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We'll all miss Harry Kalas' voice

By Rich Westcott

For The Inquirer

In all the years that sports have been played in Philadelphia, few people have had a greater impact for a longer time than Harry Kalas. For nearly 40 years, Kalas was the hugely popular voice of the Phillies. He was a Hall of Famer who brought the art of broadcasting a baseball game to its highest level.

On a warm summer night, settled in a soft chair with a cool drink in hand, there was no richer experience than listening to Harry Kalas describe with that golden voice of his a Phillies ballgame. He made it interesting. He made it fun. And he did it oh, so very professionally, never negative, never a homer, just reporting, usually in a calm, mannerly tone, the action on the field.

Of course, at times, he did get excited, especially when the occasion called for one of his trademark calls. Who will ever forget his legendary home run call? "There's a long drive. Deep to left field. Way back. It's outta heeeere. Home run Michael Jack Schmidt."

Just as memorable were Harry's exchanges with his best friend, Richie Ashburn.

"His Whiteness," Kalas called him, referring to his nickname, Whitey. Nothing livened a dull game better than the two swapping colorful, comical comments.

Harry's assets went far beyond the broadcast booth. He was willing to help charities and other groups. He served as master of ceremonies at countless banquets. He freely signed autographs. He was a good neighbor. And whether he was just walking through a corridor at the ballpark, down a street or through a local mall, his cheerful, down-to-earth manner was always present when fans approached him.

Indeed, Kalas was that rare local sports legend, a regular guy who was loved and admired by fans throughout the region. And he made a lasting impression on all those with whom he came into contact.

Philadelphia has compiled a large list of great radio and television sports broadcasters over the years. Kalas stands at the top as king of the airwaves.

As I sit here, dazed and saddened, trying to put some words together about a man who was a friend as well as a professional colleague, I think about all the times our lives intertwined. Listening to him on the air. Dinners at the ballpark. Harry wrote forewords for two of my books. Even just casual conversations. All wonderful experiences that I will forever cherish.

Harry often told the story of how Marcus Hook's Mickey Vernon was responsible for launching his interest in baseball. At his first major-league game, Kalas was sitting in the stands with his father on a rainy afternoon in Chicago. The start of the game had been delayed. By chance, Vernon peered out of the dugout and spotted the 10-year-old Kalas. Mickey waved the youngster down to the field, then picked him up and lifted him into the dugout. Vernon introduced Harry to some of the players, gave him an autographed ball, and sat and talked with him for about 10 minutes. "That really started my love for the game of baseball," Kalas recalled.

That was a good day for Kalas. But it was an equally good day for the rest of us. It paved the way for Harry to become the voice of Phillies baseball. It was a voice that we have known since 1971 - and one that we will all sorely miss.

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