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Deaths in Baseball: Jack Buck and Darryl Kile

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The loss displayed on the faces of his teammates was palpable. At the extraordinary gathering in St. Louis Wednesday afternoon Darryl Kile's teammates, past and present, together with family, friends and fans paid tribute to the pitcher who died last Saturday of heart failure at the age of 33.

Clearly this fine athlete was no ordinary person. The testimony given him in words and by the distances that players came on a game day were a measure of the stature Darryl Kile held among his peers.

The death of an athlete in the prime of his career is a harsh reminder of our own mortality and produces a heavy sense of loss of what might have been. A. E. Housman's "To An Athlete Dying Young" is still one of the best articulations of these feelings ever penned in the English language.

The gathering in St. Louis also serves as a reminder of one of those things about sport that makes it so special. The camaraderie of teammates and the closeness engendered among those seeking a common goal was more than apparent on this sad afternoon. For those who see professional athletes as selfish and money grubbing this was a reminder from Darryl Kile's teammates and peers that there is much more to sport, even at the highest levels, than the money. It is still very much men being boys together.

Kile's death was the second within the St. Louis Cardinal organization in a matter of days. The city was still in mourning for Cardinal play-by-play man Jack Buck. During his fifty-four years behind the radio microphones in St. Louis Jack became one of those touchstones of the community. The Cardinals are integral to the St. Louis community and the radio voices of the team were the most important public presence of the organization.

Jack Buck began his career as a voice on Cardinal radio in 1954 working with Harry Caray on KMOX a booming clear channel station that could be heard during the nighttime hours throughout much of the United States east of the Rocky Mountains. In Buck's first year with the Cardinals I had just entered the teenage years and I can remember as

clearly as it if were yesterday sitting on the front porch on the hot summer evenings in 1954 in Minneapolis listening to Cardinal baseball with Harry Cary and Jack Buck. It was always a joy to hear their familiar voices after the sun went down and the KMOX radio signal came up.

Over the years I have memories of hearing Jack Buck's voice in some very ordinary and some quite extraordinary circumstances. During the World Series of 1964 I listened to Buck's description of the Cardinal-Yankee Series while sitting with a small group of Peace Corps volunteers in the rugged mountains of Ethiopia. From 1967 through 1969 I listened to Harry, Jack and the Cardinals while living in Memphis.

In the early 70s I was in St. Petersburg for a spring training game, the Cards and Orioles, and happened to sit fairly near the press box. The game was being broadcast back to St. Louis that spring afternoon and I had the wonderful experience of sitting and watching a Cardinal game within earshot of Jack Buck. I was amazed not just by the accuracy of his descriptions of the same action that I was watching, but by the speed with which he turned that action into words. It was similar to a later experience I had with simultaneous translation.

I learned that day that Jack Buck's greatness on radio was not simply the tone of his voice and the accuracy of his play-by-play but also the poetry of his description which came to him instantaneously as the action unfolded in front of him.

During subsequent springs I met Jack Buck in the press box at Tinker Field in Orlando and learned that another thing that made him so attractive to people was his outgoing personality and friendly manner. Jack Buck had that wonderful ability to make everyone feel that he was interested in talking with them. I suspect this was part of the key to the tremendous outpouring for Jack in St. Louis.

Radio is an intimate medium and the voices of radio are carried within the memory of those who grew up listening to sports, especially baseball, on radio. People like Jack Buck, Ernie Harwell, and Vince Scully, the last of the great radio play-by-play men, became part of the landscape of their communities. Often they were more important than were the players and managers who come and go, while those

voices remained a constant. Some fans never saw a game except through the eyes of these great masters of description.

When Jack Buck's death was announced publicly the flags in St. Louis were immediately set at half-staff. This was not just because Jack Buck had died but because the people of St. Louis wearing their Cardinal Red knew that a part of the city had passed on into history and they understood the full significance of that passing.

There is a sense of community in America and for better or for worse it is often centered on sport be it among teammates or fans. St. Louis demonstrated this to the nation twice in a little over a week.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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