

# John Harrison Wylde, scion of a shipping business; was Cape's Mr. Baseball

By Bryan Marquard Globe Staff / March 8, 2009

Cultivated and sonorous, even a bit Kennedyesque, the voice of John Harrison Wylde poured from the public address speakers as he opened each home game of the Wareham Gatemen with his trademark greeting: "Welcome to Spillane Field for tonight's Cape Cod Baseball League game."

Many fans knew that the man at the microphone was more than just an announcer. He was also the team's president and general manager, a father figure and confidant to minor league players on their way up or on their way down.

"And not only that, he'd get out the lawn mower and cut the infield," said Paul Galop, commissioner of the Cape Cod Baseball League. "They broke the mold with him."

Mr. Wylde, the scion of a shipping business who turned his love of statistics and baseball into a vocation, died Feb. 23 at Tobey Hospital in Wareham of complications of liver cancer.

He was 70 and had lived in Wareham since 1974.

"When I think of his life and his contributions to the Cape league, I would just have to call him Mr. Baseball," said Judy Walden Scarafile, president of the Cape Cod Baseball League. "Everybody knew him."

Happy in his role as management's version of a utility infielder, Mr. Wylde cheerfully took on the many tasks he was asked to do and the many he did just because they were fun.

"Best job in the world," he said in a 2002 interview with the Globe.

Diagnosed with liver cancer in autumn 2007, he wanted to live through one more season, his 25th with the team.

"There were those three days back in September where every day I got more and more bad news," he told the Standard-Times of New Bedford in December 2007. "And I found myself essentially saying: 'Look, you've lived 69 years. You're in your 70th year. This is what the good Lord has written for you. You can't fight it. There's no sense in complaining. Just accept and sort of get on. See what you can accomplish.' "

What he accomplished was living to turn 70 and breathing the air of a baseball diamond for another season.

The press box at Spillane Field was named in his honor on June 13, 2008. By defying medical odds, he lived long enough to hear the words so many people needed to say.

"He was very humble about this, and I'm so pleased he received all those accolades last summer, because it really showed him how much people did care about him," said his sister, Laina Wylde Swiny of Dover. "So many people don't receive all those accolades before they die. So often it's posthumous."

Born in Dover, he graduated from Milton Academy in 1956 and attended Harvard College, excelling in athletics at both.

Captain of Milton's hockey team, he went on to become a top singles and doubles player on Harvard's tennis team.

At Harvard, Mr. Wylde studied American history, in part to satisfy his deep interest in the Civil War. Some ancestors had fought in the Confederate Army; others for the Union.

He devoured book after book, in what became a lifelong passion.

For a few years, until 1962, Mr. Wylde pursued tennis professionally, then went to work for his family's steamship business, Patterson, Wylde & Co. in Boston.

In 1972, he was named president of the company and ran the business until the family sold it in 1988.

By then, his other passions had become a bigger part of his life.

Fascinated by statistics, as a child Mr. Wylde always pored through the Sporting News as soon as it arrived.

In 1980, he bought Howe News Bureau, the statistics company, and brought it to Boston.

Along with his other duties with the Wareham Gatemen, Mr. Wylde took on the task of providing statistics for the Cape Cod Baseball League.

"It was really understanding some of the finite things about baseball," his wife, Patricia Plum Wylde, said of his deep interest in statistics. "I think he knew ahead of time that statistics on these players were going to be really important to the scouting process for the major leagues. He was absolutely fastidious about getting the exact number right, to the extent of staying up to 3 in the morning to be sure."

She had been friends and then roommates with Mr. Wylde's sister, then married him in 1962.

They lived in Dover before moving to Wareham in 1974.

"He had a wonderful life and knew he was very, very lucky because he could afford to do what he wanted to do, which many people could not," his wife said. "And he was very diligent about every project."

Those tasks extended beyond the baseball diamond.

He was a selectman in Wareham and served on the Finance Committee, in addition to other panels in town.

Always noticeable because of his height - he was 6 feet 9 inches - Mr. Wylde was a calm presence in any milieu.

"Certainly my brother was a gentle giant, a big man in every sense of the word, in that he had very, very high standards in everything that he did," his sister said.

"John Wylde had nothing but the straight stuff, right down the middle," Galop said. "There were no curve balls, no sliders, nothing in the dirt."

Mr. Wylde was inducted into the Cape Cod Baseball League Hall of Fame in 2007 and received a shelf full of other awards from the league and other Wareham organizations.

His most treasured moments, however, may have come during late night phone calls, away from the spotlight.

Mr. Wylde took pleasure when a Gatemen player made it into the majors, but he also was there for those who suddenly found their dreams dashed.

"When the boys didn't make it, they'd call John on the phone, and he'd talk with them for hours, telling them how they'd manage to get on with their lives," his wife said.

Galop said that after Mr. Wylde died, he called Patricia Wylde and, recalling the expression about leaving big shoes to fill, asked what size her husband wore.

"He wore size 15; that kind of says it all," Galop said, "and you don't have to be a math major."

A memorial service will be held April 13 at 3 p.m. in Wickenden Chapel at Tabor Academy in Marion.