

Hultgren Funeral Home

Jimmy Piersall

(November 14, 1929 - June 03, 2017)

Jimmy Piersall, a mainstay in the Boston Red Sox outfield for most of the 1950s and one of the finest defensive outfielders of all time, died Saturday at a care facility in Wheaton, Illinois after a months-long illness. He was 87. At his bedside were family members including his wife of 35 years, Jan Piersall, family spokesman Tom Shaer said.



Piersall played 17 seasons in Major League Baseball and was recognized for brilliant outfield play, making countless spectacular catches and displaying great range and a strong, accurate arm. He was twice an American League All-Star (1954, 1956) and won two Gold Glove Awards. But he was perhaps best known for overcoming mental health problems after his rookie season.

Piersall's superior play is made clear in one truly remarkable statistic. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, in 1,614 games as an outfielder, mostly in center field, his fielding percentage was .99022 - better than Willie Mays, Joe Dimaggio and other Hall of Famers. In fact, as of 2013, Elias listed just 20 men in MLB history who played at least 1,000 games in the outfield and fielded .990 or higher. Jimmy Piersall is the only one to debut prior to 1963, before fielding percentages generally increased due to oversized and more flexible gloves.

None of this seemed likely in 1952 when Piersall suffered a nervous breakdown. It happened amid the pressure of his first full season with the Red Sox, at age 22, when manager Lou Boudreau surprisingly shifted him to the tough new position of shortstop.

With unceasing commitment to his medical treatment and an amazing ability to adapt, Piersall defied the odds and returned for Opening Day 1953. He made a major impact as a right fielder while batting a solid .272, highlighted by going 6-for-6 in a nine-inning game, still a Red Sox record.

"Playing in Boston after growing up a Red Sox fan in Connecticut was the pride of Jimmy's professional life. It meant so much when the Red Sox, who have been wonderful to us, inducted him into their hall of fame in 2010," said Jan Piersall.

She added, “This is a sad time but it also presents a happy opportunity for everyone to remember what Jimmy meant to the Red Sox, New England and the game of baseball – and what the region, the team and the sport meant to him.”

According to Baseball-reference.com, Piersall that year led the American League in putouts by a right fielder (349) and topped all MLB outfielders in double plays (seven). He threw out a total of 15 runners from the outfield, tied for second in MLB. In 1954, Piersall was moved to center field, where he continued his excellence.

Piersall robbed many home runs from opposing batters. After Yankees outfielder Joe Collins’ would-be homer was hauled from over a Fenway Park bullpen fence by Piersall in July 1953, Hall of Fame manager Casey Stengel told the Boston Post, “Piersall is the best I’ve ever seen, including [Hall of Famer] Ross Youngs.” The same week, Red Sox coach Bill McKechnie, also a Hall of Famer, said to the Boston Globe, “I’ve seen the great ones like [Hall of Famers] Tris Speaker and Harry Hooper, and this kid is the best.”

Piersall averaged .281 at the plate over the next four years and teamed with Ted Williams and Jackie Jensen to form Boston’s “Golden Outfield” through 1957. In 1956, he earned the Thomas A. Yawkey Award as the Red Sox’ Most Valuable Player after leading the majors in doubles (40) and playing in each of Boston’s 155 games. Piersall was inducted into the Red Sox Hall of Fame in 2010.

In 1961, he hit .322 for Cleveland (third in the American League) and finished with a lifetime average of .272. Perhaps more important, Piersall’s honesty in interviews about his earlier ordeal and in his 1955 book, *Fear Strikes Out*, which was made into a movie, advanced awareness of mental health issues.

Though not an entirely accurate film, *Fear Strikes Out* was one of the first to show that mental illness could strike anyone, even a young professional athlete. Millions became Piersall fans. He said, “The best thing to happen to me was going nuts. Whoever heard of Jim Piersall before?” His best stunt was not nuts, it was planned: running the bases backward when he hit his 100th career home run with the New York Mets in 1963.

After retiring in 1967, Piersall worked in three MLB front offices and was general manager of a semi-pro football team. But great off-field success lay ahead, in Chicago. In 1977, he joined Harry Caray for seven seasons as a highly popular White Sox broadcaster and studio host. Piersall’s second book, *The Truth Hurts*, was published during one of his 17 years as a Chicago radio talk show host and analyst on numerous stations.

“Jimmy was thrilled with the success of his second career as a broadcaster and he was grateful for how fans embraced him. He loved connecting with people through his time on the air with the White Sox and with talk radio,” said Jan Piersall. “He felt a relationship had developed with the fans, and that connection never really ended.”

Under President and General Manager Dallas Green, the Cubs hired Piersall as an outfield coach in 1985. Over 14 years, he was instrumental in the development of Rafael Palmiero (20 years, MLB), Dave Martinez (16 years) Darrin Jackson (12 years), Jerome Walton (1989 Rookie of the Year), Dwight Smith (1989 Rookie runner-up), Doug Glanville (nine years) and many others. He was inducted into the Chicagoland Sports Hall of Fame in 2012.

James Anthony Piersall was born in 1929 in Waterbury, Connecticut, where he grew up a Red Sox fan. “I hated the Yankees starting when I was in my mother’s womb,” he often liked to say.

Piersall led Leavenworth High School to the New England Basketball Championship in 1947, scoring 29 points in the title game at Boston Garden. He signed with the Red Sox at age 18.

A father of nine, Piersall is survived by his wife, his children, many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. In a rich and colorful life, Jimmy Piersall saw much and accomplished even more.

A memorial service is to be held Friday, June 23, 2017 at 10:00 a.m. at [Wheaton Bible Church](#), 27W500 North Avenue, West Chicago, IL 60185. Interment will be private.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations be made to Rush University Medical Center. Rush Medical donations in Jimmy's name should please be designated for "Movement Disorders Research and Programs and the Marshall Goldin, MD - Abt Family Endowed Scholarship." Please send memorial gifts to [Rush University Medical Center](#), 1700 West Van Buren, Suite 250, Chicago, Illinois 60612 or visit <http://rush.convio.net/jpiersall>.

Memorial gifts may also be directed in Jimmy’s name to the [DuPage Care Center Foundation](#), 400 N. County Farm Road, Wheaton, IL 60187