

Baseball makes right call on Palermo

A hometown hero, Steve Palermo will be recognized at tonight's big game.

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After an umpiring clinic Monday at the All-Star FanFest, Steve Palermo (right) reconnected with Roger Adams of Tulsa, Okla. Palermo was umpiring in the 1970s in the New York-Penn League when Adams was a player.

The walk from the umpire's room to millions of television screens around the world goes up 10 steps without a handrail on the left side. Nobody sees this, really. This walk is made by men focused on other things. Men who hardly notice the stairs.

Men who don't need handrails. Men who don't use a cane to walk.

Men who are not Steve Palermo.

"I don't know how I'm going to do it," he says.

Actually, Steve doesn't know *what* he's going to do. He might make that walk. He might not. The people at Major League Baseball won't tell him. All they've said is that he'll be recognized tonight on the field before the All-Star Game at Kauffman Stadium in the city Steve has called home for 26 years.

If it was up to Steve, he wouldn't do it. Truth is, this whole thing makes Steve a little uncomfortable. Some of it is the stage. There will be more than 40,000 fans on their feet when he's shown on the giant video board. More than 10 million more will be watching on television. Of course he'll be nervous. Wouldn't you?

But most of it is Steve's nature. He's an umpire, still, even 21 years after that bullet ripped into his back, his legs went numb and his career on the field ended. Steve is a supervisor now, but he'll always be an umpire, and umpires don't like being noticed. It's part of their code.

Steve doesn't want to take away from the game. Doesn't want to be singled out. But his bosses at Major League Baseball asked him to be part of the biggest baseball moment in his city since 1985 and it's hard to tell them no. Even harder after his dear wife made a point he couldn't ignore.

You get inspired by other people's stories on TV, she told him. Other people see the power of the human spirit in you.

Steve didn't used to be a hero. He used to just be Stevie, from back East, living his boyhood dream as a big-league umpire with a million stories to tell. He tossed Earl Weaver and screamed at Jim Rice and got screamed at by Joe Torre.

He called the first Blue Jays game ever, when they cleared the snow with a Zamboni. He was behind the plate for Dave Righetti's no-hitter. He called Bucky Dent's home run fair.

He met a woman named Debbie at a restaurant in Kansas City and married her five months before he went into Campisi's Egyptian Restaurant — which is actually an Italian place in Dallas — for dinner and stories with friends. This when he made a split-second decision that changed his life forever.

The bartender yelled that two waitresses were being mugged across the street. Palermo and five friends rushed out the door. Two muggers took off in a car. Palermo and another guy chased the third mugger down on foot. They had him on the ground. Then the car came back. Gunfire blasted out. Five shots.

One bullet missed. Steve's friend took three, including one in the jaw. He made a full recovery. One bullet sliced into Palermo's waist, bounced off a kidney and went through his abdomen, breaking bone and pushing into the spinal cord. It missed killing him by one millimeter, half the size of the head of a pin.

The shooting made national news. Former president Ronald Reagan sent a letter. The New York Times ran regular updates on Palermo's recovery. Doctors told Palermo he would never walk again. A broadcaster on ESPN told the world the same thing. Palermo saw it.

"I'll show you!" he screamed at the TV.

Progress came slow, and full of pain. He had dark nights. Dark days, too, and times when he lay in his bed at the hospital and waited for the room to clear so nobody would see him cry. Improvement was measured in months, not days.

"Inch by inch, life's a cinch," Debbie told him, and that became something like a rallying cry.

Time went by, but those inches added up and Palermo did walk again. He makes his way now with a cane, slower than before, but he gets where he needs to go. Usually with a smile.

Dallas police think the muggers would've shot those women at point-blank. One of them had two children and met the man she'd eventually marry shortly after the shooting. Steve saved her life.

People ask Palermo all the time whether he'd do it again, and he always tells them the same thing. Of course he would, for two reasons.

If his wife was in trouble, he hopes someone would try to help. He needs to believe that. And if he says he wouldn't do it again, that means it was a mistake.

He can't believe that.

Steve says he doesn't feel like a hero. Feel like a hero? He doesn't even know what that means. But he's told the story that made people call him a hero more times than he can count by now.

Steve loves telling stories. He loves talking with people, making them smile, making them think, making them laugh. That's part of it. The other part is he knows people are curious.

He knows people look at him and his cane and the way he moves around and they wonder if they'd do the same thing. Would they make the same sacrifice?

Depending on what Major League Baseball does for Steve tonight and when it happens, more people will be exposed to his story than any time since the networks covered his recovery and he threw out the first pitch of the 1991 World Series.

People will hear about him. They will Google him. They will read what he was, what he did, what he is and they will take something away from it.

Steve is asked what he hopes that will be, even as he didn't want any of this attention.

"Determination, I guess," he says. "I was determined to get back as much of my health as possible. That's important. To be determined, to have determination. If I can inspire (some people) with that, then great."