

Older adults show their love of the game by ushering for the Pittsburgh Pirates

By Gina Mazza

Take me out to the ball game . . . and show me to my seat. This article profiles five older adults who step up to the plate every baseball season to show their love for the Pittsburgh Pirates and their patrons by faithfully working as ushers. No fare weather fans, here! These seniors can be counted on game after game, year after year, decade after decade.

Phil Coyne: Section 26/27 (near third base)

At the young age of 99, Phil Coyne says that he “gets more hugs and kisses now” than he ever has in his life. He’s not only old enough to remember when Babe Ruth hit his last home run at Forbes Field—he was actually one of the kids who ran after the ball that day.

Phil grew up just a few blocks from Forbes Field in Oakland and used to play ball with his siblings (he’s the oldest of eight) and friends in the Schenley Oval. “Every Saturday was kid’s day at Forbes Field, which meant we could get in for free,” he recalls. “I started ushering when I turned 18. I just kept it up and I’ve kept on living!

“Back in those days, you had to take a streetcar to get to the field and there was no parking,” he continues. “At Forbes Field, you could see the players and talk to them. Their families sat right behind home plate, not in the boxes like they do now. Most of the players took streetcars back and forth to work. Some of them married girls from Oakland. We were a close family and a close neighborhood. Today, you only see the players on the field because now they can just get in their cars and drive off. But PNC Park is nice and open, and a lot less congested. It’s easy to get to the park, and there’s plenty of parking and the T, which is a blessing.”

The most senior member of the Pirates usher brigade, Phil still gets to and from the city on his own. He takes a bus to downtown from Craig Street, hops off at Wood Street then takes the T to PNC Park.

Phil’s lifetime run as an usher has gotten interrupted by only one thing: World War II. Prior to being drafted, he began working full-time in 1940 at Westinghouse Air Break Company in Wilmerding, ushering only on weekends. In May 1941, he went into the US Army and served as a machinist in Italy until 1945. Once home, he resumed work at both Westinghouse and with the Pirates.

“When I retired in 1980, I started working all the games. I went over with them to Three Rivers then PNC Park.”

That means that Phil has seen a whole lot of plays—and players—over the years. When asked about his favorites, his answer is not

surprising: "The biggest Pirates story of all is Mazeroski's game-winning home run in game seven of the 1960 World Series against the New York Yankees."

While Phil says he has "no favorite players because I root for the whole team, he adds: "I enjoyed watching Ralph Kiner back in the late '40s and early '50s. He was quite a home run hitter. If he was going up to bat in the 8th or 9th inning, nobody—I mean nobody—left until he batted." Kiner also played for the Chicago Cubs and Cleveland Indians in his career, then became an announcer for the New York Mets.

What keeps Phil coming back after an incredible 81 years of ushering games? "It's the people," he smiles.

That love and admiration goes both ways. In fact, Phil has become somewhat of a local celebrity with his very own fan base. On Memorial Day of this year, a film crew from CBS in New York traveled to Pittsburgh to film Phil working at one of the games.

"Since that Sunday morning show aired nationally, people are now coming from all over just to take my picture. I'm not sure why they'd want that but I'm more than happy to do it."

Tony Grieco: Section 16/17 (behind home plate)

Over his years a Pirates usher, Tony Greico, 80, of Hampton Township has done more than watch players steal home. He also stole the heart of a pretty young lady whom he met at Three Rivers Stadium.

"Joann was working for the Pirates at the time, calling employees to find out if they were coming to work, including the ushers," he explains. "I was friendly and nice to her. She had a radio and knew where I was working in the ball park, so she would come down and socialize. She knew I worked at Kaufmann's Department Store. So one day she came in the store and I sold her a pair of shoes." (Tony talks about his career, below.) "Now we are happily married and she goes to almost every game."

Tony has one of the best spots in the house: behind home plate, also known as the "celebrity section." Which celebrity has stayed most in his memory? "The nicest and greatest person I've ever met down there is a man named Arnie Palmer," he says slowly and with emphasis. "He would sit in my section and when they would flash him on the big screen, everyone would come down and line up for his autograph. Everyone loved him.

"So one day I said to him, 'Mr. Palmer, if you want me to stop them from hounding you so you can enjoy the game, I will.' He said, 'No, no, let them come.' He even carried his own black marker in his pocket for autographs. He was such a joy to be around. He was a true gentleman's gentleman."

Like Phil, Tony started ushering at Forbes Field at the age of 18 (encouraged by his older brother) and also cites Maz's homerun as his all-time favorite play of the game. "Another ball player that I highly respected was Roberto Clemente," he says. "He was so colorful and fun to watch. I was there when he had his 3,000th hit."

Tony enjoyed a 55-year career at Kaufmann's Department Store, starting in the warehouse on Forbes Avenue right out of high school—then a stock clerk in the downtown store, then selling women's shoes—and eventually promoted all the way up to assistant buyer then buyer. All the while, he ushered at Three Rivers Stadium and PNC Park, working the games around his schedule.

"After I retired in 2001, I started working every game at Three Rivers, including many double headers. I enjoy baseball and being on the field. I also usher at the Steelers games, and at music concerts at Heinz Field. My aim in life then is my aim now: I love people. I enjoy making them comfortable and happy. I talk with them, joke with them. I meet so many wonderful people and it keeps me out of trouble."

Shirley Lewis: Section 8/9 (near first base)

When Shirley Lewis' late husband, William, retired from his career as a financial analyst at Westinghouse after 35 years and applied for a job as a Pirates usher, she said to him: "Well, if you can do it, I can do it."

"We were both retired," says Shirley, 83, of Whitehall. "I had a secretarial service and had sold my business, and it just made sense. So we both became ushers at Three Rivers Stadium. That was 26 years ago, and now I'm at PNC Park." (William passed away three years ago.)

"I guess you could say we're a baseball family. William played baseball for Pitt and had coached high school baseball for about two years at Baldwin High School. We had two girls and a boy and we took them to Pirates games. My son played Little League growing up and high school ball."

Their love of the game extends down to her eight grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren, as well. "All the grandsons played Little League and my youngest grandson played baseball at Chatham College.

McCutchen is Shirley's current favorite player and says that the good memories of working the games are too many to count. "I've met so many nice people. They're great fans and I enjoy talking with each and every one of them. It's been so much fun."

Donna Mangold: Section 20/21 (behind the dugout)

Donna Mangold, 68, of Bloomfield-Friendship comes from a family of Pirates ushers. "My father, two uncles and a cousin were ushers at Forbes Field and Three Rivers Stadium," she shares. "Growing up, I played Little League softball and later women's softball."

Her parents took her to her first Pirates game when she was 12 years old. "I've always enjoyed baseball. It's still my favorite sport, although I'm a Steelers and Pens fans, of course. I went to many Pirates games while growing up. Hall of Famer Stan Musial [from Donora, PA] of the St. Louis Cardinals was my first autograph."

So one day, she asked her father why there were no female ushers at Three Rivers Stadium. "A few days later, he brought me an application and I signed up. That was July 1983."

Donna made the move to PNC Park when it opened in 2001. To her, there is no comparison between the two stadiums. "It's like night and day. PNC Park is just a beautiful facility. The view from home plate to the outfield is magical, especially at dusk, with the city skyline; and the visibility is fantastic. There really is not a bad seat in the park, and it's much more comfortable."

Donna feels blessed to be ushering in the section right behind the Pirates dugout. She's got a few celebrity stories to tell, as well. "Michael Keaton [of *Batman* movie fame] and David Conrad [of the TV series *Ghost Whisperer*] have both sat in my section; but a big part of the last few years working in that section has been to help the kids get baseballs after the players throw them up into the stands. That was before they put the net up."

As Donna looks back on her decades of ushering, she concludes that the Pirates have had their ups and downs. "The seasons have run the gamut from good teams, not so good teams, good teams, not so good teams, and trying to work our way into the top of the division."

She mentions Andrew McCutchen and Iván Nova as being at the top of their game now but one of her favorites over the years is Andy Van Slyke. "I was a real fan of Andy's when he was playing," she recalls. "He was quite a character. He wasn't the most sociable to the fans but if he was working with a charitable organization or other public event, he was fabulous. I also respected him because he would tell things like they were. And I do like McCutchen. He's a class act."

Never one to sit on the bench, Donna has also volunteered for the Pittsburgh Gold Club, which helped the team sell tickets, and in the late '80s and early '90s, "I got to participate in special events and got to interact with the players."

All in all, Donna loves working for the Pirates organization. "Everybody who works at the ball park—not matter what capacity you are, from ticket seller to security or selling hot dogs—everybody is just so good to one another. We all really care for one another and know that we've got each other's backs. It's a nice organization to work for and I like that we get training every year to see what's new at the park."

Keeping it all in the family, Donna and her husband, Darrell Lewis, are full-season ticket holders and have taken their four daughters

to games over the years. "One of our daughters is a real baseball fan. She goes to about 10 games a year. Of course, she sits in my section."

Joe O'Toole: PSIEU President

Joe O'Toole, 77, of Bon Air is another lifelong Pirates devotee. At the age of 13, he started working in the clubhouse then shortly after became a bat boy for about four years at Forbes Field, making \$4.50 per game. "I wasn't old enough for a work permit—you had to be 14—so I used my older brother's name for a while," he grins. "By 1960, I had gotten on the [ushers] list."

The first game he worked was the 1959 All Star Game.

Joe worked with Giant Eagle for nine years then went onto sales positions for Canada Dry and 7-Up. "I ushered when I could around my full-time work," he says. Joe retired in 2009 as a manager for the Pennsylvania Department of Revenue.

Growing up in south Oakland, Joe's father ushered the games. Now Joe is president of Pittsburgh Stadium Independent Employees Union (PSIEU), which represents all game day employees who work as ushers, ticket takers and ticket sellers at PNC Park and Heinz Field. He has served in this position since 1998, and previously was secretary/treasurer.

Joe ushered at Three Rivers Stadium from when it opened until it closed. "At Three Rivers, we worked for the management team that owned the ball park," he explains. "When the Pirates and the Steelers got their own stadiums, no one had their arms open to bring in the union. That was considered a management failure; but we ended up getting into both parks. The Pirates accepted us right away; the Steelers took a little while but we got in."

Currently, there are approximately 450 people in the union, including 150 ushers at PNC Park and 150 at Heinz Field. Of the total ushers, Joe estimates that 60 to 70 percent are ages 55 and older. "Your senior workers show up every day. They are the most reliable employees and do a consistently terrific job."

Over the years, Joe has accumulated a number of favorite players. "Willie Mays was a super guy." He tells the story of how he almost ended up on the cover of *Look Magazine* with Mays: "In 1955, a photographer came to me and asked me to do the cover shoot, but in the end, they decided to go with a photo of Willie by himself. I should have been there with him," Joe shakes his head. "That would have been a moment of pride for me."

Joe and his wife, Diane, have three daughters and one son, and they went to a lot of games over the years as a family. Even though Joe was ushering at some of the most infamous games in Pittsburgh sports history, he actually missed seeing a few of the most important plays.

"In 1960, when Maz hit his home run, I was called into work at Giant Eagle in Hazelwood. I'd gone across the street to get a cup of coffee

and heard the play on the radio. So I missed seeing that, but it gets worse than that! When Franco caught the Immaculate Reception, I was working at Three Rivers but couldn't see that part of the field because of the line of sight.

“So how about that? All those games I worked at, and I was right there—but when Franco caught it and ran in for a touchdown, I never saw it.”