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The Sports Report: Baseball can be a comfort to those with Alzheimer's

By HOUSTON MITCHELL | July 29, 2019

Baseball

Bill Plaschke [wrote a wonderful column over the weekend](#) on how baseball helps people battling Alzheimer's and dementia. Here's an excerpt.

"It starts with a baseball.

"Each person who attends the monthly BasebALZ program in a conference room at the offices of Alzheimer's Los Angeles is handed one, faded and scuffed.

"For the next two hours, those suffering from Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia will hold that baseball.

"Some will clutch it tightly as they listen to stories about former baseball greats. Others will roll it around in their palms as they watch presentations about baseball's historic moments. At some point, they will be asked to reach back into their own baseball history.

"Through the magic of those 108 stitches, they will remember.

"My friends and I lived near each other, we'd play together," Al Hassan, 82, says with a grin. "I wasn't very good, I played way out in the field. There was a little creek they put me near in case I had to jump in the water. It happened three or four times. I think they were agitating me!"

"It's a bright Friday morning, and Hassan laughs, and across the table, Dolores Jones, 89, soon joins him.

"There was this St. Louis pitcher, I would stay up late to watch him on TV," she says with a grin. "He put his cap low; it was scary for hitters. They're looking for his eyes, they'd let a pitch go by."

"Jon Leonoudakis, the meeting facilitator dressed in a gold vintage Pittsburgh Pirates jersey and cap, jumps in.

"Oh, you're talking about Bob Gibson," he says, pausing, then raising his voice in wonder. "And did you know he wore glasses?"

"The room instantly buzzes with oohs and aahs and lights in eyes that have been growing dim. Baseball has done it again. Baseball has wrapped its arms around unsettled souls and taken them out to the ballgame.

"Watching what happens here is like watching people come to life," says Anne Oh, manager of support groups and activity programs for ALZLA.



Jon Leonoudakis pitches to Stephen Dolainski, a friend of an Alzheimer's patient, during a meeting in Los Angeles held by BasebALZ. (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

“Even in a summer when the major leagues’ best team plays at [Dodger Stadium](#) and its [best player](#) plays at Angel Stadium, nowhere is the power of baseball in Los Angeles better illustrated than on the fourth floor of this mid-Wilshire office building.

“Led by members of the Los Angeles chapter of the Society for American Baseball Research, a group of as many seven dementia patients and their companion caregivers participates in what is known as baseball reminiscence therapy.

“In sessions designed to elicit moments of clarity through a century-old connection with the national pastime, participants talk ball, sing ball, and even play a little ball.

“According to their caretakers, it is the first time some of them have engaged in weeks. From talk of Little League to thoughts of autograph chases, delving deep into poignant childhood memories, there is something about the ancient sport that rustles the mind.

”Baseball is a game of storytelling; it’s the heart and soul of the sport. Everyone has baseball stories, everyone has baseball memories,” says Leonoudakis, 61, a producer who brought the program here after hearing about its success in the Central/South Texas SABR chapter. “These people grew up during the game’s golden age, so it seems like such a natural fit.”

“Oh, whose office also hosts therapeutic programs involving art, music, gardening and dance, says baseball touches a nerve.

“It brings them to the present,” she says. “Individuals with dementia are often just home and not engaging in conversation, not being stimulated with activities. When they come here, it stirs up strong memories they have not thought about for a long time. It opens them up. It’s real and important socialization.”

“It starts with a baseball, but officially begins with a song. On this Friday, after Leonoudakis passes out baseballs from a plastic grocery bag — they’re remnants from his youth league coaching days — he pulls out a guitar and everyone stands up.

“Because of the usual last-minute cancellations, and because the innovative program has been around only a year and still is gaining traction, there are only three participants today. But, along with their caregivers, they sing the national anthem like they are a group of 30,000.

“Play ball!” Leonoudakis finally shouts, marking the beginning of what is essentially an admission-free day at an imaginary ballpark.

“Then there are stories, plenty of stories, with this week’s tales focused on legendary Negro Leagues pitcher Chet Brewer and that wonderful Pasadena historical institution known as The Baseball Reliquary.

“But the best tales come from the participants themselves, spurred by a Leonoudakis question.

“When you hold that baseball in your hands, what does your heart and soul say?” he asks.

Hassan says, “Watch me, I throw pretty good.”

“Jones says, “I haven’t been to a baseball game in a long time. I wanted to come here to see what it was like.”