

## THE VOICE OF THE TIGERS

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If you grew up in Michigan in the seventies, as I did, Bob Seger sang the soundtrack to your summers, and Ernie Harwell provided the voice over.

Who is Ernie Harwell? Well, if you were listening to a baseball game and the announcer somehow claimed to know that the fan who just caught the foul ball is from Calumet, Kalkaska, or Kalamazoo, it's a safe bet you were tuned in to Ernie Harwell.

Our family trips up north were always accompanied by Harwell's comfortable cadences filling the car. He didn't simply broadcast baseball games. He turned them into stories. In Harwell's world, a batter didn't merely strike out. He was "called out for excessive window shopping," or "caught standing there like the house by the side of the road."

Like millions of others, my love of baseball was fostered by Ernie Harwell. He covered more games than anyone in baseball history, including forty-one years' worth for the Tigers. When *Sports Illustrated* drew up its all-time baseball dream team, it tapped Harwell as the radio announcer. In 1981, he became the first active announcer to be inducted into the baseball Hall of Fame, and his voice has appeared in six films, including classics like *Cobb*, *Paper Lion*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

"TV, and especially the instant replay, made the analyst the number one guy in the booth, not the play-by-play man," Harwell told me. "And if you try to tell a story on TV, the graphics will pop up in the middle of it. Baseball is still the perfect game for radio, because you can tune in and tune out throughout the game while you're doing something else."

Unlike most modern announcers who prattle on with mindless patter and meaningless factoids, Harwell preferred to treat his listeners to a few homespun stories and a healthy dose of "companionable silences," something Zen masters refer to as the delicious "space between the notes."

"I don't believe much in stats," Harwell explained. "I'd rather keep quiet than say a guy has hit safely in six of the last eight games, or is two-for-six

lifetime against this particular pitcher. When you're quiet, you can let the listeners enjoy the sounds of the ballpark itself, which I think is better."

Just about everybody, it seems, agrees with his philosophy.

"There is a timelessness," Bob Costas writes, "to [Harwell's] approach."

Like most members of baseball's first generation of radio stars, Harwell was raised in the South, in a time and a place that valued relaxed conversation over the rush of commerce. Born in Washington, Georgia, in 1918, Harwell grew up delivering the daily paper for *Gone with the Wind* author Margaret Mitchell, reading the *Sporting News*, and listening to Atlanta Crackers minor league games on a crystal radio set. Harwell understood at an early age the special relationship between announcer and fan.

"My dad had multiple sclerosis," Harwell said. "He rarely left his wheelchair, and the highlight of his day was listening to the Atlanta Crackers games on the radio."

At age sixteen, Harwell pitched *The Sporting News* for the post of Atlanta correspondent—and he got it. At twenty-nine, he realized another dream when he became the Crackers' play-by-play man. Just two years later, in 1948, the listener-friendly Harwell caught the ear of the Brooklyn Dodgers, who were so impressed they offered to give the Crackers catcher Cliff Dapper in exchange for Harwell, making him the only broadcaster in baseball history ever traded for a player.

Harwell's timing was perfect. TV hadn't yet invaded radio's turf, and New York was about to become the capital of baseball, with the Brooklyn Dodgers, the Yankees, and the New York Giants dominating the sport throughout the fifties. New Yorkers could debate which team had the game's best centerfielder, the Dodgers' Duke Snider, the Giants' Willie Mays, or the Yankees' Mickey Mantle, and who had the best lead announcer, Brooklyn's Red Barber, the Giants' Russ Hodges, or the Yankees' Mel Allen—southerners all.

"New York was great for me," Harwell says. "The fans were supercritical of the players and the announcers, but with three teams in the city, they'd listen to all three broadcasts. It kept you honest."

The unusually competitive conditions soon thrust New York's announcers and managers into a game of musical chairs. Harwell moved across the river to the Giants' Polo Grounds to become Russ Hodges's sidekick, while a young man named Vin Scully replaced Harwell in the Dodgers booth.

During the Harwells' years in New York, his son Gray's teacher asked the students what their fathers did for a living.

Gray piped up. “My father doesn’t work. He just goes to the ballpark.”

“So many guys are just working for paychecks,” Harwell said, “that I just appreciate the fact I’ve got a job I love.”

When the American League created the Baltimore Orioles in 1954, Harwell left the Giants to become the new team’s lead announcer. There he witnessed Brooks Robinson’s debut—and a lot of bad baseball—before pulling up roots for the fourth and last time in 1960, moving his wife Lula and their four children to the Motor City.

“If life was too smooth,” Harwell said, “it wouldn’t be much fun.”

In the four-plus decades that followed, Harwell became more closely linked with the Tigers than Harry Carey was with the Cubs. Along the way Harwell saw more than a few highlights, including the Tigers’ World Series triumphs in 1968 and 1984.

“A magical year,” Harwell recalled of the time the Tigers jumped out to 35–5 start and never looked back. “It all just came together.”

He’d tell you Willie Mays was the best player he’d ever seen, that Jackie Robinson was the most courageous, and that a lovably quirky Tigers pitcher named Mark Fidrych, who used to get on his knees to groom the mound before each inning, “was probably the most charismatic guy we’ve ever had here in Detroit. A real breath of fresh air.”

“We throw around words like ‘legendary’ and ‘excellent’ and ‘exceptional,’” longtime *Detroit Free Press* baseball writer Gene Guidi told me, “but Ernie really is. He treats everyone the same. He makes new reporters feel like they’ve been in the business for fifty years, and *he’s* the rookie.”

In 1997, I was one of those rookie reporters, lucky enough to cover spring training for the *Detroit News*. My first day there, Ernie Harwell himself sidled up next to me on a bench. We sat there, watching baseball, and chatting like old friends—just the way everyone of us imagined we already were, listening to him on the radio all those years. He invited me for dinner that night with his wife Lulu. We enjoyed a long talk, he picked up the tab, and we stayed in touch from that day on.

Four years later I wrote a story about him for an airline magazine, which came out the morning of September 11, 2001. I woke up to the phone ringing. It was Ernie Harwell, calling to thank me for the article. Who does that?

The day soon turned tragic, but Harwell’s little act of humanity will always stand in my mind as a poignant counter to everything that followed that day.

A few times over the years I invited him to call in to a talk show I was hosting.

“Just ask,” he always said, “and I’ll come running.”  
And he always did.

Harwell’s passion for the national pastime, and all the people connected to it, never waned. So when he announced in September that he had contracted an incurable form of cancer, and would not seek treatment, it hit all of us who knew him, or felt like we did—which, really, is just about all of us. We were losing our baseball buddy, our grandfather, our friend.

The only person who didn’t seem shaken by the news was Ernie Harwell. He said, “Whatever’s in store, I’m ready for a new adventure. That’s the way I look at it.”

Harwell was a profoundly religious man, but he never wore it on his sleeve. He simply lived it. He was, truly, at peace.

But I was not. Like just about every sports writer who knew him, I felt compelled to write about him. In that piece I told a lot of the stories above, then closed by saying, “I wish there was something I could do for him now. If he just asked, I’d come running. And you would too.”

I had to deliver that line in the studio a few times before I got through it without getting too choked up. The next morning, after the piece ran, an old friend called to thank me.

Who does that? Ernie Harwell, that’s who.

It’s a strange sensation, knowing you’re probably having the last conversation with someone you love so much. I could have talked all day with him, but I didn’t want to be greedy with his time so I kept it short. I had to tell him, though, how much I appreciated hearing from him.

“Well, John, we go back a loooong way,” he said. “Thanks for the wonderful story. God bless you. Good bye.”

After we hung up, I sat there for a few minutes. We went back about 13 years—not really that long for a man who had friends going back more than a half-century—and I’m sure he had read better stories about his life and career than mine that week alone. But he still took the time to call.

So, thank you, Mr. Harwell, for a lifetime of wonderful stories.

God bless you.

Good bye.