

Interview with Bill Hillgrove  
20 October, 1994  
at WTAE studios, Pittsburgh, Pa  
interviewer Martin Gorski

Counter

008 M: Why do you think baseball is special?

H: The best way I can describe it, Marty, is that its the only game that hasn't changed intrinsically, basically since the turn of the century. The angles all work. the distances all work. 60ft. 6in....still works. 90ft. still works. 3 strikes, 4 balls. It works. And so they haven't had to tamper with the basic game. Now, okay, they jazzed the baseball up on occasion. They've come up with the DH, which I don't like. I'm a purist, I'm a National League fan. I grew up that way. I don't like the DH...for a lot of reasons. And..uh..its the game that seems to be in tune with the human mind and the human body, more so than another game.

025 M: So I guess what your trying to say is that baseball is the perfect game?

H: Well. I wouldn't say its the perfect game. I don't think there's such a thing as a perfect game. But I think its the game that appeals most to human beings because there is no clock. You know human beings were saddled with the clock. For all of us the clock is ticking. In baseball it doesn't. So that timelessness adds to the charm and it also presents with it human problems. Many times that last out is the toughest to get. And so therefore I just...I grew up as a baseball fan. I've never had the pleasure to broadcast baseball, but I love the game.

036 M: Okay..and ..uh this timelessness would that be its defining character? How would you define its character?

H: Yeah, i would say..uh..that and the fact you could be very successful individual performer. Whether it be batter, runner, fielder, pitcher. You can be very successful and still have to play and use that success within the team concept. I would say football is the ultimate team game because the ball doesn't move if all 11 men on offense don't do their job properly and conversely you can't stop somebody if all 11 men on the defense don't do their job properly. But in baseball one man can win the game. One man can end the game with a strike out. In football its not that easy. In hockey, it's...certainly one man can end a game with a goal. But it takes the goalies cooperation to make that possible. So...in baseball there is cooperation form the pitcher..that's a given. I think that's it..that's its a major attraction. The fact that individuals perform within the team concept, yet individuals can still be themselves.

058 M: Individualism, I feel, is a basic part of the American Psyche. So.. Do you feel the same way? Could you say that is the reason it's the national pastime or do you feel there is some other aspect of the game?

H: Well, I think it became the national pastime because..of timing and also the fact that it is a game played in the summer time. Basically, when people have generally more time to be outdoors and enjoy the sunshine and the breeze and the birds singing and all that sort of thing. And I think that's why people tend to gravitate toward it. Football for many, many years was considered for ruffians. That's changed now, but in its early times with the flying wedge and leather helmet..people losing teeth. It was rather barbaric to a degree. And I think with baseball, even with people getting hit with baseballs; it wasn't considered so. It was more considered as a gentleman's game. More a pastime than a sport.

076 M: Now.. you mentioned something about timing?

H: The timing.. In other words the timing of the Industrial revolution. People in small towns rallying around the local heros. In general they were baseball players. and this is in a time, however, when there was no tv. When people would, on a Sunday afternoon, go down to the local ball park, just to watch a baseball game. Now they don't do that because there is one on TV played by the best in the business. You know, that has changed, and that is probably why football has surpassed baseball. In terms of popularity, if you want to argue that. I don't want to argue that. Seems to me, nothing right now is more successful than the National Football league. It terms of what it is able to attract. Because maybe people have changed.

087 M: Now..uh..you said the industrial Revolution was a or could be a major factor in determining the expansion of baseball. Now Pittsburgh being an industrial town, or used to be. Has Pennsylvania contributed a lot to baseball or has baseball..you think baseball had more on an influence on Pittsburgh or PA.

H: Well..that's a cart and horse story. And its hard to determine which. There's a lot of both. But I think Pennsylvania has certainly contributed a lot. If you want me to sit and start naming names, I can probably start doing that..and I know I'll leave some names out and that would be incomplete as a result. But in terms of the number of great major league baseball players we have sent to the game. Your thinking names like Stan Musial, Dick Grote..I believe Hank Sauer was a western Pennsylvanian. We've had our share...Ken Griffy..and Jr. We have to claim Jr. even though he's a generation or two removed. We've had our share of contribution to the game from that stand point. But also the game has effected us. I..I..never saw it..Butler used to have a minor league team. Erie, I think, still has it. The towns used to have their teams and if they weren't professional or organized teams; they were semi-pro teams that represented the community. And so the Industrial Revolution..the people worked in the mining towns and if the mining town had a baseball team..they wore their pride on that teams sleeve. On Sunday afternoons or whenever they could get off, they let this thing happen. Communities would battle each other in this way and have their little..uh..rivalries and enjoy them. And I think it really came along the same time it was blossoming, and.. I think

one grabbed the other, and I think that's why it became the national pastime.

118 M: Okay, now I wanted to talk about something a little more recent - the baseball strike. Do you feel that its affected baseball in any way and..uh..

H: Well, I said in '81 that I thought baseball would never recover from that strike. And I thought the other work stoppages would hurt it as well, but people even though they get mad when there's a work stoppage and you can't watch baseball, for whatever reason they go back and forgive. Something tells me this time around, fans are really turned off, and I know my track record is not a good one, because I said it before, but this time around seems to be different. First of all, hard feelings are much deeper then maybe even we suspect. I mean the owners are going to show the players and the players are going to show the owners and then who gets caught in it you and me. We're the people who end up suffering. Okay, I'm sure they're's some ball players that have 3 different condos they're making payments on, a couple of BMWs and you know they may have to concentrate on one payment and forget the other stuff. But we're the ones deprived. I also feel very badly in this situation for the people who work at the ball parks. Who's livelihoods around the ball park depend upon the fact that there's a crowd there at the baseball game. Parking lot attendants, you know, you name it. There's a lot of people suffering because of it. And it's money that they'll never retrieve. I mean its gone forever. And I perceive the hard feelings, plus the fact that I think the average guy in these tight economic times has trouble making ends meat and the wife having working together with income troubles getting the family on solid financial ground. I really think they're sitting looking at it and say these millionaires want more. Okay the side of the coin is the Baltimore Orioles franchise sold for \$12 million in 1979. Today it worth \$175 or 80 million. So there must be something attractive about owing a baseball franchise. I'm not saying that the players are completely wrong. Or that the owners are completely wrong. I'm saying that they're all wrong, and the fan is suffering. And until the fan speaks his mind, or holds out; or stays away, or boycotts the product sold by Major League baseball, then they'll probably not get the message. I'm talking about the owners and the players. They'll probably be business as usual until its time for another strike. Something tells me this is all together different. Something tells me this is going to have far reaching, long lasting affects.

151 M: Now you being a sportscaster in Pittsburgh have you heard anything on the inside? I don't wanna break any news stories that you might have later on tonight.

H: I'd be happy to do it if I had one.

M: You don't have any...

H: I don't have any insight. I don't know.

M: Locally? What's happening?

H: No. First of all Donald Fear made sure the players wouldn't

take, we can't get to them, accept for Jay Bell, and the other...Tim Foley..Tom Foley--Tom Foley, I'll be alright, Tom Foley the other player. Jeff King lives in Pittsburgh. He wouldn't talk to us because he was instructed not to. So I don't know anything. My guess is it will be back next year. I'm taking my cue from Charley Huff, who just retired. And Charley, speaking as an ex-player and is now as a fan, thinks they'll settle it and be back in the spring. But I wonder, I really wonder. I think that bad blood is really thick.

162 M: Also I may be wrong or right. I'm not sure. Are they thinking about selling the Pirates?

H: They have to be sold.

M: They have to be sold? What going on?

H: This consortium can't go on any further with this project. They say baseball and now we have to take the next step. Hopefully, the ownership..which could involve the Rooney's and possibly the local cable TV company and other high profile people, who said they were interested, like Dan Marino said he was interested. Hopefully, that can be put together. In fact, if it can be put together then we won't be immediately threatened with the loss of the franchise.

170 M: And that was my next question. What if an outsider buys the franchise?

H: Well here's all you need to know about that. Elroy Face told me that the guy, I don't remember, came in from Charlotte said "Here's a check. I'm going to sign this check. You fill in the amount. It could be whatever you want it to. You just put a number in there. Fine, I'll pay it, but in ten minutes that clubs going to Charlotte." And of course, Marc Sauer doesn't have that power--It's a good thing. I think it would be bad for baseball to have this great traditional franchise, one of the earliness, to be lost and we would have to bring a back-up team in here.

179 M: Now do you think it would affect the average fans here?

H: It would affect them a lot especially if we ended up with an American League team because these people here are basically National League. They've always been, and they would have trouble identifying with a National League team.

M: So you feel even if the Pirates do move, you feel another team would move into Pittsburgh?

H: I think that at some point in time they would try it again. Yes under better circumstances, under better management, better lease-agreements for a better ball park. That's not a ball park, that's a stadium. There's a big difference.

184 M: Okay, does being a sportscaster give you a special view point on baseball? I mean as opposed to players, the owners, the grounds keepers.

H: Well sure. I think that if you're doing your job correctly your representing the fan. You're asking the questions that the fans would be asking. Why this? Why that? Why not this? Why not that? And so therefore I think that we have a unique role in the situation. We're closer to the fans than the ball player is and

the owners because we represent the fans. Firstly, we are fans if we're doing are jobs right, and secondly, we represent the fans. And sometimes I think when players refuse us interviews and turn their backs on us, then, okay, they have their reasons and they can do that. I think I can live with it but they have to remember that they're turning their backs on the fans when they do that. I don't think they want to do that. I don't think a player wants to turn his back on a fan. You gotta remember who pays the freight.

195 M: So you feel that sportscasters are the representatives of the fan?

H: Yes. That's are job.

M: Okay..now..uh..I believe you grew up around Pittsburgh..

H: Yes in the city proper, Garfield, which is in the East End section.

199 M: What's your first experience that you remember with baseball?

H: My dad took me to Forbes Field. I saw Danny Murtau play second base. I saw Ralph Kiner hit home runs. I saw the O'Brien twins..then I saw Dick Grote. Then you kinda move forward. '71 championship team, then '79 championship team. So my earliest recollection is Danny Murtau play second base. Uh..and..uh..who was the guy who went to Cleveland uh..left fielder, Gene Wooding. I remember him. So I was about 10 or 11 years old. Which would've been around 1950 or '51 when I first had a recollection of Forbes Field. Also, I grew up in Garfield; up on a hill we could see the lights of Forbes Field at night. It was a constant reminder that there's a baseball game going on. In those days Rosie Rosewell's voice would came over the radios on porches in my neighborhood. People listening to the ball game. That doesn't happen anymore, either. First of all, if its a porch, its in back of the house; and its far removed from anybody else and there is no communal sense. Everybody is off doing their own thing. And it not a radio, chances are its probably a TV now. Uh..but I do remember that..uh..that was..uh..the most vivid memory as a youngster growing up, that I can recall.

214 M: Do you think that TV...that is no radio, then radio, then TV has impacted the sport? .....

H: Oh sure.

M: ...and the fans in the area?

H: Television has had a profound impact on all sports. Most of it good, some of it bad. Some of it fixable, most of it irreparable. Uh..you know, let's face that was a period of time when people sat on the porches. They don't do that anymore. Its a whole different society now. A society geared towards television. baseball has certainly used television especially with the ratings it gets in the World Series and play-offs. Sorry to kinda see the game of the week go by the boards, but cable TV has impacted that to. It used to be that if NBC would put an afternoon game on between two really good teams, that a lot of the nation would tune in to see what was going on. But now, I'm not going to watch that if the Pirates are coming on that night on cable. Its fragmented now. You can do more of

what you want to do as an individual. You don't have to sit around and wait for anybody, NBC or anybody, to hand you a baseball game. You can just punch one up and its not scrambled.

228 M: So you feel that the fans, they don't identify with the entire game? They just identify only with their teams? And the fractionalized...

H: Well, I think more so because more of the local teams are available. It used to be the Pirates used to televise 38 games a year, and that was not that long ago. Now with cable they're just about on all the time. I mean its rare that they're not on.

232 M: Do you think this has maybe hindered the progress of farm teams?

H: Yes, I'm not going to watch..uh,..um..uh,um..even the Pony League or American Legion game in my local field if..if the Pirates were on tonight. I wouldn't ever make the decision to watch the live game, with a young kid; when opposed to what you might call the real thing. Well, not that the real thing is the same as it was 30 years ago. The game has slipped. The people playing the game don't play as well as they used to...generally speaking. Uh..the pitching not as good. If they expand again we'll have pitchers extending their careers into their 50's. Charlie Huff may unretire; Nolan Ryan may come out of retirement if there's another expansion. There's not enough pitchers to go around. Last year, the average earned run average was 3.50 I don't know what it is this year. That's high. When I was a kid, when you were over 3.30 you were getting ready to be shipped back to the minor leagues. And now the average is 3.50. Pitching is just not as good. You don't see the hit and run as often. You don't see smart baseball because the product is diluted. There aren't enough good baseball players to go around to all the major league teams. And so therefore, the product isn't as good as it used to be. Now I may sound like "Things ain't like they used to be." Well, in baseball they're not. I think football has gotten better. Hockey, the pool of talent has increased, now, in the European players. More kids in America skate, so the pool is getting better. In basketball, it always will rise. baseball is shrinking. Kids don't play as much baseball now. Plus there are too many teams. You can see it; 20 game winners are almost unheard of these days. When I was growing up, the Cleveland Indians had four on the same staff. Four-20 game winners, 20 games now..you only have to win 12 or 13 now to be considered a real effective starter. 'Course the use of the Bull-pen has increased and that's part of it, but still there aren't enough good pitchers.

255- Interruption by Don Cannon.

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M: What do you feel are the best examples of baseball? The Pirates before and long ago and today? Then and now?

H: Oh.

M: Either players or team owners, managers who most exemplified what the game meant or stood for?

H: Well I think I'm prejudiced but again that's my time warp. I belong to that era as fan growing up as compared to now. I'm not a fan growing up now. I'm a fan who's middle-aged and young. The 60's Pirates will always be my favorite team because that team was first of all a over achieving team. They weren't as talented as the Yankees that year. The Yankees pounded them in 3 games, but the Pirates won the close games. To me that's the true champion. That was a smart team. Dick Grote once said to me that the Pirates, day in and day out, put 6-1/2 coaches onto the field. Not talking about coaches but players. Guys really bright, into the game; knew where to position themselves, had good instincts, pitchers that knew how to pitch. They didn't have to be taught as much as maybe today's players. So the 60's Pirates will always be my favorite team. '71 was great. Clemente was as great a baseball player as ever walked on the field. '79, I got to cover that with Doc Prince down in Baltimore, back and forth. And That was a great experience. But none will ever be as impactfull on me as the 1960's Pirates.

276- Interruption by Don Cannon.

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M: Oh, Yeah. Roberto Clemente. I wanted to ask you--the memorial statue? How do you see him as a person? From what I've understood, he used to be laughed at because of his accent. Is that how you see it?

H: I don't think so. I think maybe that's somebody view. Uh..he was always a guy who was not easy to understand because he wouldn't let people get to know him that well. He always wanted to keep a distance from people. But I remember him as a warm, friendly--he didn't always get along with the media well but I wasn't in the media then. I was kinda a kid trying to become a media person. And he certainly had all the skills. He could throw the ball. He could hit with authority. He has great base running instincts, had great style and a flair, you know, the basket catch. Arm threw on a rope, That devil may care swagger he had. He was good and he knew it. He was colorful. If there was one word to describe him that would be colorful. He had style great style. And obviously was a great baseball player. Dick Grote once said, "no on was ever given more skills by the Lord than Roberto Clemente. No Body." I think that his little distancing from the media and the fact that he had a language barrier made his early years somewhat more strong than they should've been..uh..probably when he matured and perhaps mellowed a little bit, he looked back on himself and said "yeah, I made some mistakes," but that's part of being a foreign kid with another language that's coming into a culture that's a little different. Maybe a lot different. This person, how could you question the man as a human being. Who died in the manner he died. I mean he was trying to help somebody he didn't even know. Nicaragua is a pretty good hike from Puerto Rico. And certainly Pittsburgh is a light year. I remember one time I got to play in one of those

media games. Either against the coaches or with the coaches versus someone else. I hit a ground ball to short which one of the other media or somebody didn't field. It went all the way to the left field wall, 'cause nobody caught up with it. And so I'm chugging around the bases and finally I'm coming round third and they're waving "Okay!!" And I go to slide and then there's mud all over me. I got a raspberry on my can. I got up slowly and I remember looking in the dug out and seeing Clemente. He is just roaring, laughing at me doing what I just did. Hitting an inside the park home run between the short stop's legs, you know, which shows the quality of baseball played in those games. But..uh..he got a kick out of that and that warm smile, I'll never forget - he had that warmth.

306 M: Do you think that players...I mean he was a great player and person during this time. Do you think that players nowadays would come close? Like Barry Bonds?

H: Now Barry Bonds, don't get me wrong, Barry Bonds is a great player but if you want to make a comparison between the two of them. As a hitter Barry Bonds may be better. Barry Bonds, according to Dick Grote, who knows a lot more about hitting a baseball than I do, said he's not only the best lefty against lefties he's ever seen, but he's the best two strike hitter in the game. 'Cause he changes his swing to accommodate the strike zone and make sure he stays alive and makes contact. Uh..maybe as a hitter, Bonds might be greater. But as a fielder, and I'll cite one example, that's when Sid Bream scored a winning run for the Atlanta Braves in game 7. That base hit to left field by Francisco Cabrera - a name we shall never forget. I could see Clemente picking that ball up. First of all, Bream wouldn't have turned third, and then the next thing you see Barry Bonds' throw is up the line. If its anywhere close to home, Spanky has a shot making the tag, but not if its up the line. I would never see Clemente make a critical mistake like that situation - throwing down the line. Just wouldn't happen. So I think the comparison ends right there. So overall greatness--Clemente's the greater ball player

320 End of interview.