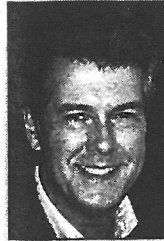


Rory roared through life



Every spring, sportswriters and others, like George Will — a hapless Cub fan — wax nostalgically about baseball, unable to resist a whack at universal, hanging curveball themes like hope

and redemption. As predictable as April rains and September Cub collapses, these sentimental high-fives are offered by even the most cynical — see Charles Krauthammer, a Washington Nationals fan — and reveal a yearning for relief from our harsh, 21st-century reality.

For me it kindles a mix of optimism and melancholy as it brings to mind my friend, Rory Hodgson, a baseball umpire himself. Brown-haired with a dimpled, round face, Rory stood 6 feet tall and weighed 400 pounds. Yes, he had a big appetite, but it was matched by a big heart. If this was a fair world he would be calling balls and strikes today, but Rory was struck down by leukemia over 20 years ago.

But his death is not what defined Rory. True to his name, he roared through life, gobbling up everything that came his way, enjoying the big and small, the epic and trivial, offer-

ing high-fives for anything from a well-struck golf shot to a cold drink of water. For a big man, Rory was surprisingly light on his feet. No stamina, mind you, but agile. A good tennis player, golfer, smooth swinging slow-pitch softball player, the guy moved well, picture Jackie Gleason on "The Honeymooners," John Belushi in "Blues Brothers" or Chris Farley dancing with Patrick Swayze on "Saturday Night Live."

On sunny days in the early 1980s we bolted from the Illinois State University campus, Old Milwaukee long necks stacked in an ice-filled cooler, and drove to Hazy Hills Golf Course, a nine-hole pasture surrounded by corn and soybeans. We played all day for 10 bucks with a cart. Rory shrugging massive shoulders and pummeling drives, me, at 6-foot-2 and 160 pounds, stretching and snapping like a rubber band, matching his bulk with club head speed.

"High-five, Louie," he hollered my nickname when we both striped the fairway.

An unlit "Swisher" cigar clenched between dimples, Rory displayed a soft touch on putts, beaming when he dropped a bomb, grimacing as if he had lost the Masters when he choked on a short one. Next tee, he would swig a beer and whale away, ready

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for more.

Big appetite.

But Rory was more than a golf and drinking buddy. He worked at the local newspaper, *The Pantagraph*, as a reporter in the sports department and landed me my first job as a writer, working as a stringer for high school football and basketball games. Coaches called in and gave the scores and stats. We wrote a paragraph or two and sent it to the editor. Mid-night deadline looming, coaches yelling into the phone from a local bar, it taught me to write quickly and concisely. Particularly when the sports editor, the late Jim Barnhart, a crew-cut ex-Marine type, paced behind

me shouting: "Need it now, Pemberton. Later is just a blank space in the paper."

At Rory's urging, Barnhart sent me to cover games. At that time the reporter was responsible for typing the stats into the aggregate "Score Card" section along with writing the story. Rory taught me how to keep score in baseball and organize stats for football and basketball games. This allowed me to complete the aggregate and provided a game summary to refer to when I wrote the story. Rory did all this without my asking, just knew I needed help and offered.

Big heart.

Rory's passion was baseball umpiring. He worked local high school and college games, longing to follow his idol Harry Wendelstedt into the big leagues. The 1980s were the era of the big ump. Eric Gregg, Ken Kaiser and John McSherry roamed green fields like blue-suited professional wrestlers, bar-bouncer-sized men with booming voices and a flair for the dramatic.

Rory idolized them.

I remember covering a high school baseball game one bright spring day where Rory was behind home plate. A skinny, right-handed kid crouched in the batter's box with a 3-2 count,

two outs and bases loaded. A curve ball bent toward the plate but looked outside. The kid dropped his bat and stepped toward first.

"STEEEEEERIKE," Rory bellowed, startling sleeping dogs three blocks away.

He scooted right-to-left on metal cleats, hopping on his right foot as he lifted his left. His right arm soared skyward, then zoomed down as he braced his left foot in the dirt, driving his bulky body toward the ground like he was planting a spear.

"YOOOOUUUURUUUUUT."

The skinny batter stopped. His coach raced onto the field. Rory jerked off his mask, face flushed, eyes bright. The coach yelled and stomped. Rory jawed back and pointed to the bench. The coach threw up his hands and retreated.

Sun shining, the two teams and crowd buzzing, Rory and I exchanged a glance. He winked and grinned, dimples popping.

High-five, my friend. High five.

Mike Pemberton's short stories have appeared in such literary journals as *Aethlon*, *Touchstone* and *Euphemism*. His first novel, "Transcendental Basketball Blues," was published in 2011. He lives in Hoopeston and can be contacted at www.mikepembertonbooks.com.