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Umpire turned hero

Paralyzing experience shows resilience of selfless Palermo



Former major league umpire Steve Palermo walks off the field after being honored for a night in 1991 in which he saved two women from muggers in Dallas. One of the muggers shot Palermo, leaving him with a spinal cord injury. Palermo, an Overland Park resident who worked as an MLB umpire for 15 years, is now able to walk with the help of a cane and one leg brace.

By Tom Keegan, Sports Editor

Steve Palermo was relatively new as an American League umpire when he called Ken Griffey Sr. out on a close play at first base. It drew the ire of the Yankee Stadium crowd and a visit from the manager, Billy Martin.

“I can’t believe you made that call because I consider you to be the second-best umpire in baseball,” Palermo said Martin told him, sharing the story over a recent lunch in Overland Park. “And then he turned and went back into the dugout. I’m thinking, ‘Wow, I’ve impressed Billy Martin that much that he has me rated the second-best umpire out of 28 in the American League. Wow, that’s pretty good.’ So I thought about it for a few innings and then I called him out of the dugout.

"I said, 'Billy, you got me thinking when you said I'm the second-best umpire out of the 28 in the league. What can I incorporate in my game to where you see me as the best guy?' He looked at me with a straight face and said, 'Don't worry about it. The other 27 are tied for first place.' That was the last time I called Billy Martin out of the dugout. That was enough."

Palermo, a supervisor of Major League umpires, has an abundance of such stories he shares to the delight of audiences. If that were all he had, baseball stories, he could book his share of speaking engagements, but it's far more than those that will make him a speaker in demand. (He has started a Web site StevePalermoUmpire.com, marketing his availability as a keynote, motivational speaker).

Palermo, 59, never wanted to be a hero. He was perfectly happy getting paid to be a villain in the eyes of baseball fans who want every call to go their team's way.

One bullet less than a half-inch in diameter that whistled out of the silver barrel of a pistol transformed him from perceived villain to reluctant hero.

One night changes everything

Palermo, who worked as an American League umpire from 1977 to halfway through the 1991 season, went out to dinner at a friend's restaurant in Dallas after working third base in a Texas Rangers game. Not long after midnight, Jimmy Upton, the bartender, was closing the shutters when he looked out the window and saw two waitresses getting beaten, Palermo said.

"We came up off the table and saw these three muggers beating and hitting these women, smashing their faces to the pavement," Palermo said. "We felt violated just watching. We went after the guys. One of them hollered, 'Look out, here they come.' Two of them took off in one direction to where there was a getaway car with a driver waiting for them."

The other took off in another direction and was chased down by Palermo and others, including his friend Terence Mann, a former Southern Methodist University football star. They caught the mugger, held him down, and waited for the police to show up.

"This car pulled up and out of the front right seat a passenger gets out, pulled out a pistol and fired five indiscriminate shots," said Palermo, an Overland Park resident. "Pow, pow, pow, pow, pow."

Mann took the first three bullets and recovered. The fourth hit a wall. The fifth changed Palermo's life: "It hit me belt high, went through my body, missed my spine, but hit my kidney, bounced off my kidney, hit my abdomen, went straight back, hit my spine, hit the spinal cord itself and then on the way out tore some nerves called the cauda equina, which is Latin for the horse's tail."

The gunman, Army Pvt. Kevin Bivins, was sentenced to 75 years in prison. The bullet brought sadness to so many others. The waitresses, Palermo said, broke down crying, blaming themselves, the next time they saw him at the restaurant. Palermo didn't want to put them through that again, so he ate elsewhere on nights they worked. Umpire Rich Garcia, the first one to visit him in the hospital, blamed himself for leaving dinner 20 minutes earlier because he wasn't feeling well. The patient who couldn't walk became a nurse to injured emotions of others.

Mann, Palermo said, drove himself to the hospital. Palermo couldn't move.

"Jimmy Upton had a bar rag in his back pocket and put it behind my head," Palermo recounted. "I said, 'Jimmy, reach back there and get that rock off from underneath me. There's a rock back there.' He reached back there and all he had was blood on his hands. He said, 'Stevie, there's no rock back there.' It was my spine swelling."

Back on his feet

Palermo remembers a doctor telling him he didn't think he would walk again.

"It was like a bag of cement dropped on my head," he said. "I said, 'Ok, Doc, that's your opinion, but I'm going to prove you wrong.' He said, 'I hope you do,' but there wasn't a lot of conviction in his voice because there was just too much damage."

Palermo not only walks with the help of a cane and one leg brace, he golfs, sometimes at Alva mar Country Club, usually at Wolf Creek.

"Two things that kept me going were I wanted to get back on the field to umpire and I wanted to golf," he said. "I've gotten the second part. If they find a cure and fix me up, I'm out there at 7 tonight. I'll kick somebody off the crew and I'm working the plate."

His keen sense of humor came in handy during rigorous rehabilitation sessions during which he would introduce his physical therapist as his, "physical terrorist."

He credits wife Debbie with being his main inspiration. The couple was married five months before the shooting.

"She tells me you can't be that 8-handicap you were," said Palermo, whose handicap index is listed as 23.8 at ghin.com. "She said, 'You have to base everything on July 7, 1991, going forward, not July, 1991, going back. You can't do that. This is your second life.' All right. I understand it. But I don't like it."

A humble individual

The day after the shooting, then managing general partner of the Texas Rangers, George W. Bush, paid the fallen umpire a visit in the hospital.

“He told me, ‘Stevie, wherever you need to go, whatever needs to get done, we’ll make sure you get it,’” Palermo said. “He came back two days later and told me when I got out of the hospital he and Laura were going to take Debbie and me to dinner. It took me seven weeks to where I wanted to go out to dinner. I was using a wheelchair. They took us out to dinner.”

A few years later, Palermo was seated behind home plate at a baseball game when he was approached by Sen. Bob Dole, a decorated World War II hero.

Palermo recounted the conversation:

Dole: “Steve, Bob Dole. Great to see you. It’s nice to have a hero from Kansas.”

Palermo: “Well, you know what that’s all about. I’m not a hero. You’re the real hero. You did that in war time. We didn’t know what was going to happen.”

Dole: “That’s what makes you more of a hero. You were doing a good deed, a nice act.”

Palermo remembers it as a “nice night,” but he never wanted to become a hero. He just wanted to be an umpire. Still does.

“If it happens, it’ll be back to business as usual,” Palermo said. “People will be screaming at me. That’s always been the ultimate goal. You never admit defeat. You don’t give in to this.”