

backtalk

with chris rodell

photo by Richard Kelly

Pirate Principal

Stephen Russell wishes his students would enjoy more baseball.

You might be surprised how the vendors who take your tickets, pour your beers and hand you hot dogs spend their off-duty hours away from PNC Park. Some are sons of former Pirates. Some are accomplished public speakers. Some are highly regarded presidential historians. Some operate regional halls of fames. Some are authors. Some are chummy with baseball's superstars. Some are middle school principals.

Ticket-seller Stephen Russell is all of those rolled into one. He mans the main-concourse ticket booth behind home plate for every home game. He does it with a cheerful aplomb that belies the fact that he'd spent the previous eight hours absorbing the administrative and disciplinary headaches that go with being principal of Bellmar Middle School in Belle Vernon.

"You should see some of the double- and triple-take looks I get from kids who don't know this is one of the things I do when I'm not their principal," says Russell. "But to me the atmosphere of the ballpark is so uplifting. It does my heart good to see families enjoying a baseball game together."

Pirates CEO and managing general partner Kevin McClatchy might consider it an affront, but Russell, a 55-year-old bachelor, has actually "punished" unruly kids by suggesting they—"No! Please! You monster!"—attend a Pirates game. He believes families and society would benefit by embracing the pastoral game that helped raise him. His father was the late Jimmy Russell, who played Pirates right fielder from 1942 to '47. Considering the zestful accomplishments of his son, it's hard to argue baseball isn't a good custodian.

Since 1998, Russell has been the curator and general chairman of the Mid-Mon Valley All Sports Hall of Fame. He's written a book, *Mid-Mon Valley All Sports Hall of Fame Biographical Journal*, about the inductees and will again oversee the June 12 induction ceremonies at California University of Pennsylvania. One past inductee, Joe Montana, was in Russell's homeroom in 10th grade.

Russell is a presidential historian with a collection of more than 10,000 political buttons. "I have a Kennedy/Johnson one worth \$5,000, but when I take the display to show the kids, all they want to see is the pro-Nixon one that says, 'You Can't Lick Our Dick!' That's middle school humor for you."

His might be the only principal's office in America where some kids want to be sent. Inside are pictures of him with baseball greats Willie Stargell, Paul Molitor, Don Mattingly, Richie Hebner



Stephen Russell: the intellectual face of Pirates ticket-selling.

and other famous friends.

This is his 34th year with the Pirates and his 34th as an educator. He says much has changed in both those realms. He describes today's students and their coddling parents with some of the same terms sports talk-show callers use to complain about major-league ballplayers. "There's an increasing percentage who are very difficult to motivate, who don't try as hard and who are unaccountable. And when you tell their parents their kid is doing something inappropriate, they look at you like you're telling them there aren't any good seats left for Skyblast, the big fireworks night. They don't understand how that can possibly be."

It's an analogy only Pittsburgh's lone principal/ticket salesman/historian/author/curator could reach. So, next time you're at a ballgame, try to find out a little bit about the man or woman in the green PNC Park uniform. Like principal Russell, some of them may have more to offer than just cold beer and box seats. ○