

Ron Santo—A Case Study in Attitude!Dr. James Fitzpatrick

Last Friday I was making a list of all the things I had to accomplish by Christmas. As I looked at the list, I began to experience a little self pity thinking this list was quite daunting as I poured myself a cup of coffee. Then my wife Therese came in following her early morning run. Teary eyed, she told me to turn on WGN radio where they were breaking the news of the death of Chicago Cub legend Ron Santo. For baby boomers like Therese and me the generational affliction of being die-hard Cub fans was passed on to us. “Wait until next year is deeply imbedded in our psyches.”

The summer of 1969 will always be remembered for Neil Armstrong walking on the moon, and a three day music festival called Woodstock taking place at a muddy and rainy farm field in upstate New York signifying the countercultural revolution that was sweeping America. But for Cub fans 1969 evokes memories of the most magical yet traumatizing season in the history of this long suffering franchise. For the Cubbies lost the pennant to the “Amazing Mets” after building a huge lead into late July. Many believe this Cub team while breaking our hearts, endeared themselves forever in the hearts and souls of Cub Nation. This team is often regarded as the greatest baseball team that never made it to the World Series. Given three of its players are in the Hall of Fame lends credence to this claim. That Ronnie Santo should be the fourth member, and has been rejected 19 times, is an injustice in this writer’s opinion, but that is an argument for another day.

This column is not really about sports, or a great athlete who has passed away. Moreover it is about attitude and having the grace to face adversity in a most remarkable manner.

Santo diagnosed with juvenile diabetes at 18, made his debut with the Cubs in 1960 but hid his illness until 1963 his first all-star year, and one of nine appearances he would make in a fifteen year career. He was a fiery competitor and hit 342 home runs and was awarded five gold gloves. Keep in mind this was long before the advent of insulin pumps as he coped with this dreaded disease amidst the irregular travel and meal schedule for a major league player. Abandoned by his father at age six, he was raised by his mother and a wonderful step father who came into his life at age 12. In 1973 Santo endured the greatest sorrow of his life when his mom and stepfather were killed in a car accident on their way down from Seattle to see him in spring training.

Santo’s diabetes eventually caused him to lose both of his legs. He painstakingly learned how to walk with prosthetic legs. Along with heart and circulatory problems, he also fended off bladder cancer first diagnosed in 2003. All close to him marveled at how he never complained. He helped raise 60 million dollars for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation with his annual “Ron Santo Walk for the Cure.” Quietly and behind the scenes Santo would honor requests to visit terminally ill youth or others in need of encouragement and inspiration. He was known as someone who could not say no to anyone beseeching his help.

In closing we can find inspiration in a lot of places if we are not self absorbed in our own worries. After reflecting upon the life and times of Ron Santo, that daunting list that I recorded last Friday now looks very doable. Moreover, in this holiday season we should have an attitude of gratitude not only for the things we have, but for the things WE DON'T HAVE. For Ron Santo there are no more injections or rejections. He is in a higher hall than Cooperstown!