

Christmas Day 1970 Job Interview

“If you want to meet tomorrow (Christmas) morning, it’ll have to be early I’m planning to get to the office about nine o’clock.” Roger Ruhl to Dick Wagner of the Cincinnati Reds.

I was a pretty happy guy in December 1970. A year earlier, I was in Phouc Vinh, South Vietnam. Now, life was good. I left Vietnam and the Army in February. I had planned to return to my job as athletic publicity director at West Virginia University, but another opportunity surfaced. Someone I met while at WVU had become the general manager of the Cincinnati Royals professional basketball team, and he wanted me to be public relations director. I loved everything about West Virginia – the job, the people, the state. But this position with a pro sports team in my hometown of Cincinnati was too hard to turn down. And I didn’t. I returned to WVU in the summer of 1970, got my degree, and went to work for the Royals.

There was a Christmas Eve office get-together at the Royals offices at Cincinnati Gardens. Nothing elaborate ... sandwiches, snacks, drinks. The office staff was small ... maybe ten people. As people headed home, I found myself having a last drink with the coach Bob Cousy. A legendary Boston Celtics player, he had taken the Royals coaching job a year earlier. When writing Cousy’s profile for the Royals press guide, I found and used a quote that struck home with me – *“Anyone who ever throws a behind the back pass will always be imitating Bob Cousy” ... John F. Kennedy.* When I shot baskets as a kid on Stella Street, I pretended I was Bob Cousy. Now, here I was with him ... finishing off a drink, walking out of Cincinnati Gardens and bidding Merry Christmas. Heady stuff.

When I got to my parents’ house that evening, they told me I had a phone message. Dick Wagner, Assistant to the President and number two guy with the Cincinnati Reds, wanted me to call. I had met him once when a friend introduced us at a Reds game during the baseball season. Why was he calling me? When I returned the call, Dick said the Reds publicity director was leaving to take a new position and he wanted to know if he and I could meet the next morning to talk about the job. “Sure,” I said, but “if you want to meet tomorrow morning, it’ll have to be early ... I’m planning to get to the office about nine o’clock.” The Royals played a game on Christmas Day and I had to update statistics and do the pre-game press notes. Someone suggested when hard-charging, workaholic Dick Wagner heard that I was planning to get to the office early on Christmas morning, he figured I must be his kind of guy.

Dick and I met at 7:30 AM at the Holiday Inn in the Cincinnati suburb of Sharonville on Christmas morning. We talked for a couple hours, and then went to his house in nearby Glendale to talk a little more. We both said we needed to think more about this. Dick called a couple days later to offer the position. I had been with the Royals only six months. I liked the job and the people and I felt an obligation. But Major League Baseball was a bigger deal than pro basketball, even though I liked the sport of basketball more than baseball. I sought the counsel of some mentors. A couple days later, I called Dick and said yes.

I spent 13 years with the Cincinnati Reds ... first as publicity director, then promotion and sales director, and eventually Vice President Marketing. Those were the days of the Big Red Machine ... World Series wins in 1975 and 1976. Lots of good memories. But perhaps none more memorable for me than how I got my job with the Reds.