured by his appreciation of their skills. Like all of us who never succeeded at this most difficult of games, he considered the players to be remarkable athletes and he liked being with them.

Bart Giamatti was, of course, a fan, and he thought like one. He talked constantly of his interest in improving the "ambiance" of baseball; by which he meant the total environment of the fan experience. His efforts will be continued, of that you can be sure, but it is to his great credit that he identified the proper course.

Bart's death is such a powerful and sharp loss because of the dimensions of his qualities and of his success. Therefore, the space he leaves is immense. Those of us who knew and admired him have much to draw upon.

We have our memories and we have his writings. We also have the lesson of his life, dedicated as it clearly was, to the joys of the mind and the sport.

Informing and guiding the work of the mind and the joys of sport are the principles in which Bart believed and which illuminated his course. This was Bart's creed: honesty above all else, belief in process and order, and of course, freedom - the freedom to speak, to write and to be all that one could be. If I had to select one word that Bart stood for - it would be civility - the basic obligation we have to be part of an ordered society. Uncivilized acts destroy the order and for this reason Bart attacked uncivil behavior in ballparks or in the streets or in university discussions. This fine, gentle and yet determined man was fond of the word "noble" and often attached it as a compliment to someone's name. Yet to me, Bart Giamatti was the noblest of them all. This descendant of the Romans was noble in talent, in attitude and in aspiration. Bravo, noble Bart and thanks.

Philip F. Pepe

It was the greatest marriage of man and job and even if the job came to the man late in life, it was no less a blissful wedding. A. Bartlett Giamatti had a lifetime love affair with baseball; his destiny delayed as he dabbled in academia. Even as president of Yale University, his passion for baseball consumed him, its fires flickering eternally, ceaselessly.

Perhaps he was frustrated in an attempt to reconcile his love for the classics with his love for this little boy's game that men played for money. Perhaps he harbored some guilt in the conflict. But baseball sustained, obsessed and fascinated him, and when the opportunity came to him, as it inevitably had to, A. Bartlett Giamatti had no misgivings. He indulged in no second guesses and no recriminations. He left the world of academia and reverted to his childhood dream as president of the National League.

This would be a mere apprenticeship for what was to come. When baseball, in its search for a successor to outgoing Peter Ueberroth, turned to him, Giamatti was ready. He had long been willing and able.

As commissioner of the game that he loved so dearly, A. Bartlett Giamatti could live out a lifetime fantasy such as few men can. He would have preferred playing shortstop for his beloved Boston Red Sox alongside his idol, Bobby Doerr, but that was not to be. This, then, was a suitable alternative, and Giamatti plunged into his job voraciously, gratefully, and with the full comprehension of the responsibility of his office, but not without a fan's zeal.

There was nothing better than sitting in his front row seat at the ballpark, any ballpark, on a sun-drenched afternoon, his sleeves rolled up, watching this greatest of games, even if it wasn't the Red Sox, and even if it was Cleveland against Seattle in August. Giamatti made no distinction. Baseball was baseball. There was beauty in any game. "And to think," he liked to say, "they pay me for doing this."

Baseball has had eight commissioners. In my time, I have known seven of them and have covered the game under six. Each of them brought something to the game, even the overmatched, miscast General William "Spike" Eckert. Each of them had a special skill, an expertise, a style. All of them loved the game, but none loved it as much as Bart Giamatti. None was as genuine a fan, as sincerely enraptured or as knowledgeable about the game as Giamatti.

I remember one special evening I shared with the man when he was still president of the National League. It was the night before the election of Johnny Bench and Carl Yastrzemski to the Hall of Fame. It has become a local tradition for a group of sportswriters to entertain a baseball executive on this night - no business, just off-the-record conversation about baseball, what else? There were just four of us - three longtime baseball writers and Giamatti. He did not monopolize the conversation. On the contrary, he was more interested in our experiences, and our anecdotes, than he was in pontificating. At one point, there was almost envy in his voice as he paused during the conversation, sighed, and with a faraway look in his eyes said, "What an interesting life you fellows have had. How fortunate you are to have earned a living doing a job like yours." There were other times spent with Giamatti, talking baseball, all charming, entertaining, instructive, and all too few.

I do not know how history will treat A. Bartlett Giamatti. Was he a great commissioner? He was on the job too short a time. Would he have become a great commissioner? That is a question no one can answer. We can only speculate, and I like to think the answer would have been a resounding "Yes!" I do know this. No commissioner brought more love to the job than Giamatti.

His reign lasted a mere six months. It was too short a time. But I am certain A. Bartlett Giamatti would agree with the lines written by Tennyson in his *In Memoriam*:

"I hold it true, whate'er befall;
I feel it when I sorrow most;
'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all."

*Allan H. Selig**

My mind is filled with many thoughts today - thoughts of our friend, our associate, and our captain. There is so much I want to say and so little time to say it. But that's really the story of Bart's career in baseball. In six months, he enriched so many lives and was the catalyst for so much mean-

* The text of this essay, with only minor editorial changes was delivered at the Bart Giamatti Celebration held at Carnegie Hall, New York, New York, November 15, 1989.

ingful change. What we need to focus on is his life and his times and what he meant to so many people and more important, what he accomplished.

It seems like only yesterday but, indeed, it was six and a half years ago, as Chairman of Major League Baseball's Commissioner Search Committee, I first met Bart Giamatti. It was a night I will never forget.

We met here in New York and had dinner and talked a great deal about the game and then proceeded to walk the streets of New York till 1:30 in the morning discussing baseball as seen through the eyes of two men who had loved the game very much all of their lives. We replayed the Summer of '49 long before it became fashionable to replay the Summer of '49. Ours was a friendship that came so easily because it was fashioned by a mutual appreciation and love of the traditions of our game. All of us in baseball are so fortunate to have had Bart Giamatti as our friend and, more importantly, as our leader.

What startled me in June of 1983 was his unmistakable grasp of the total baseball universe - its problems and its strengths and what its role really should be. It was like he had been in our league meetings and he had been talking to each one of us for many years. I knew that this remarkable man had a unique and sensitive insight into our game.

There are few people who understand the sociological significance of our national pastime and what it really means to millions of people on the North American continent who follow baseball on a daily basis. He wrote and spoke about the game in a way that none of us had ever heard before. To say it was magnificent and emotional would be a stark understatement. He understood the role that those of us who have been blessed with the mantle of being custodians of this game must play in the most sensitive and caring way. Bart had been a fan who loved and lived baseball all of his life and could honestly and accountably represent people everywhere because he could empathize and understand how a fan thought and felt. He never forgot his many years of just being a fan. That, in the end, you see, is the most important part of our game. Preserving its traditions and its history and not letting them be besmirched by greed or intemperate actions.

When on August 24th of this year he said, "I believe baseball is a beautiful and exciting game loved by millions, I among them, and I believe baseball is an important and enduring American institution. It must assert and aspire to the highest principles of integrity and professionalism of performance, of fair play within its rules". He told you not only what he felt and believed in, but on that day how he would react to any situation that threatened it. It was an enduring lesson in morality and it was certainly a proud day for baseball. Bart understood that integrity is the backbone of our existence and that integrity is neither antiquated nor yielding. In his brief commissionership, he left a legacy that no one connected with baseball, in any way will ever forget.

When he said, on that same day, "I will be told that I am an idealist, and I hope so, I will continue to locate ideals I hold for myself and for my

country in the national game, as well as in other national institutions," it was another proud moment for those of us in the game. None of this can be stressed too much because it is so vital and Bart did it in a way that made it so special for all of us.

He went on to say "baseball, in all dimensions, mirrors the condition of freedoms for Americans that Americans ever guard and aspire to." That understanding and that philosophy guided Bart and took the institution of baseball to new heights. But what was needed to do that? What was needed was his history, instinct, and the innate ability and sensitivity to understand all the indigenous characteristics of baseball and all of its sociological ramifications. In my two decades in baseball, there were very few people who had the understanding like Bart Giamatti did. That understanding manifested itself in so many positive ways that oftentimes I sat back in sheer wonderment. He set new standards for us. He set new ideals for us. And, most importantly, he gave us freshly rekindled hope, dreams and pride.

This marvelously charming man also left us a legacy of love. Some of you may find that surprising, but baseball, with its myriad of internal squabbles over the past decades needed, and badly needed, a healing process. Bart Giamatti brought that healing process to us. He brought it by dint of his warm personality, his intense feeling for the game and, a unique ability to get people to work together in a constructive atmosphere. Another characteristic that made him so unique was that he was not in any way encumbered by ego, but acted only in a what was the real and true best interest of baseball.

There are many people who wonder what a man from academia was doing in baseball. Well, they all know now. His impact was enormous and his legacies so powerful that they will stretch on into perpetuity. Baseball has been enhanced in ways too varied to even mention today because Bart Giamatti was our Commissioner.

It is much too premature to know how baseball historians will view the tragically all too brief tenure of Bart Giamatti. However, to those of us who lived and worked with him, it won't be difficult at all. What makes all of this so remarkable is that it all happened in an incredibly short amount of time. It all sprung from his own moral fiber. And so, today, we celebrate all of this. With the knowledge that his deeds and his words will set standards for us, our children and our children's children. He was, without a doubt, one of the most remarkable men I have ever known. And, of course, we will miss him greatly. But having known him and having had him in baseball has enriched us in a myriad of ways that will have positive consequences for millions of people and for all of us who knew him. And so, our captain is gone, but in so many ways he is right by our side.