

## Lon Simmons, Giants' Hall of Fame broadcaster, dies at 91

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Lon Simmons, the Hall of Fame broadcaster whose baritone voice and dry wit captured some of the most thrilling moments in Bay Area sports history, has died. He was 91.

"The Giants family and Bay Area sports community lost a true gentleman this morning when Hall of Fame broadcaster Lon Simmons peacefully passed away," the team said Sunday in a statement announcing his passing.

Simmons was part of the Giants' original broadcast team when the franchise arrived in San Francisco for the 1958 season and helped provide the soundtrack for the era of Willie Mays, Willie McCovey and Juan Marichal. His "Tell it goodbye!" home run call became a signature line for the franchise.

Said Giants president and CEO Larry Baer, "Like many fans, my earliest Giants memories were listening to Lon and Russ (Hodges) on my transistor radio. Hearing his broadcasts ignited my and thousands of others' passion for Giants baseball. He will be deeply missed by all of us."

Simmons also had extensive play-by-play tenures with the 49ers and A's before retiring in 2002. He was honored with the Ford C. Frick Award as a broadcaster to make "major contributions to baseball" at the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2004, an honor he treasured -- albeit reluctantly.

Simmons had gone so far as to quash attempts by Giants officials and the likes of Joe Morgan and Vin Scully to push his candidacy.

"I had felt, and still feel, I don't rate up there with people like Scully, (Ernie) Harwell and Russ Hodges," Simmons said shortly after his election. "People can tell you things and make statements about how you do your job, and that's gratifying."

"But I'd finish broadcasts and be driving home and be really upset with myself because of something I didn't say or some mistake I made. ... I never thought of myself as being a polished announcer."

Such down-to-earth accessibility, though, made Simmons a fan favorite.

"Everybody felt they knew Lon," the late A's broadcaster Bill King once said. "You always felt: Here's another guy just like you. That's the way he always came across on the air."

Born July 19, 1923, Simmons grew up in Burbank with dreams of becoming a big league pitcher. The Philadelphia Phillies signed him shortly after he finished a stint in the U.S. Coast Guard, but the hard-throwing right-hander suffered a back injury in his first minor league game and never was the same.

Simmons launched his radio career in 1952, operating the switchboard, handling news updates and spinning records for a station in Elko, Nevada. Simmons would later work as a disc jockey for small stations in Marysville and Yuba City, where he volunteered to do play-by-play for high school sports teams for free.

His first full-time sports job was at KMJ in Fresno before KSFO hired him as its sports director in July 1957.

Simmons' big break arrived, along with the Giants, in '58. Half of the New York broadcast duo, Jim Woods, decided against the move, leaving an opening next to Hodges in the booth.

Simmons and Hodges went on to work together for 13 years, establishing an easy chemistry that would propel both of them toward Cooperstown. The broadcast booth at AT&T Park is named in their honor.

"Russ and I had a very special relationship," Simmons said in "The Original San Francisco Giants," an oral history by Steve Bitker. "(Hodges) was so thoughtful and giving that he had no jealousies or fears. He wasn't worried about what anybody else might do to take his job so, consequently ... he didn't hold back a thing.

Simmons worked in the Giants broadcast booth over three stints (1958-73, '76-78 and a partial schedule from '96-02) and unleashed his home run call -- "Tell it goodbye!" -- for players ranging from Mays to Barry Bonds.

Though most associated with the Giants, Simmons spent 15 seasons with the A's (1981-95). King, in a nod to the elusive championship during Simmons' San Francisco days, let his partner handle the final three outs when the A's defeated the Giants to win the World Series in 1989.

Andy Dolich, a top A's executive in those days, said Sunday that the pairing of Simmons and King was one of the smartest moves Roy Eisenhardt made as president of the team.

"Lon truly was one of a kind with a sports sense of humor that was pure Hall of Fame. We were all lucky to have worked with him," Dolich said.

The A's, in a statement released Sunday, said: "His humility and humor made him one of the most beloved figures in franchise history. ... Lon was an incredible broadcaster, but his personality and wit set him apart."

Simmons was also the voice of the 49ers for 26 seasons (1957-80 and 1987-88). He was behind the mike for one of the most NFL's most memorable bloopers, on Oct. 25, 1964, when Minnesota defensive end Jim Marshall scooped up a Billy Kilmer fumble and got lost on his way to the end zone.

Simmons, as was his custom, never missed a beat:

Kilmer driving for the first down, loses the football ... It is picked up by Jim Marshall who is running the wrong way! Marshall is running the wrong way! And he's running it into the end zone the wrong way, thinks he has scored a touchdown! He has scored a safety! His teammates were running along the far side of the field, trying to tell him go back!

The crazy scene left him well prepared for another crazy run in 1988, when 49ers quarterback Steve Young broke loose for a frantic, zigzagging run against the Minnesota Vikings at Candlestick Park. Young's 49-yard high-speed chase was accompanied by Simmons' increasing shock -- "Gets away again! Goes to the 40. Gets away again!" -- and ended when the quarterback flopped into the end zone, leaving both the player and the broadcaster out of breath.

"I don't think either one of us could have gone on much longer," Simmons later cracked.

Although he rejoined the Giants as a community ambassador in 2006, Simmons essentially retired from broadcasting after the '02 season. When he did, he used his trademark deadpan humor in attempt to defuse the ensuing tributes.

"To the people who have voiced the opinion that they enjoyed my work, I can only say, 'Thank you.' It's always pleasant to hear that they grew up enjoying listening to me," Simmons said. "To those that hated me -- and believe me, there are a lot of them -- I want to apologize for sticking around so long."

Simmons is survived by daughters Robin, Cindy, Lisa and Kelsey. No funeral services are planned.

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