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Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2010

There's no place like home

Rockville native Riggleman discusses Ripken League, managing the Nationals

by Dan Greenberg | Staff Writer



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Nearly 50 years ago, Washington Nationals manager Jim Riggleman was "breaking into" the Glenview Mansion in Rockville, roughly 400 yards from the house he grew up in. He returned as an invited guest for a fundraiser Thursday, and the hometown hero discussed his life in baseball — and how the perennial also-rans could scale new heights.

It would not be his first time beating the odds.

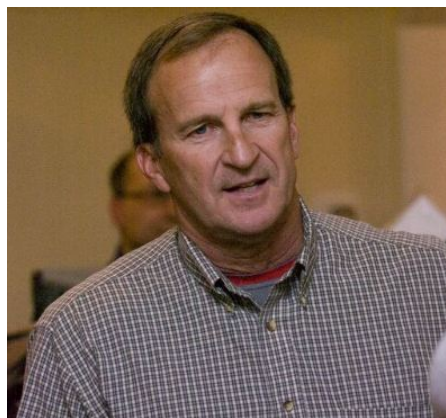
Since his days at Richard Montgomery (class of 1971), Riggleman has risen through the ranks in baseball, on the field and in the dugout. That's why he was brought to the dinner and auction held for the Rockville Express, a charter member of the amateur Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League.

"I'm grateful you guys came here tonight to support the Express," he said, addressing a crowd of roughly 100, "because I experienced this, just in a different place. I was really fortunate my college coach got me into the Cape Cod [Mass.] League. ... That's how you get better."

Fielding questions from C-SPAN anchor Robb Harleston, Riggleman told the story of a kid who struggled to crack his high school lineup, yet eventually became a professional baseball player. A late bloomer who "didn't grow into [his frame] until college," the Rockville native set records for home runs (22), extra-base hits (44), and total bases (199) in three years at Frostburg State University, where he is a Hall of Fame inductee.

Also on hand for the event was ESPN baseball analyst Tim Kurkjian (Walter Johnson, class of 1974), who watched Riggleman play as a youngster.

"When I was going to games at Cabin John Park, Jim Riggleman, I



NAOMI BROOKNER/THE GAZETTE
Washington Nationals manager Jim Riggleman, a Rockville native, detailed his life in baseball Thursday.

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thought you can't possibly be a better hitter than him," Kurkjian said. "And he didn't even get to play in the big leagues."

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He did reach the majors, just not as a player. After spending seven years in various Class AA and AAA leagues in the St. Louis Cardinals organization, he was given advice.

"The best year I ever had playing was my last, but I was 27 and the oldest on the team," Rigglesman said. "They told me, maybe you should think about coaching, which was their way of saying 'You're not good enough.'"

It was a blessing in disguise. For the next 10 years, he coached at all three minor league levels before getting his big break. With 12 games left in the 1992 Major League Baseball season, San Diego Padres manager Greg Riddoch was released, and Rigglesman — then helming the Padres' AAA affiliate in Las Vegas — was brought on board.

Fast-forward to 2010, and Rigglesman is still in the big leagues thanks to similar circumstances. Serving as the bench coach for the Nationals through the first half of last season, he was promoted to interim skipper after former manager Manny Acta was fired July 12.

The numbers support the front office's decision to remove the provisional label in November. The Nats started 26-61 under Acta, but finished 33-42 with Rigglesman on board.

But his no-nonsense reputation may have had more to do with it. That is how he has spent parts of 10 seasons as a Major League manager: three with the Padres, five with the Chicago Cubs and another with the Seattle Mariners.

Considering the Nationals' record of late (they led the league in losses in 2008 and 2009), Rigglesman's hometown franchise is a long shot to contend under his watch — at least, temporarily.

"I would guess the Nationals are going to finish last in their division, but they're going in this direction," said Kurkjian, pointing skyward. "These guys are talented beyond words; they need guys to get in their face and say, 'Look, it's not going to be that way.' That's what he did, that's what [general manager] Mike Rizzo did, and that's why they're going this way. It's because of Jim Rigglesman."

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