Cubs consultant Ken Ravizza dies at 70; sports psychologist hired by the Cubs in 2015

By MARK GONZALES
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Cubs’ Anthony Rizzo on Dr. Ken Ravizza’s passing. (Mark Gonzales/Chicago Tribune)
Dr. Ken Ravizza, whose mental skills teaching expanded from nearly 40 years with the Cal State Fullerton gymnastics teams to the last three seasons with the Cubs, died Sunday night in Southern California.

“We’re going to miss him,” said manager Joe Maddon, whose association with Ravizza started in the mid-1980s in the Angels’ organization. “I miss him already. I hear his voice in my head. He’s left an internal impact on all of us.”

Ravizza passed away late Sunday, six days after suffering a heart attack. “Heads-Up Baseball 2.0,” a book Ravizza co-authored with Tom Hanson last year, was placed on a counter near the entrance of the visitor’s clubhouse at AT&T Park.

The Cubs hired Ravizza, 70, as a consultant in 2015 after he had worked for several years Maddon with the Rays.

“He was the best at what he did,” said Maddon, who would run several of his slogan by Ravizza for approval and would even speak at some of Ravizza’s classes at CSF in the winter in preparation to address his players in spring training.
Customers at Naperville restaurant say their group was asked to move because another customer ‘doesn’t want black people sitting near him’

Cubs third baseman Kris Bryant once referred to Ravizza as the “godfather” of sports psychology. One of Ravizza’s more popular teachings occurred in spring training on the agility field. He placed 162 baseballs in a line, separated by seven bats representing each month of the season. The extra bat and balls represented the playoff run the Cubs aimed for.

“He did a really good job of being available at all times,” first baseman Anthony Rizzo said. “You could get everything off your chest - Life, baseball, anything.

“He’s done a lot for this organization, but so much in our baseball world.”

Maddon connected with Ravizza through Angels pitching coach Marcel Lachemann, but Maddon believes the acceptance of Ravizza’s teaching began to swell significantly through former baseball coaches Augie Garrido of CSF and Dave Snow of Long Beach State.

“(Pro) baseball was not ready for him,” said Maddon, who added that Garrido and Snow saw the value of Ravizza’s teachings. “Every manager thought he had all the answers.”
Ravizza taught classes for nearly 40 years at Cal State Fullerton on stress management and applied sports psychology before several U.S. Olympians, college and professional teams enlisted Ravizza’s services during subsequent decades.

“He was an unbelievable person and even a better friend,” Cubs infielder Tommy La Stella said. “He was an expert listener, and that’s a lost art these days nowadays.

“I think everyone is in rush to share their opinions and share what they know. That wasn’t Kenny. His greatest strength was his ability to listen.”

Ravizza’s book was published two years after Cubs President Theo Epstein established a mental skills program for the entire organization, with Ravizza hired as a consultant.

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Maddon said Ravizza worked closely with pitchers Mike Montgomery, Kyle Hendricks and catcher Willson Contreras. Ravizza visited the Cubs two weeks ago in Los Angeles and had planned to rejoin the team for their West Coast trip that started Monday in San Francisco and conclude this weekend in San Diego.

“People are still reading Dale Carnegie and Napoleon Hill,” Maddon said two years ago. “Those messages started in the 1920s and filtered to today. A lot of times the people you read about today are the more present gurus. A lot of it is a twist on what had been written years ago. I just think Kenny remains contemporary, and his message never gets old.”

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Mark Gonzales has served as the Cubs beat writer for the Chicago Tribune since August 2013, after 8 1/2 seasons as the Tribune's White Sox writer. Before joining the Tribune, Gonzales covered baseball for the Arizona Republic and San Jose Mercury News. Gonzales grew up in Santa Clara, Calif.

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