

**SOME RANDOM NOTES
ON COMMUNICATION
IN THE "GREAT
AMERICAN GAME"**

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I CONFESS that I was overwhelmed at the idea of working with a major league baseball team. Almost sixty years ago I had attended the St. Louis Cardinal games through "The Knothole Gang." About 55 years ago I ushered my way through four seasons at the ball park. But the halo around big league ball players still brightly shone, despite all the intervening years.

In 1953, one of our clients, Anheuser-Busch, bought the St. Louis National League Baseball Team. Imagine, now I could see the players on the bench, in the clubhouse and maybe get an autograph or two!

I found that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, like major league baseball!

I have seen it warm the veins of cold-blooded bankers and businessmen. I have watched it cool off the hot heads.

It has softened many a tough father. It drives people to mental mayhem and it is one place where emotion plays a greater role than reason.

In fact, there is very little reason in baseball at all!

When a fan gets a hate on for a manager, he dreams up so many different things that are wrong with him and ways to get him fired that it is hard to keep track of them.

Applying normal reasoning or logic only gets the irate fan real, real sore.

I know, I learned it the hard way!

Some time ago one of my good friends, normally, I always thought, a sane fellow and a very successful businessman, got off a choice bit in

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a group of friends. "There is dissension on the Cardinal ball club," he said with authority. "I got it straight from the *horse's mouth*. The manager is on the way out. Musial and the other players don't talk to him any more, etc., etc., etc."

Since I thought I knew the horse pretty well, I asked my all-knowing friend how he got all this inside information.

"I know the guy who takes pictures of the Cardinal team. He's in a position to know. He's in the clubhouse all the time," he said in a very mysterious voice.

Making a mental note to get the club photographer fired, I asked my friend *specifically* what this authority on the Cardinal dissension had said.

"I asked the photographer whether it wasn't true that there was dissension on the Cardinals as this guy ought to know!"

"But what did he actually say," I persisted. My all-knowing friend replied in a voice that was loud, disdainful and convincing . . . "He didn't say anything! And that convinces me that there is something to all this talk!"

Well, the late Senator Joe McCarthy hasn't gone that one any better yet!

Another friend of long standing, head of a large firm in downtown St. Louis, practically tore my ear off when he told me the great secret of one of the Cardinals' losing streaks.

So help me, this is word for word what he said: (This happened to be about Eddie Stanky.)

"Stanky figures he is through with baseball as soon as the season is over. So, he has to get it while he can. Every day he bets large sums against the Cardinals with a downtown bookmaker and so far he has made over \$50,000 at it."

At first I thought this guy was surely joking. When I acted accordingly, he was most indignant and said, "I got it right from the horse's mouth." I asked some pretty obvious questions about a manager betting against his own team. His answer was to get very angry with me. He passes me on the street even today—years later—with a polite but curt nod.

I ought to warn all of you. It's dangerous even to tell about this incident. Somebody is going to say they heard this story from me, quote me as the authority on why the Cardinals had such a bad year, and swear Stanky bet against his own team. After all, didn't they hear it right from the horse's mouth!

Well, that's baseball.

Some time ago, a St. Louis banker with a reputation of being a pretty hard-boiled character around town, asked me if he could possibly see the inside of the Cardinal clubhouse. All his life he had wanted to.

It was against regulations, but I took him in one day when the team was on the field. He seemed to commune with himself in front of each locker. When he got to Stan Musial's, he actually dropped down on one knee, picked up Stan's extra pair of shoes and stroked them reverently. Getting up, he touched the Man's extra uniform. When my banker friend came out of his trance, he explained to me unashamedly that of course he was only doing all this so he could tell his grandson about it. I told him I understood perfectly and got him a bat autographed by Musial.

I could borrow money from his bank, without security, without financial statements or anything. I've got character! I'm connected with the Cardinals.

There are a select number of otherwise mentally sound men walking the streets of St. Louis and other cities and towns across the nation, proudly carrying certificates of membership in the "Cardinals' Honorary Bat Boy Society." They run the gamut from governors, senators, mayors—on down to some crippled kid about to die.

A gentle female who runs a dress shop in Rochester, N.Y., writes to tell Gussie Busch he ought to get rid of our management—that even though she has never seen the Cardinals play, she is sure her 19 year old son in Korea can run the team better than our manager.

A businessman from Los Angeles told Mr. Busch to get on the ball—make some good trades to strengthen the Cardinals. He even enclosed a list of suggested additions which he guarantees would win the Cardinals a pennant. In case you are interested, this gentleman suggested trades for players like Willie Mays, Whitey Ford, Sandy Koufax, Roger Maris and similar types!

Funny thing, I think the guy could collect on his guarantee!

In any case, for this bit of "free" advice, the suggestor only wanted free Budweiser at the rate of one case a week for a year!—which is more modest than some demands in return for baseball advice. We have guys who offer to put on the hex or give the evil eye or hypnotize the opposition. One guy wanted to sue us because he says he sat in his room in Massachusetts and caused us to win most of our games. He called collect to tell me he was going to sue.

A businessman from Memphis wrote that his sales manager's son had just been in an auto accident and was about to be told that his leg must be amputated. Would Mr. Busch please send the boy an autographed baseball. It was sure to ease the pain and the shock because the boy is such an ardent fan and has wished so hard for a ball. It's against the policy—but we sent the ball.

A Red Cross grey lady writes from a Veteran's Hospital in the South that Red McGee, a "basket case,"—(both arms and both legs off)—practically stays alive only because of his interest in the Cardinals. We made him an "Honorary Bat Boy."

A father pleads with us to allow his blind son to meet and shake hands with Stan Musial. It will mean a thousand-mile trip, but the father thinks it will be worth it if it can be arranged. We did.

A 90-year-old lady says all she wants before she dies are birthday cards from the Cardinal players. And when this old soul died about 6 months later, her closest friend wrote and told how when the greetings arrived, the neighbors were invited in to inspect the cards and the autographs. She told Mr. Busch that Granny Woods was never happier in her 90 years . . . and she was ready to die.

A mother sends us \$1.85 because, she says, her son somehow got in the ball park without paying and occupied a reserved seat not belonging to him. Since she was raising her son to pay for everything he got, she wanted Mr. Busch to have the money.

When Gussie Busch wrote and told her that it was wonderful to know there were people like her around and to please bring the whole family to a ball game as his guest, her husband wrote back that he didn't know there were guys like Gussie Busch left and from now on he drinks only Budweiser! This was an unexpected dividend!

In any ordinary business when you do well everyone is usually very happy. In baseball when you sell out the park, instead of being happy you only start figuring how many letters the next week's mail will bring. The guy who had to sit behind a post, usually after traveling all night to see the game; the fellow who couldn't buy soda pop when he wanted it; the boys who couldn't get autographs; the people who didn't like it when we changed pitchers or batters—or those who thought we should have taken out the pitcher earlier, and so on and on!

There are no good losers in professional baseball. Every man plays to win—period! And I guess that's the way the fans like it.

I remember one night when we had thousands of Boy Scouts on the field in a ceremony. As their massed flags passed the Cardinal dugout and the players stood at attention, the kids yelled, "Kill them Bums," "Murder 'em, Stan," "Beat their socks off, Red," "Knock the block off 'em," "Kick their brains out, Eddie," and similar soothing and placating remarks. I stood next to the manager and leaned over to hear what he was mumbling to himself. This is what I heard. "When the great scorer comes to write your name, it makes no difference whether you won or lost, but how you played the game"—shaking his head, the manager added, "I wonder who the hell has been teaching those kids!"

Eddie Stanky, whom I mentioned before, may be one of the good case histories in public relations, in my judgment. He freely and frankly admitted that he firmly believed that the only thing that counted with anybody was to win.

How didn't matter! Just win.

Stanky also frequently referred to getting along with people in somewhat more earthy terms than "It's a lot of bull . . ."

Roy Stockton, the late sports editor of the "St. Louis Post-Dispatch," wrote when Stanky was fired as manager of the Cardinals:

"Stanky may beat his way back to the big leagues. He has many of the qualifications of a big league leader. He knows baseball, his strategy is sound and he's one of the best teachers we've ever seen in uniform. He's alert at all times and has a burning eagerness to make good, to win.

"Eddie, however, will have to learn a few things. He must learn to get along with people. He must delegate some authority to his coaches. He must try to acquire a little warmth in his relations with the public. Good relations with people are important, too. He must learn to be as courteous to cub reporters as he is to his old friends among the typewriter pounders. The kid he snubs today may have access to a hammer column tomorrow. He must remember that other people are nice, too, just as are his own family, and should be treated kindly.

"Let him keep his eagerness to win, and continue to be loyal to his players. But there can be an ethical way of trying to win, even in the rough and tumble business of baseball, and an eternal chip on the shoulder may bluff some people, but it will merely antagonize most of them."

Stockton has set out a better-than-average philosophy for people to follow.

It is our opinion, as public relations practitioners—that what people say and think in large measure depends on what they know. When people get only half the story, or a confused and complicated story, then we have poor communications. We find ourselves in a sort of verbal blind alley. There is lack of *understanding* of either the idea, the principle or the activity. Part of the job of public relations is to find the blind alleys in human communication and open those alleys if possible.

You can spread a lot of talk in a vacuum. It seldom results in good public relations. Eventually people catch up with you if you try to engage in this kind of activity very long. On the other hand, you can sometimes work very hard at doing the right thing. But without public appreciation for it, there will seldom be a full understanding of what is being done. It takes a full understanding and appreciation to have good public relations.

We hear so much about the so-called great American game. So, we take it for granted that everybody thinks baseball *is* the great American game and people will continue to flock out to the ball parks to see the players perform.

Well, times are changing. Baseball doesn't have the monopoly on entertainment or sports that it may have had at one time. In years

gone by the only way people could get to see a professional ball game would be to go to the ball park to see the teams perform.

This is no longer true. If you don't like to suffer the inconvenience of traffic jams, or parking and sometimes what amounts to extortion from the parking lot operators, all you have to do is to turn on a radio or television set and you can see or hear something else possibly more entertaining than baseball — or even baseball itself!

Some of us feel that baseball reaps greater benefits when it communicates more about what goes on behind the scenes in baseball, to interpret to the American people what baseball means to the youth of the country and to let them know how important baseball is in the minds and the hearts of millions of other people. It's a great story and it can be told over and over again. Otherwise, without the emotions involved, baseball can be a very dull game.

A letter came from a fan in Tokyo. He said, "I am a Cardinal fan. God bless you, Mr. Busch!"

A letter was received from another Japanese boy just learning the English language. He sent Mr. Busch a letter saying, "I am just learning about America and I have already picked what I want most to see if I ever come to America. I want to see the St. Louis Cardinals play baseball."

There may have been a time when it didn't make much difference what a ball player did publicly or how he acted off the field. If he got into the papers the next day with unfavorable publicity or because of some breach of public morals, it didn't seem to hurt anything or at least that is what a lot of people thought. He was a great hero as long as he hit home runs and stole a lot of bases or made brilliant plays on the field. What a player does off the field is almost as important as what he does on the field.

Stan Musial is a shining example.

Years ago we used to get hundreds of letters from people who were complaining about discourteous treatment by ushers. So we called a meeting of the ushers and guards. It is no small matter when you have 400 persons who work at the ball park for only a few hours a night, who come from different environments and different backgrounds, few of whom are permanent employees. Nevertheless, they are the people who personally greet the fans as they are seated in the stands. They are just about the only people who are in direct communication with our fans, as a matter of fact.

At this meeting we explained our problem, we laid down the standards of courtesy we wanted followed and told why. We told them we wanted the same treatment accorded people in the stands that they, the ushers, would expect to get if they were fans. And we even got a little tougher when we told them that there was no room in the organization for anybody who didn't know what it meant to treat other

people properly. We tried to tell them what troubles the fans had with traffic jams and parking problems before they even got into the park. It must have sunk in—we didn't get a single letter complaining about discourtesy from guards or ushers this past year.

Getting close to the fans pays off. You learn a lot! I almost dropped dead one time when I found Gussie Busch standing in line to buy a ticket to his own ball park. He just wanted to know how the fans felt, he said. He made some changes as a result of his personal test.

Baseball clubs get thousands of letters. They can be answered or tossed away. It can become a real nuisance, but answering the mail is important.

What do we do about complaints? We could say forget 'em, they come from a bunch of old crabs. We are frequently told that you get chronic complainers in baseball . . . and the hell with them! You will always have them.

But the Cardinals don't subscribe to that philosophy. The worst letters of complaint are regarded as the greatest challenge. And there is a lot of fun and even more satisfaction in answering.

Most of the complaints in baseball can be answered. Some people get bad seats in the ball park, and splinters in their rear ends, or sit behind a post.

When a fan writes and says, "I got terrible seats behind the post," we write him and tell him we are sorry, there was such a large crowd at this game that all seats in the park had to be sold. "Please accept two tickets and be our guest at another game."

You ought to see the mail the Cardinals get back. You couldn't invest tickets or efforts better. There might be some chiselers, but we have found very few.

People say, "Well, but you must get a lot of screwballs who take advantage of you." Certainly, we must be able to differentiate between a screwball and somebody who is trying to gyp us and legitimate fans.

But we never make the mistake of thinking that because we do have screwballs and other eccentrics that we should interpret every request or complaint that comes in like that. It's a bad trap to fall into in dealing with people.

We certainly don't know all the answers in baseball communication. We are trying to find more of them all the time. One thing is sure—we don't have a locked mind on the subject.

We are sure of another thing—good communication pays off in dollars and cents.

We have found the practice of good human relations also pays off in fewer headaches, fewer ulcers and in better and more enjoyable living. What more can one ask these days!

But don't get me wrong, I love baseball—and baseball players!