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Ken Ravizza Pioneered Art of Coaching Athletes, Others on Thinking Skills

Sports psychologist counseled Cubs and water polo players: ‘Attitude is a decision’



Ken Ravizza was a renowned sports psychologist who served as a thinking coach to the Chicago Cubs and other teams. PHOTO: CINDY YAMANAKA/THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/ZUMA PRESS

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By

James R. Hagerty

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Ken Ravizza, a sports psychologist, told baseball players never to admit they were in a slump. Instead, he advised, say you're due for a hit.

“Attitude is a decision,” said Dr. Ravizza, who taught kinesiology at California State University, Fullerton, and served as a thinking coach to the Chicago Cubs and other teams in sports ranging from rugby to water polo.

His own days as an athlete ended when he blew out a knee playing college football. He earned a doctoral degree in kinesiology at the University of Southern California in 1973 and became a professor. After watching gymnasts work out at Fullerton, he mentioned to their coach what he saw as insufficient focus. Soon he was counseling gymnasts, baseball players and other athletes.

His message also resonated off the field. He coached heart surgeons, musicians, military officers and corporate executives.

He began working with the California Angels baseball team in 1985 and in the past several years worked for the Cubs. He once gave college baseball players a miniature toilet so they could flush negative thoughts.

Dr. Ravizza died July 8 after a heart attack. He was 70.

Cubs Manager Joe Maddon recalled one of Dr. Ravizza’s mottos: “It’s your choice to approach your day with a positive vibe or a negative vibe.”

Dennis Keiser, co-owner of Keiser Corp., an exercise-equipment maker based in Fresno, Calif., invited Dr. Ravizza to speak to his employees and work with one of his sales executives. “Whether you’re shaking off the last pitch or strikeout or whether you’re shaking off a lost sale or a bad day, it’s all the same,” Mr. Keiser said.

Baseball players working with Dr. Ravizza learned to arrive at the plate with a plan, such as driving the ball to right center. When they made an error, players could let themselves feel bad for only a moment. Then they had to take a deep breath and focus on the next pitch, he advised in “Heads Up-Baseball,” a 1995 book written with Tom Hanson.

Routines were helpful: An outfielder who dropped a fly ball might take off his glove while venting his anger and humiliation. When he pulled the glove back on a moment later, pouting time was over.

In Dr. Ravizza's early days as a jock doc, his job wasn't taken very seriously. "No one wants to admit it's mental," he told the Los Angeles Times in 1998. "They say, 'It's my arm, my mechanics, it's not my head.' It's the biggest barrier I have to overcome, the whole shrink image. I say, 'I'm not a shrink, I'm a stretch.' "

Now his approach is mainstream. Twenty-six of the 30 Major League Baseball teams [employ sports psychologists or mental-skills coaches](#), Charlie Maher, a sports and performance psychologist for the Cleveland Indians, told The Wall Street Journal recently.

Kenneth Henry Ravizza, whose family name is pronounced Rah-VISS-uh, was born Jan. 21, 1948, in Hartford, Conn. His father owned a plumbing business, where his mother kept the books. He earned a physical education degree at Springfield College in Massachusetts before going to USC for his doctoral work.

He lived with his wife, Claire Tehan, an executive and leadership coach, in Redondo Beach, Calif. In his free time, he went body surfing and tended an organic garden. He is survived by his wife, two brothers and two daughters.

He was known for his booming voice and standard greeting: "Hey, how ya doing?"

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