

Interview with Edward Vargo

Q: Dad, tell me a little about your childhood and where you grew up at.

A: Dave, I was born in Butler, P.A. on the Pillow Street area, which is on the ~~west~~ end part of town. I have a lot of memories there because that is where I started my career in baseball. Pullman Park was in that area, and I was a batboy for the Butler Yankees for a period nine to ten years, and that is what got me started in baseball, and I am very thankful for that. I attended Butler High School, and I was a graduate of Butler High School. I lived in Butler all of my life, and Butler is just a wonderful place to be from, and I am proud to be from Butler.

Q: Dad, who were ~~the Butler~~ the Butler Yankees and some of the famous people that you met?

A: The Butler Yankees were the farm team of the New York Yankees. I met a lot of ~~ball~~players, and many big leaguers came from the Butler farm system such as Whitey Ford, Joe Collins, Dick Star, and Carl Drew, and I was a part of those people. I am very happy to say that during the war they disbanded baseball here in Butler. Frankie Frisch visited Butler, and he was the manager of the Pittsburgh Pirates at the time. I was a guide for Frankie Frisch because there was some big event in Butler at the time, but I cannot remember what it was. Anyhow, Frankie invited me to come down and work with the Pirates. I was fourteen years old at the time, and I would hop the Harmony Short Line bus every chance I got during the summer when Pittsburgh was at home, and I would go down to Forbes Field and

work out with the Pirates. I can remember a great thrill for me was at batting practice. Hank Greenberg was among many that were there, and they had a coach by the name of Honus Wagner, and I would sit on the trunks in right field. Honus would have his arms around me, and we would talk nothing but baseball. He was a wonderful old gentleman, and it was a great thrill for me just to be in a company of a man of his caliber.

Q: What did you do after you graduated high school?

A: I went to play baseball after graduation. I was scouted by St. Louis Cardinal farm team, and they took me to spring training where I played two years for their organization, and then the army came by and took me. I played baseball in the army and managed a ball team which was the Ft. Belvoir team and managed the St. Albans Naval Hospital team. I also umpired during my tenure in the service because at that time they needed somebody who knew about baseball to umpire, so I started playing baseball and umpiring at the same time. I could not throw anymore after my release from the service because my arm was hurt, so I took up umpiring and went to George Barr's school for umpiring in 1954. The classes lasted for about six weeks, and they only had one job opening at that time, and my roommate by the name of Phil Reeves got the only job available in our class.

I came back to Butler and went to work in the Pullman Standard, and about a month passed away when I received a phone call from a Mr. Anderson who was the president of the Georgia-Florida League. He called and said that my roommate Phil Reeves decided he would no longer umpire anymore because he had a father

who was ill at home, so Phil recommended me to Mr. Anderson, and I am very much grateful to Phil because I would not be here today in baseball had it not been for Phil. I worked in the Georgia-Florida League that year, and I went to the Piedmont League for my second full year. Piedmont is Class B, and I had a good year for them. The Piedmont League folded the following year, so Mr. Anderson called me and asked me if I would like to come back down to the Georgia-Florida League and umpire, and I told him no. He then called my parents and told them not to let me quit and have me come back because he thought I was big league material. I talked it over with my parents, and they decided I should go back. I went back to the Georgia-Florida League that year, and it was a break of a lifetime going back there because I was bought the following year by the Eastern League. It is Class A ball, and I worked in that league for a period of six weeks. The International League then bought my contract, and I worked for them for two years. The National League then bought my contract in 1959, and here is where I am today.

Q: Dad, you worked your first game in 1960 in San Francisco. Were you very nervous?

A: Dave, they actually bought my contract in 1959, and I did work some games that year for the National League, but my first full year was 1960. I opened in Candlestick Park, with and actually I was nervous as a devil just like anybody else would be, and that is the day that a knock came on my door in the dressing room. I was rubbing up baseballs as a rookie always does for the game, and a knock came on my door. Somebody

asked me if Dick Nixon could come in and use the restroom facilities, and I told them no because I did not know who he was talking about. A second knock came on the door, and I opened the door, and there was Richard Nixon, the Vice President of the United States. He told me he was Vice President Nixon, and he wanted to know if he could use the restroom facilities. I told him that he most certainly could. It was my first day in the big leagues, and I ended up throwing out the Vice President. We had a nice chat. He told me that he came back from Venezuela, where they spat on him, so he told me to have a good time and wished me good luck.

Q: Dad, what were some of the most memorable events that you were involved in in your twenty-four plus year career?

A: Dave, there were so many memorable events that I was involved in. For example, I worked four World Series. The first World Series was between the Dodgers and the Twins. The second series was a great thrill for me. It was between Pittsburgh and Baltimore in 1971, and I had the pleasure of calling balls and strikes that particular game because it was the first night game in World Series history, and it was a great thrill for me to umpire in front of my hometown fans because I called a great ball game. The third World Series was in 1978 between the Dodgers and Yankees, and I worked the 1983 World Series between Baltimore and Philadelphia. I also worked four All Star games. I worked the 1974 game in Pittsburgh which was another great thrill for me because it was in front of my hometown people here. I also worked four LCS championship games and two tie breakers.

Another memorable occasion was when I called four no hitters in my career. Two were by Sandy Koufax, and the other two were by Don Notterbach and Don Wilson. One other great thrill for me was when working the plate when Hank Aaron tied Babe Ruth's record of 714 home runs. It took place in Cincinnati, Ohio, and that was another great thrill for me. I also umpired the last game in Forbes Field in Pittsburgh and umpired the last game at Shibe Park in Philadelphia. Also, I worked the last game at Crosley Field in Cincinnati and also the Polo Grounds in New York. I had so many events that it would take me a long time to tell you just how many memorable occasions that I have had.

Q: What was the atmosphere like on that day when Hank Aaron hit the home run that tied Ruth's record of 714 home runs?

A: It was opening day in 1974, and it was just like any other ball game. Jack Billingham was the pitcher for the Reds, and Aaron came up and hit a 2-2 pitch to left field for a home run that tied the record, and the place went crazy. There was a lot of security following Hank, and time was called as soon as he hit it out of the park. They located the ball that he hit over the fence, and President Ford came over and chatted with me for a while until Hank Aaron came over, and he presented Aaron with the baseball and shook his hand. Hank was a great player and a great power hitter.

Q: Dad, what were some of the favorite managers that you came across?

A: I never really hated any manager. Leo Durocher was supposed to

be one of the toughest managers with the umpires, but I really never had a problem with Leo. ^{OR WITH} Walter Alston, Gene Mauch, and Chuck Tanner. Tanner lives in New Castle, and I consider him a great gentleman and a good manager who never gave the umpires any trouble, and I really did not have any problems with any managers.

Q: Who were some of the umpires that you worked with all of those years?

A: Most all umpires are good that I worked with and some that come to mind are Jocko Conlan, Augie Donatelli, Al Barlick, Ken Burkhart, Frank Secory, Bill Jackowski, and Mel Steiner. I have a lot of respect with Al Barlick, and Al and Jocko are both in the Hall of Fame. I worked with Al for nine years, and Al introduced me to your mother on the airplane, and Al works for me today as a supervisor, and I enjoy having him as one of my top fellows that goes out and looks for umpires which helps me secure umpires for the National League.

Q: What year did you finally retire from baseball?

A: I retired after the 1983 season. I thought I had enough because I was getting some injuries and did not want to get hurt anymore than I actually was, so I retired after the 1983 season. Chub Feeney was the head of the National League and asked me if I wanted to be a supervisor for him, and I took the offer and was a supervisor for Chub in 1984, 1985, and 1986. Chub then retired as president, and the late Bart Giamatti came on the scene and hired me in this position as umpire supervisor.

Q: What kind of man was Bart Giamatti?

A: Bart was the former head of Yale University. He loved the game of baseball, and he was a very close friend of mine, and we became very close friends. We spoke almost 365 days a year. Bart died in September of 1989, and that was a great loss for me. We were very close friends, and I am still very close with his family today. Bart loved baseball, and we would not have this mess we do today if Bart were still living. I just cannot put into words how I feel about the late Bart Giamatti. He was a wonderful and brilliant man, but he did not know too much about the game at that time. I taught him everything he needed to know about baseball. We would have connecting rooms in the hotels, and the door would be open between his room and my room. He would be reading some novel, and out of the blue he would ask me what some rules were in the rulebook. Bart was a great man for the game because he loved umpires, and he would visit them everytime he went to the ballpark. He was a true friend of the umpires, and all of baseball loved him.

Q: What does a supervisor actually do?

A: I have many responsibilities of being a supervisor. First, I do all of the schedueling for spring training and the regular season, and that is a headache in itself. I also find and train umpires for the National League and have two supervisors that work with me who are Nick Colosi and Al Barlick. I also serve on the rules committee for baseball, and that itself is enough in this position.

Q: What did you think of that whole case between Pete Rose and

Bart Giamatti?

A: I am very familiar with that case between Giamatti and Rose. Bart thought that what he did was right concerning Pete Rose. Bart would have helped Pete only if Pete went to him in the first place, and the decision hurt Giamatti quite a bit because I had breakfast with him just two days before he died, and the situation affected him dearly. Pete Rose was a tremendous athlete and a great competitor, and someday I would like to see Pete get into the Hall of Fame because he deserves it.

Q: What is the atmosphere like in Cooperstown, New York?

A: Cooperstown is a little village with about 2,500 people, and it builds up to about 50,000 people coming in for the Hall of Fame weekend. I have been going up there for the past ten years or so, and I umpired many of the Hall of Fame games. I play golf up there, many of the legends tell stories. Money cannot buy the experience I have with these legends of baseball.

Q: What does it take to become an umpire?

A: It takes a few things such as having good judgement, good technique, and the most important thing is that you have to have a lot of guts to become an umpire because you have to take charge when you have to. I look for those points when I scout umpires to see if their judgement can be helped. Most young kids in the minors have to have the desire to become a good umpire. It takes a lot of hard work both on and off the field, and that goes for any walk in life. People can be what they want to be such as a doctor or a lawyer, but you have to have the desire to do it. People thought that I was too small to become

an umpire, but here I am in the big leagues being five foot nine and head of all of the umpires.

Q: Do you think that baseball is headed in the right or wrong direction?

A: The strike has really hurt the game of baseball very much. I think that the owners and players should get together and resolve this thing because the young kids are suffering. Baseball is the number one sport in the country, and the situation has hurt the game very much. The owners and players should get a deal together and get it over with. Players are making millions of dollars and still want more, but the one thing that is forgotten is the kids. They ought to lower the price of the tickets and open the stands so the young kids can come into the park because they are the backbone of this country and of baseball. Baseball will be better off as soon as they do that.

Q: What do you think is going to happen to the small market teams in the future?

A: I hope that nothing happens to them because the Pirates have been here for years, but most of the small market teams are hurting badly. Pittsburgh is a small t.v. market area, and they put a lot of money in the game. The Yankees get thirty million a year from MSG, but Pittsburgh does not make that in ten years, and they really have to do something to help these small market teams, and I hate to see Pittsburgh lose their franchise and move elsewhere because it would hurt people that are already involved with baseball, and it hurts the economy in the

cities.

Q: Who were some of the players that you remember the most?

A: The outfield would have to include Hank Aaron, Stan Musial, Willie Mays, and Roberto Clemente. To me, Clemente was the greatest player I had ever seen. He could run, field and throw the most. My top pick for first base would be Gil Hodges. The second baseman would be Bill Mazerowski. My pick for shortstop would be Ozzie Smith, and third base is a tossup between Brooks Robinson and Cleve Boyer. Catchers would be Johnny Bench and John Roseboro. The relief pitcher would have to be Elroy Face because he played for the Pirates. There were a lot of them that were my favorite players.

Q: What do you think about baseball expansion?

A: They have been talking about adding two or four new teams, and I think it would be a big mistake. We just expanded two years ago in Denver and Miami, but I really do not think that there are enough players to go around. The pitching is very slim today, and they better think twice of expanding in my opinion because it is really hurting the game.

Q: What do you love the most about umpiring?

A: I am still in the game because I get to see at least 140 or 150 games a year. Baseball is a wonderful game that has been very good to me, and I hope that I have been good to the game. I will never put the game down because it is such a wonderful profession to get into, and I hope that someday somebody will be just as lucky as I am to have this position.

Q: What is your hometown of Butler like?

A: Butler is a wonderful place because my roots are here and friends are here. I love the city because it is a wonderful place to raise a family. I do not think that there is any place in the United States that I would rather live than the city of Butler. People are very friendly, and they are also helping people. There are colleges around here such as Slippery Rock and Grove City. It is just a wonderful place to raise a family and be from.

Q: What are some of the treasured artifacts that you have collected throughout your career?

A: I have many autographed balls from the All Star games. I also receive bats every year from Cooperstown from working the games. I also have many personal autographs such as Ted Williams, President Kennedy, President Ford, President Nixon, President Bush, and some also from Vice Presidents. I also have a bat that I very much treasure because it is an Honus Wagner bat that nobody really has in this area. It was given to me by the manager of the Pirates years ago when I was a youngster. I also have World Series rings, All Star rings, bats from different teams, and I am very proud of my collection.

Q: What was it like being out on the road away from your family?

A: The travelling was very difficult. I hit eight cities when I first started out, and when they expanded to ten I hit ten cities, and I very seldom got home. I used to like to see my schedule when it said Pittsburgh on it, and it was very difficult for your mother who really had to be a mother and a father when I was away from home, but that is just part of the profession that I had to realize. I know I did not spend a lot of time with

you kids growing up, but that is part of life. I made a nice living by it and educated all of my kids, and I really enjoyed the umpiring profession.

Q: Dad, how would you like to be remembered as an umpire?

A: I like to be remembered as a man who contributed to the game of baseball. I spent twenty some years umpiring, and I hope they realize that I did a good job of umpiring for these people and the National League.