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Calling 'Em For The Crawdads

CORRESPONDENT SHARES RADIO BOOTH WITH VETERAN

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Most baseball fans have two big dreams.

One is to hit the grand slam that turns a 5-2 defeat into a 6-5 victory in the ninth inning of the seventh game of the World Series before a howling home crowd.

The other is to make the call of that home run on a radio or TV broadcast.

Braves' fans may someday forget who got the winning hit in the seventh game of the 1992 Championship Series (it was Francisco Cabrera), or who scored the winning run (Sid Bream), but they will never forget Skip Caray's call:

"Braves win! Braves win! Braves win! Braves win!"

Remembrances of Caray's famous call, of his father Harry Caray's "Holy Cow!" and of Mel Allen's "How about that!" were churning through my mind on a recent Saturday evening in Greenville, S.C., as I shared the Crawdads' radio booth with veteran broadcaster Dave Friedman.

Friedman, who is now in his third season of calling the full schedule of Crawdad contests for Morganton's 92.1 FM, had graciously agreed to let me be his "color person" for a road game against the Greenville Drive.

A "color person's" job is to supplement the commentary of the "play-by-play" announcer with insightful observations, colorful anecdotes and humorous stories -- all the while not interfering with the telling of the action of the game itself.

I arrived at the "away" radio booth at West End Park about an hour before the 7 p.m. game was set to begin. Friedman was already in place, a plethora of notes, charts, stats and reminders at hand.

Yes, he is the radio voice of a Low A minor league team in the South Atlantic League, but he is as thorough in his preparations and as meticulous in his mastery of facts and figures as any veteran big-league play-caller.

Settling into the seat next to him, adjusting the microphone into which I would speak, I realized just how very nervous I was.

Perhaps picking up on my apprehension, Friedman looked at me and said, "Relax, Bill. If you make a mistake, I'll just make fun of you and move on."

Seeing the stricken look on my face, he smiled and said, "Remember. It's just baseball. It's you and me talking about baseball. We do it all the time."

With those words of encouragement, the broadcast began.

It was great.

Like a batting practice pitcher, Friedman grooved me one pitch after another, belt high, right down the middle. While I didn't slam each of them for a home run, I at least made pretty good contact on most of them.

I shared my memories of running the Grandfather Mountain Marathon last July.

I recounted the tale of the first, last and only time I ever snagged a foul ball at a baseball game -- the catch coming on a steaming July night at a Capitol City Bombers game in Columbia more than a decade ago.

I praised West End Park -- the Greenville Drive's sparkling new stadium -- and everything about it, including the sight lines, the sound system, the food and the spirit of a standing-room-only Saturday night crowd.

I joked with Friedman about his fixation on horse racing and his refusal to accept my challenge to run in the Crawdads' Home Run Trot 5K.

I spoke in worshipful tones about Neil Diamond and about how "Sweet Caroline" is the signature song of this new stadium, just as it is in Boston's Fenway Park.

And every now and again, I even sputtered out a few pearls of wisdom about the game.

When the 'Dads jumped out to a 1-0 lead in the top of the first inning, I mentioned that perhaps the momentum from Friday night's win had carried over.

When Brad Corley hammered a ball over the deep centerfield fence, I commented on his college career at Mississippi State University.

And when Crawdad manager Jeff Branson elected to pitch to a dangerous Greenville hitter with first base open, I opined that an intentional walk would have been a better strategy. (I was right. A base hit and a run for Greenville followed.)

Mostly, I let Friedman do his job -- a job that stretched over three hours and 24 minutes (the 'Dads' longest game of the season thus far) and which ended with the heartbreaking call of the winning run for the Drive scoring on a Crawdad throwing error.

But I did learn some things.

I learned that even a middle-aged, diabetic guy can make it for three hours and 24 minutes without going to the bathroom, if he really has to.

I learned that I'll take the bleachers over the broadcast booth any day.

And, most importantly, I learned that a pro like Friedman can make a hard job seem easy -- but it's still a hard job.