Yesterday, April 13th, while getting ready to broadcast a baseball game, Harry Kalas died. You didn’t have to be a baseball fan to appreciate Kalas’ voice as he was heard on NFL films and various commercials. In fact, like a lucky coin, his voice would be heard in many unexpected scenarios.

The kalas story, as far as his affiliation with the Phillies, dates back to 1882, interestingly enough. In a suburb of Boston, the town of Worchester, the Ruby Legs would embark on one of the worst seasons any baseball team had ever experienced.

In the course of a 82 game schedule - remember, this is 1882 and the idea of never ending seasons really hadn’t been thought of as yet - the Ruby Legs lost 5 games for every one they won and ended with an 18 win, 66 loss season and a .214 season standing.

Teams like this don’t stay long in one place. Fans then and today like to see winners and so we can assume that attendance left a lot to be desired. The management moved the team to a new location, far enough south that the Ruby Legs reputation wouldn’t precede them. The disk coordinator, without doing research cannot recall whether the management in the end sold the team at that point or continued to suffer with it .

Anyway, to start the 1883 season, the team found itself in new surroundings, probably up in the North Philadephia area of the City Of Brotherly Love with a new name, the Philadelphia Quakers. The Quaker name, however appropriate for Philadelphia, would survive until 1890 when the team would get a new moniker, possibly the most unique name in all of sports in this country, The Philadelphia Phillies. In 1900, their city rivals, the Philadelphia Athletics joined the American League and the Phillies, in 1903, joined the newly formed National League.

In a memorial to Harry Kalas, you might ask how does the derivation of the team name tie into this? The answer is somewhat shaded unless you know the history of the team from 1890. The Phillies were the worst team through the year 2000 in terms of aggregate losses in the majors. Not only in Baseball, but in all sports and you can verify this by looking at the Guinness Book Of World Records to see the losingest professional sports team of the Twentieth century where the Phillies name can be found. In some case, especially during the 20’s and 30’s when several of the owners got into legal trouble, the win-loss percentage was only slightly higher than that achieved in their last year as the Ruby Legs.

Kalas became a hero and legend for a team that certainly should have moved several more times after its exodus to Philadelphia. Why didn’t it? In some ways the name tied the team to the city and generally this would result in more attendance than the team play justified. For whatever reason, the Phillies remained in Philadelphia and Kalas joined a series of legends in broadcasting the team games throughout the last century, into this.

Baseball during the 20’s and 30’s became a media experiment. With commercial radio being experimented with in the late teens and early 20’s, one of the big attraction to this medium was the “play by play” of these local teams. We have emphasized the quotes here, because no such thing really existed until the late 30’s as the broadcast of baseball games began with simulated calling by someone in a studio. Information about an at bat would be sent in and it was the announcers responsibility to emote on this information to keep the radio listeners tuned in. Eventually, the broadcasting equipment was moved to the stadiums and real play by play was instituted first for home games and then later for away.

We might also add that it wasn’t only radio where this occurred. Experimental TV stations were set up in several metropolitan areas of the United States prior to World War II. In New York, the RCA experimental station was beaming Yankee games by 1939.

The War ended this experimentation with TV although it rebounded with a vengeance once the war was over. As far as Philadelphia is concerned, The Athletics hired a sports announcer, By Saam, to broadcast on radio their home games. As mentioned above, as telephone lines and communication, in general, expanded, the teams began to broadcast the away games live, too.

For those who listened to By Saam ,he had a voice not much different than Kalas in its effect on an ear. While not the most astute broadcaster, and you can find a whole set of gaffs attributed to him – there is no doubt that his voice had a soothing impact on the anger a fan would feel when listening to another loss by the Athletics, who by that time were only a shadow of their former selves.

The Phillies took note and hired Saam as a broadcaster for their games. From 1939 through 1975 (with several years of absence during the early 50’s) By Saam was a fixture of the Phillies broadcast similar to what we think of Kalas today. In that time he broadcast with Gene Kelly, (whom most baseball fans felt had a superior knowledge of the game to Saam but did not have the magical vocal chords), Richie Ashburn, ( a member of the 1950 whiz kids and a beloved member of the Phillies as a player) apparently a very young Andy Musser and with the new guy on the block, recruited from the Houston Astros organization to eventually replace Saam, Harry Kalas.

While By Saam had less and less airtime after Kalas’ hiring, and retired from broadcasting in 1975, the new broadcast team of Ashburn, Kalas and Musser were the perfect fit for the resurgence of the team in the late 70’s. What a broadcast trio!

Ashburn brought a Midwestern humor to broadcasts and also had a terrific knowledge of the game from his days as a player. Very low level in his approach. In the early days of his being a broadcaster – he started to broadcast Phillies games in 1964 – home runs were acknowledged very matter of factly. To be fair, in later years he did become more animated.

His broadcast partner, Harry Kalas, was very different. Animated, with excitement in his voice, he bellowed the words “Out of Here” which become his trademark. The interaction between the two was fun to both hear and watch. Kalas’ good natured description of Ashburn as “Your whiteness” (Ashburn became prematurely White while still playing Center Field for the Phillies in the 1950’s) says it all.

Add to this Andy Musser who approached every game as if still a teenager broadcasting for the first time, and Phillies games were interesting to both watch and hear. Only Musser remains, having retired in 2001 and relocated to Florida, but the disk coordinator will always remember the special something they as a team of broadcasters brought to the Phillies games, especially during that magical 1980 World Series season.