

# Ernie Harwell shares stories of baseball, Bible

BY JULIE BROWN  
STAFF WRITER

It's hard to believe, but baseball announcer Ernie Harwell at one time considered himself tongue-tied.

"Through the grace of God, I overcame that handicap," said Harwell, in recalling his visits to an elocution teacher in his younger days. He went on to a distinguished career as a baseball announcer, and for many years has been the voice of the Detroit Tigers on WJL-AM radio.

"Baseball's a great game and the Tigers are a great franchise," said Harwell during a Sunday, Nov. 14, morning service at West Plymouth Community Church. Some 350 to 376 church members and guests turned out to listen to Harwell's stories of baseball and of his Christian faith.

Those attending welcomed Harwell and his wife, Lulu, with a rousing rendition of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." The Rev. Phil Rogers, pastor, recalled his own days as an 8-year-old living Downriver and playing Little League during that magical 1968 season when the Tigers won the World Series.

"We realize that Ernie Harwell is much more than a baseball announcer," Rogers said. "He has created a lot of memories."

## Stories to tell

The Georgia native, who was born in 1918, came from humble beginnings. His father had multiple sclerosis, and Harwell's mother supported the family by making sandwiches and cakes.

The Harwell boys sold things to help out.

"I wanted to play baseball in the worst way, and that's how I played it," Harwell, who was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, N.Y., in 1981, realized he would never make it in the majors.

In high school, he wrote to the Sporting News editor in St. Louis, and became that publication's Atlanta correspondent. He later got a job at the Atlanta Constitution "mainly doing things nobody else wanted to do."

He started in radio in the minor leagues. Following service in the Marine Corps during World War II, he set his sights on the majors.

"I still had an emphysema, a void in my heart that needed filling," He'd been a regular churchgoer, but didn't have much of a relationship with God.

"Our attitude was pretty much if we went to church, did a few good deeds and stayed out of everyone's way, we would go to heaven."

His success as a major league announcer in Baltimore and other cities didn't bring fulfillment. All that changed in 1961 when he went to a Billy Graham Easter service while with the Tigers during spring training in Florida.

"God has set my priorities in order. I made Him my Lord and my savior from then on."

Harwell, who took some time after the Sunday service to sign autographs, recalled the thrill of playing cards with Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, Pee Wee Reese and other baseball greats.

He recalled Robinson's breaking of baseball's color line in 1948 with the then-Brooklyn Dodgers. "It was quite an experiment, a noble experiment by Branch Rickey," Robinson was the ideal choice as major league baseball's first black player, he said, not only because of his playing skill but also because of his ability to turn the other cheek.

"Jackie I think was the most exciting player I ever saw." Willie Mays of New York (later San Francisco) Giants fame is the best player Harwell ever saw.

He remembered a catch Mays made in Pittsburgh when he was

a rookie. "Willie made the greatest catch I've ever seen." Mays couldn't catch the line drive with his glove, but caught it with his bare hand.

He came back to the dugout and the more seasoned players remained silent, to tease the rookie. Mays asked manager Leo Durocher about the catch, and Durocher responded "Willie, I didn't see it, go out and do it again."

## On to Detroit

Harwell's arrival in Detroit introduced him to a number of Tiger players and fans. "I came to Detroit in 1960 and the people of

Michigan have certainly been great to me."

He considers Al Kaline the best Tiger of all time. "I'm just glad he's still around and doing the telecasts along with George Kell." Cecil Fielder's a fine player too, as was the late Norm Cash, who was a friend to all. "He loved to play ball, no question about that."

Harwell has fond memories of Mark "The Bird" Fidrych, who played for the team in the 1970s.

Fidrych was a "sweet kind of guy," but not too adept with words. One time in Kansas City, Harwell asked him about the team physician's opinion of his arm injury.

Fidrych replied that the doctor knew little about such injuries. "He's a skin doctor. He's one of those gynecologists," he told Harwell.

Harwell didn't mention his abrupt firing by former Tigers owner Tom Monaghan or his return to the broadcasting booth after the team was bought by Mike Ilitch. He had nothing but praise for the team and its team chapel program.

That program has now spread into the minor leagues and other sports. "I've seen a lot of athletes devote themselves to Jesus." Those include such current and former Tigers as Frank Tanana, Travis Fryman and Milt Cuyler.

Harwell recalled the story of one of the two Yankees who made headlines by announcing in the early 1970s that they planned to swap wives. That player was later traded to the Texas Rangers, where he met player Danny

Thompson, who had leukemia and was dying but continued to play.

"Fritz dedicated his life to the Lord" after meeting Thompson, Harwell said. "God can work wonders wherever he is, in the locker room or the church."

"I'm richly honored that God loves me," Harwell said. "Since I've given my life to Jesus, I've had a peace I've never had before."

"It's like knowing the final score of the game. Sooner or later, the outcome is going to be on God's side."

Rogers, the pastor, told those attending how Harwell announced on the air the name of his former second-grade Sunday school teacher, who's battling cancer. "She called me and she was so excited because he mentioned her name. I think he is the epitome of humility."

After Harwell's speech, Diana Rogers, the pastor's wife, presented Lulu Harwell with a bouquet of flowers. The Harwells, who live in Farmington Hills, have been married for 52 years and have four children.

Mary Nalepka was among those who enjoyed hearing Harwell speak. "I'm glad to have finally got to meet him. I think he's wonderful, and I wish him all the best, always," said Nalepka, who works in the Plymouth Township clerk's office.

Attendance was nearly four times what it would be on a normal Sunday.

"We're just glad to have the people here," said Rogers.



ANN HEALY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**Not long gone: Ernie Harwell shares stories with members and guests of West Plymouth Community Church. Harwell, who recently retired from broadcasting, will remain with the Tigers in a public relations capacity.**

## On to Tokyo



**Spartan effort: Theresa Kuclio of Farmington Hills is a member of the Michigan State University dance team, The Motion. The 1992 Harrison High graduate will perform at the Coca-Cola bowl in Tokyo, Japan, on Dec. 5.**

# Cards convey message of love

BY ETHEL SIMMONS  
STAFF WRITER

These Christmas cards have an extra message.

Besides the message of good cheer they send to the recipients, the cards also convey a message that they are helping a worthy cause. Proceeds from the sale of the cards go to the organizations that assist children and adults in special ways.

The Rainbow Connection, headquartered in Rochester, grants wishes of children with life-threatening illnesses. This year, there are eight different cards to display. The cards will be on display at offices of the Rainbow Connection, 527 N. Pine in downtown Rochester, and at the Livonia Civic Library, 3277 Five Mile Road, Livonia.

Cards submitted by this and other organizations also are being displayed at all five offices of the

Observer & Eccentric through the holiday season. Readers may stop in at any O&E office to look through the Christmas card book, select cards and find out how to contact the organization for orders. The Farmington Observer office is at 21898 Farmington Road, Farmington (477-5450).

The Christ Child Society of Detroit is offering three different Christmas cards, including a Hummel religious card. The society provides personal services to needy children throughout the metropolitan area — regardless of race, creed or national origin.

Cranbrook Hospice Care of Bloomfield Hills has four cards, with designs including a reindeer, partridge, flight and cherubs. Four cards from the Children's Hospital of Michigan Auxiliary have themes of a teddy bear, snowman, gingerbread cookies

and teddy bear on a carousel horse.

Some organizations' cards are based on drawings from individuals who use their services. The Arc of Northwest Wayne County, with offices in Redford, offers two designs drawn by local residents with disabilities, Heidi VanEe of Plymouth and Donovan Clay of Detroit, who both work at S.T.E.P. in Livonia. The Foundation for Mentally Ill Children, Inc., in Bloomfield Hills has chosen a card designed by a 13-year-

old student at Fairlawn Child/Adolescent Psychiatric Center.

The American Cancer Society's Oakland County Unit in Southfield has 12 different cards, including religious themes for adoption and for flight; contemporary for a city scene and birds and trees; and nostalgic, for a Currier & Ives design.

The Michigan Cancer Foundation in Detroit has a range of eight designs with everything from a polar bear to "Mother and Child."

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