

Giant for a day
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By Neal Ross

Over its long history, the San Francisco Giants ballpark at Candlestick Point has resounded with the shouts of mighty monickers -- Mays, McCovey, Bonds, to name a few.

But this Father's Day, Al Adams was added to that august roll call as he donned the famous orange and black to become Giants Ball Dude for a Day.

Fifty friends and family members -- some clutching a banner which read "GO BALL DUDE" in large, painted letters -- showed up in the right field seats to cheer Adams on as he dutifully waited along the first base line to retrieve any foul balls that screamed his way.

Before the game, Adams -- who helps his wife Kay run the couple's fabric store in the Sonoma Marketplace Shopping Center -- expressed some slight doubts as to whether or not he'd actually have a chance to uphold the office entrusted to him.

"If I get one ball today, I'll be lucky," he joked as he signed the papers making him an official, on-call Giants employee, entitled to an official \$15 Giants paycheck. "You don't have to worry about me cashing this," Adams quipped. "It's going on the wall."

The Ball Dude program started in 1993, according to program co-ordinator Sue Petersen, who said that the team's new ownership -- having made the park "more kid-friendly" -- wanted to do something involving senior citizens. "We thought we'd try it out, and it just took off," she said.

Longtime local Ball Dude Dick Leland, who does "15 to 20 games a year", got permission from the Giants to auction off a couple of his assigned days to raise money for the Valley of the Moon Boys and Girls Club. Last year, he brought in \$1,200; but this year, the two chances at game-side glory raised a total of \$6,000 -- \$3,000 from Sonoma Market owner Dick Shone, who fielded fouls on June 25, and \$3,000 from Adams' daughter Patti.

"She called me at 11:30 at night," recalled Adams. "It was a complete surprise. I got the call and thought 'geez -- something's happened to one of the kids.'"

The self-effacing Adams, who retired in 1988 after 32 years with the California Highway Patrol, has been a Sonoma resident since 1951. His last brush with fame was posing, sans badge, as the patrolman in the locally-famous poster, "Sonoma Valley Sobriety Test -- If you can't say Gundlach-Bundschu Gewurztraminer, you shouldn't be driving!" Members of Adams' entourage were identically clad in T-shirt versions of the poster.

Adams, however, had brought his own glove and a new cap -- and his son's cleats -- to the game, and was quickly attired in the number 74 practice uniform after going over the day's ground rules in Petersen's office: Don't touch anything but foul balls, and try to distribute them evenly to kids in the crowd. Most importantly, no pestering players or coaches to autograph the balls for fans.

"You'll hear every story in the book," Petersen told him.

After suiting up, Adams and Leland wandered around the field and into the Giants dugout, chatting with the team before taking their respective seats along the first and third baselines.

"I'm very impressed with those ballplayers," Adams said afterwards. "They were so gentlemanly and so super to me."

Scudding clouds provided brief but welcome shade from the blazing sun as the game -- an eventual Giants loss to the San Diego Padres -- got underway. Most of the fouls went behind home plate or along the third base line, but Adams did get a chance at greatness in the bottom of the third when Padres second baseman Silvio Veras fouled along the first base line. Adams leaped up to retrieve the ball, but it hit him in the right knee.

“It was nothing,” he said later, “but I regret that I didn't dive after that one ball.”

The rest of the game passed uneventfully – both for Adams and his new employers – but the newly-initiated Ball Dude said he'd do it again at the drop of a bat, even though he was a bit tuckered out by his adventure.

“My ear is completely red on the left side,” he said the next day. “I got home, had two glasses of wine, fell into bed and died until morning.”