

## Remembering a Pioneer Of Baseball's Mental Side

A longtime sports psychologist cut a wide swath through the game.

By **BILLY WITZ**

When the Cal State Fullerton baseball team was floundering midway through the 2004 season, on a pace to become the first losing team in the program's history, an unusual team meeting was called. The players were brought before a kindly gentleman with weary eyes, a warm smile and a Wilford Brimley mustache.

The man was Ken Ravizza, a kinesiology professor at the university. He got right to the point: Forget the last game, forget the last play and forget the excuses.

To help drive home the point, Ravizza left the players with a miniature toilet small enough to fit in the pocket of a baseball glove. It became a fixture in the dugout, a metaphorical cue to flush away a bad at-bat, a poor pitch or a fielding mistake.

"We all thought it was pretty funny — it's a toy," said Kurt Suzuki, that team's captain, who is now a veteran catcher with the Atlanta Braves. "But as we bought into it, it really helped."

Ravizza died this month at age 70 after a heart attack. He left a lasting impact on that team, which also included Los Angeles Dodgers third baseman Justin Turner and P. J. Pilittere, who is now the Yankees' assistant hitting coach, and on a considerable swath of baseball.

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STEVE GREEN/CHICAGO CUBS

Ken Ravizza in the dugout before a Cubs spring training game earlier this year. Ravizza changed the way athletes think about the games they play.

# How a Pioneer of the Game's Mental Aspects Left an Impact on Baseball

From First Sports Page

Ravizza was a co-author of two baseball psychology books, worked for years with Chicago Cubs Manager Joe Maddon and is considered a trailblazer — along with Charlie Maher of the Cleveland Indians and Harvey Dorfman — in bringing the mental game into major league clubhouses.

When Ravizza first began preaching his theories some four decades ago, they were considered eccentric. Now, 26 of the 30 major league teams have a mental conditioning coach, Maher said, and many have more layered throughout organizations, as well as countless loyalists among players and managers.

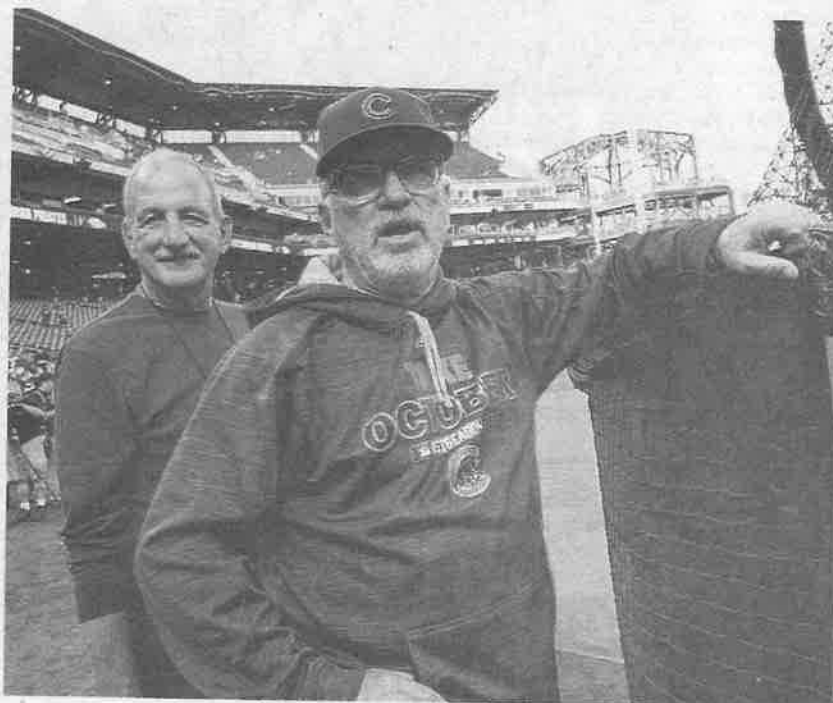
Suzuki is one. He was responsible for the toilet's safekeeping on that Cal State Fullerton team, setting it up in the dugout before each game. He dutifully performed this task all the way to the final game of the College World Series, which the transformed Titans won. Their championship rings are engraved with the words that drove them: Next Pitch.

"Ken might as well have been on the field with us — he was that vital," Pilitere said.

In the 1980s, Maddon, then a minor league instructor with the Angels, began working with Ravizza. As a result, Maddon has long argued that the mental component of baseball is the sixth tool for which players should be evaluated, along with running, throwing, fielding, hitting for average and hitting for power.

Baseball has come a long way from when Ravizza began, when the first question from skeptical ballplayers would be: Where did he play? Or even from 2005, when Yankees outfielder Gary Sheffield, upon hearing that the team had hired its first sports psychologist, said: "I don't believe in it. I think it's for people who are weak-minded."

"There's still remnants of that, but it's changed," said Maher, who has been with the Indians for 24 seasons. "The players know this is a hard game, and they want



STEVE GREEN/CHICAGO CUBS

Ken Ravizza with the Cubs' Joe Maddon, an early supporter of his theories.

everything working for them. The focus on sports psychology has become more positive and it's on performance rather than 'what's your problem?' You're an elite athlete; you're not here by chance. How can we help you get better?"

This view is reflected in job titles. Sports psychologists are now often referred to as mental skills coaches, which might be semantics but also reflects how they are increasingly seen as akin to a pitching or a hitting coach.

Chad Bohling, that first sports psychologist hired by the Yankees and now the team's director of mental conditioning, said Ravizza was skilled at taking generic concepts in psychology and applying them to high-level athletes in a manner they could understand.

George Horton, the coach at Cal State

Fullerton in 2004, who is now at the University of Oregon, said the value in Ravizza's lessons was that they could be applied broadly.

"The same tools he was teaching my players to handle the stresses of baseball could be used in a job interview, exams or if you had a bad day or a bad week," Horton said. "Nine out of 10 things might be terrible in your life or your game, but he would get you to identify the one thing you are doing well and always had a way of making you feel there was something you could go to. He wouldn't allow you to wallow in your pity."

Baseball is rooted in failure. The best hitters are out two-thirds of the time. So hanging on to hope is vital, even for elite athletes.

Matt Duffy, the third baseman for the

Tampa Bay Rays, was introduced to "Heads Up Baseball: Playing the Game One Pitch at a Time," by Ravizza and Tom Hanson, when he was in high school in Lakewood, Calif. When Duffy met Ravizza a couple years later while playing at Long Beach State, he said it was like meeting a minor celebrity.

Duffy eventually graduated to Dorfman's book, "The Mental Keys to Hitting," which he began reading during his first full season in professional baseball, in 2013, knocking out a chapter a day on bus rides to spring training games. Duffy still carries the book, which is marked up, tabbed and dog-eared, with him during the season. It is his personal slump buster.

"Honestly, to me, it's everything," Duffy said of the mental game. "I didn't start having success professionally until I got into the mental game. You've got to understand how to handle failure. You really have to trust your work and have a good mental state to not run to the video room after an 0-for-4 with two lineouts."

He continued: "A lot of slumps start with some bad luck and a run to the video room for the last 10 at-bats. The next thing you know you feel like a Little Leaguer in the box and you don't know why. It's amazing where your brain goes when you start doubting yourself."

When the Cubs won the World Series two years ago, one of Ravizza's proudest moments was the pep talk Jason Heyward gave to his teammates while they were waiting out a rain delay in the ninth inning of Game 7.

The gist: Forget about anything bad that had happened that night — like blowing a late lead — and play like the team that had the best record in baseball.

Heyward's speech book-ended a talk Ravizza had delivered in spring training.

Ravizza had gathered the Cubs on the field, where he had lined up 162 baseballs, plus about a dozen more, and separated them with seven bats. The objects represented the number of games the Cubs would play over the course of the season, including the playoffs, and the

bats divided them by months.

The message?

"How long the season is, yet how individual it is and how each game means something," said Adam Warren, a Yankees reliever who spent the first half of that season with the Cubs. "For an athlete, it's easy to say 'forget about that' or 'focus on the next pitch' or 'one game at a time.' But if you have something visually that you can see that symbolizes that and resonates, it's going to stay with you as opposed to something you hear and then forget about two minutes later."

This is why Yankees pitcher Masahiro Tanaka has an inscription in Japanese on the inside of his glove reminding him to

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### 'You've got to understand how to handle failure,' a major league player says.

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pitch like a warrior. Or why Luis Severino wrote "paciencia" — patience in Spanish — on the bill of his cap last season to remind him to slow down.

Neither pitcher had worked with Ravizza, but the broader message in their reminders — be in the moment — is a tenet of his teaching. When Suzuki stands in the batter's box, readying himself for each pitch, he has a routine that he traces back to college: He fixes his gaze on the trademark of his bat and takes two deep breaths.

These habits are familiar to an increasing number of ballplayers, no matter who has influenced them. But they may resonate a little more with those who sat in Ravizza's sports psychology class, received his radiant greeting — "How's it going?!" — or still recall the power of a toy toilet.

"You can always hear him in the back of your mind," Suzuki said. "Flush it. Let it go."