

In The Big Inning...There was Story!

Jon Miller Passes Time with Stories Narrating America's Pastime

by Craig "Hackin' Boo" Harrison

We associate storytellers with schools and libraries, museums and hospitals, campfires and stoops. One overlooked venue is the ballpark. That's where ESPN and Major League Baseball announcer Jon Miller carries on a tradition of great storytellers in baseball, America's national pastime. Blending stories, impressions, anecdotes and spontaneity, Jon entertains even as he calls play-by-play on radio and television for listeners around the world.

The Sport of Stories

Baseball is ideally suited to storytelling. Unlike other sports, there is no clock or elapsed time to modulate the length of games. They run two hours or three or even four, and if, after nine innings they're tied, teams continue long into the night until a winner is determined. There's lots of time for storytelling.

Even more wonderful for listeners of baseball on radio and television, fans are regaled with stories of players, of teams, of past plays and games, of seasons and more. And the longer the game, the more lopsided the score, or the longer the rain delay, the more story time at Jon's disposal.

Jon tells stories in many forms and incarnations: between pitches, between batters, and over the course of a half-inning. And, rain delays, pitching changes and arguments between managers and umpires. At times stories are told in partnership with a "color" commentator. And many times Jon will lapse into impressions. It's not uncommon to hear Jon employing Spanish or Japanese phrases in his stories. Other times you'll swear the great Dodgers announcer Vin Scully is in the booth with him — Jon's impression of him is that realistic!

Storytellers in his Family

Jon was born on Hamilton Air Force Base in Marin County. His father was a navigator during the Korean War. His grandfathers were both informal storytellers. One served under General Pershing in World War I and kept a diary of his experiences, which he shared in later stories. Another rode the rails during the Depression, stowing away under freight trains, and told about those experiences.

"They were all funny, looking for laugh lines," Jon says. "My grandmother and dad were big into puns. We'd take camping trips in Oregon and Washington. Around the campfire, grandpa would play the banjo. All of the sudden there were sixty people at our campfire, listening to his (strumming and) stories."

Impressions Made

Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, Jon listened day and night to Hall of Fame broadcasters call SF Giants baseball games on the radio. "Russ Hodges and Lon Simmons were always telling stories." Jon "broadcast" his own games of Strat-o-matic baseball, narrating the action between both teams as an announcer. "I used to do the crowd noises, PA announcers and all. I'd be Russ Hodges doing a Giants game,

Vin Scully doing one for the Dodgers. I'd be Chuck Thompson doing a Baltimore game, Bob Shepard if the game was at Yankee Stadium. I loved the sights and sounds of the ballpark." And he recreated them for his imaginary listeners. He'd do the national anthem, announce the lineups and announce both teams. It's no wonder, years later, that he's such a popular emcee in the off-season.

The Voice(s) of the Game

Jon broadcast for the Boston Red Sox and Baltimore Orioles before becoming the Giants announcer. His initial notoriety came in part from rain-delay impressions of other announcers. Soon thereafter the *Boston Globe* was featuring a piece on Jon and his marvelous mimicry. Jon has been entertaining ever since.

Storytelling Influences

From Hall of Fame broadcaster Vin Scully, Jon learned to have a story for every situation. The story needs to be apropos to what just happened in the game. "I remember seeing Kirk Gibson striking out, walking back to the dugout, hitting himself in the helmet. Vinny has a story about an old guy with the Phillies in the 50s, a funny story, reminiscent (of what was just seen)."

A Respect for the Game

Other influences on Jon include Hall of Fame broadcaster Ernie Harwell. "Ernie has great stories. He was a tremendous storyteller. Ernie told me his philosophy was: 'On a broadcast, you should be able to start and finish the story between pitches or between batters. If it goes longer than that, it is too long.'"

"Ernie told me: 'They're not listening because they like us, they're only listening to us because they are baseball fans and want to hear the game.' I never lose sight of that. Vinny would tell stories that would go from pitch to pitch. I realized later fans loved that Ernie always kept his focus on the game. That's what it's all about."

While Teams Score Runs...Announcers Score Points

Ernie was a genius of the medium of baseball on radio. He understood better than anybody the nature of it.

"We all want to believe people tune in for the first pitch, and they're listening to you all the way through," said Jon. "The game is the reason people tune in. Now, if it's a blowout or real uninteresting game, then you want to have some stories to tell fans. Otherwise, give them the score. At any given moment the majority of the audience has probably just tuned in and doesn't know the score. Ernie said he gave the score every 60 seconds. I have my egg timer and try to tell the score before it runs out."

Putting Listeners In The Ballpark

Jon continues: "You may be telling a funny story and it's hilarious but they just tuned in. They're not laughing with you, they're wondering 'what's the score?' There's a common mistake that it's all about the chit-chat and the stories and the anecdotes; it's just the opposite. It's about the game. On the radio let's paint a vivid picture of everything that's going on out there,



In the press box, Jon Miller uses an egg timer to keep his stories short and in the flow of the game.

Winter Ball: How A Lead-Off Hitter Almost had to Bat Clean-Up

During the off-season Jon has been known to speak and emcee various dinners, awards nights and special events. From comedian Steve Landesberg (the pediatrician on *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*) he learned to tape his performances for the unscripted material that comes up. Of the rubber-chicken circuit, Jon says: "I really enjoy those kind of events when I am doing them, if it's going well, but not the anticipation of it!"

"One year I'm speaking at the New York baseball writers dinner. Last year's MVPs, Cy Young winners and managers of the year receive awards from the commissioner at the banquet. And I am supposed to be the entertainment. It's a big deal. Two thousand people in this midtown Manhattan ballroom. And I am basking in it. I'm getting a lot of laughs.

"Then, in the back of room there's a commotion. Is it a fist fight? Something is going on. People way in the back of the room aren't listening. I decide I better wrap it up. Yankee owner George Steinbrenner shakes my hand: 'That's fabulous.' Manager Lou Pinella congratulates me. I'm thinking 'Oh yeah, I am good. I killed 'em.' I Look again, it's Joe DiMaggio! Joe DiMaggio walked into the room. People are parting. He's like royalty. He looks immaculate. Talk

about charisma! He just stops the room. All I can think of is: 'What if he'd come in right while I was starting?' I would have been cooked. It's a reminder to me. Even feeling triumphant, I realize how fragile that (public storytelling) can be."

Ball, Strikes and Stories

You never know what to expect when you tune in. You may hear Jon's impeccable Walter Cronkite impression, or marvelous word play in his entertaining stories and adlibs. Jon can literally riff on any subject, sound or sight. He finds humor in everything from Doppler radar forecasts to road trips to the quirkiness that is baseball. Yet all the while he gives the score and balls and strikes to keep purists happy. So whether you listen on radio or TV, let Jon "take *you* out to the ballgame, take you out with the crowd!"

*Craig "Hackin' Boo" Harrison tells stories of humor and humanity. His interview with John Wooden will appear in the October edition of *The Toastmaster*. Visit www.HackinBoo.com for more on Craig's stories.*