



Harry Caray Is My Wingman

A Chicago Cubs love Story

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My allegiance to the Chicago Cubs—which may actually bring something other than misery this year—began in earnest when the team hired Harry Caray to announce their games in 1982. My eternal affection for Harry goes beyond his broadcast brilliance: A long time ago, he helped my adoptive grandfather and grandmother meet. And he once helped me out too.

In the 1930s, Mister Mel (the grandfather in question) was an engineer for a radio station in St. Louis. Most of his duties involved setting up the equipment for remote broadcasts of the various sporting events that were the station's staple, and the announcer he worked with the most was Harry Caray. Harry, he liked to tell me, succeeded because he was indefatigable, incredibly ambitious, and possessed of a near-photographic memory. Mel was fond of repeating that all Harry needed was 60 seconds, a glass of water, and a scorecard before going on the air and pretending that he had been intensely following the two teams about to play for the entire season.

Besides doing sporting events, Mel did remote broadcasts for the station's big band shows on Saturday nights. It was a plum gig: After setting up the equipment he had little else to do once the broadcast began, so he would mingle with the crowd and invite women to sit with him at the front row table he commandeered.

When Harry found out about Mel's Saturday night assignment, he wanted in. Mel was at first reluctant—Harry was tall and handsome and already of some renown, and Mel didn't want any competition. But Mel was Jewish and quickly realized that he and the Catholic Caray were fishing in different streams. And what's more, having a gregarious wingman was bound to be a plus. So Harry began tagging along, sometimes convincing the club owners to let him emcee but often just sharing Mel's table and imbibing the free drinks provided.

One evening, shortly after their collaboration began, Mel met a woman he found so intoxicating that he had trouble maintaining a coherent conversation. Before she could extricate herself from this awkward encounter, Harry came to the rescue, talking Mel up and giving him time to catch his breath. It was enough to help get Mel a dance, and later on a date. A year later they married.

Early one summer Sunday morning, six decades after Mel's supper club encounter, I headed to Wrigley Field accompanied by a woman I was desperately trying to impress. I had paid a scalper more money than I could afford for front-row tickets on the third base line: The game happened to be the same day as the Chicago Air and Water Show, which meant that various military planes would be flying low along the shore of Lake Michigan, just beyond right field. I figured that if my date didn't find the Cubs interesting—she had never been to a baseball game before—she would at least be entertained watching the air show.

Despite the Cubs' fielding yet another mediocre team, it was a great day for baseball. My all-time favorite Cub, Shawon Dunston, was playing what turned out to be one of his last games for the team and he homered. It was also the last game I attended with Harry Caray present to lead the singing of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" during the seventh-inning stretch; he died just six months later.

But the actual game was an afterthought for almost everyone at Wrigley that afternoon. The weather was perfect, and the spectacle of military aircraft flying overhead gave the day a carnival feel. My date enjoyed herself, and we spent the rest of the day walking along the lake. From my perspective it was a success.

A few days later, I received a videotape from my parents, unlabeled save for a note that said "DO NOT REWIND." It turned out that—unbeknownst to me—my father and brother had driven up from Peoria for the game, setting up the VCR to record the proceedings in case they made it onto the broadcast.

They didn't make it onto TV but we did; when I put the tape into the VCR my date's face soon appeared on the screen, looking resplendent in her hat and sunglasses. After a few seconds, the camera panned back to capture my head in the frame, staring not at the game but at my date.

WGN used to refer to these as "hat shots," and they were a favorite of the station's longtime producer Arne Harris. After the visage of a beautiful woman wearing a hat would appear, Harry would remark to his broadcast partner Steve Stone—or Arne himself—about the attractiveness of "the hat," which gave him a bit of an alibi if his beer-fueled remarks got a little too risqué, not that Harry would have been fired at that point in his career.

After the image of my date left the screen, Harry gave a long pause before uttering a thought that was anything but risqué: "Steve, what I wouldn't give to be young again and watching the game with a woman like that."

I called my date to tell her we made the broadcast and invited her over to see it and have dinner. She was flattered by Harry's remarks and got a kick out of seeing us on TV. The dinner went very well.

I'm inclined to think we would have married even if she hadn't been the object of Harry Caray's musings, but—like Mr. Mel—I appreciated his help.

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