

# Pitching a prayer for the Tugger

By **WILLIAM C. KASHATUS**

**N**EWSPAPER TUG McGraw's battle with two brain tumors has been very difficult for me to handle.

It's as if a member of my own family has been cheated out of the health and happiness he so richly deserves.

If you're a baseball fan who lived and died with the Philadelphia Phillies during their glory years, McGraw's final pitch of the 1980 World Series is seared into your memory. That 1-2 fastball struck out Willie Wilson of the Royals to end the game and give the Phils the one and only championship in club history.

More than a million fans turned out for the parade down Broad Street and to hear Tugger deliver one of the city's most memorable quips. "All through baseball history, Philadelphia has taken a back seat to New York City," said the comic reliever, whipping the crowd into a wild frenzy. "Well, New York City can take this world championship and stick

it!" he roared, thrusting a copy of the "We Win" *Daily News* skyward.

It was vintage McGraw: passionate, funny, and quintessentially Philadelphia. He may have forged his impressive career with the Miracle New York Mets of '69 and their "You Gotta Believe!" successors of '73, but for us, he will forever represent the spirit of this city. Beyond his uncanny ability to entertain fans with his screwball-dominated repertoire, amusing antics and love of baseball, Tug has done what so few of our hometown heroes have ever been able to — care about us, the fans.

Once, when asked by baseball writer Roger Angell how he manages to survive such a tough crowd pitching in Philly, the Tugger replied: "I love them. Whenever I need something extra, I look up in the stands and there it is."

I met Tug in 1999 when he made an appearance at Chester County Historical Society to promote a baseball exhibit we had recently opened. He spoke about community involvement and helping our chil-

dren to achieve their dreams. He also made a gesture that touched the hearts of the 150 people who were there.

Carefully removing his own 1980 World Championship trophy from a bag, Tug told the gathering that the "feeling we had as ballplayers when we won the Series was no different that the folks in the stands . . . It made us both winners for the first time. I would like to share that moment, once again, with you." Then he handed the trophy to the audience, which passed it from person to person.

The he hung around. He chatted with visitors, posed for photos and signed autographs until the last of the crowd had gone. It was a class act that I saw him repeat on several occasions when I accompanied him on appearances to promote his book, "Was It as Good for You?: Tug McGraw & Friends Recall the 1980 World Series." I've also seen him visit ex-big leaguers, now invalids, in nursing homes; joke with the crowd at minor league parks; lead the Philly Pops in a dramatic rendition of "Casey at the Bat."

As a baseball historian, I've had the opportunity to meet and speak with many former major leaguers. Some admit to an

understandable sense of loss when the careers are over. They experience all the emotions that come with that loss: denial, anger and sadness. Some are able to come to terms it. Others still have one foot in the past and one in the present, ten because they just haven't been able to find the same rush, the same kind of meaning in their post-baseball life.

I'm sure Tug struggled with those feelings. But he's also found meaning here in the Philadelphia area with his family, his many community involvements, and with us, the fans. He reminds me of everything that was once good about baseball because he always pays attention to our hearts and to our dreams.

So let's pray that Tug will win his medical battle. Pray that he will return to us happy and as healthy as he was on that chilly autumn night in October of 1980 when he made us proud to be Philadelphia. And pray that he knows, in his heart, that no matter what happens, we will always love him. ★

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