

## **For a baseball hero, one heartbreak, many joys**

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The bullet tore through Steve Palermo's waist, from his right side to his left. It bounced off a kidney, then through the abdomen, breaking bone before pushing into the spinal cord.

If the bullet had been one millimeter thicker, he would have been dead. That's what the doctor told him. One millimeter. The head of a pin is about two millimeters wide.

Palermo is here, at Kauffman Stadium, working in the sport he loves, because it was a .32-caliber bullet. He would have died outside a Dallas bakery in the middle of the night, 18 years ago this week, if it had been a .33-caliber.

He changed history that night. Police think three muggers would have shot two women at point-blank range if not for Palermo and some friends. One of the women is now married to a man she met after that night. The other felt overwhelming guilt and doesn't keep in touch.

A friend of Palermo's took three bullets, including one in the jaw, but somehow made a full recovery.

Palermo took just one bullet, but it took away his major-league umpiring career. It left him needing a cane to walk and a handicap tag to park. He now works as an umpire supervisor, watching baseball games from the wrong side of the wall. He and his wife they had been married just five months when he was shot never had children.

There are dark times, moments Palermo isn't proud of, when he feels more heartbreak than joy about what's left. These moments are rare, but they are undeniably part of his life now.

That one night left Palermo with a lifetime of consequences for that one selfless act. His dream career was taken away, making room for a push to go on every day.

Palermo, 59, is well known as the umpire who got shot, the hero who now walks with a cane. But there's a lot in that story that gets lost in 18 years, when life moves on.

This is part of the story Palermo wants to tell, to people in Kansas City, where he lives, and anywhere else they want to hear that tough times can be beaten.

Lou Piniella took strike three one night playing for the Yankees. He didn't like the call, and turned to scream at the umpire. Where was that pitch at?

The umpire replied that someone wearing the Yankee pinstripes should know not to end a sentence with a preposition. Piniella screamed back. Where was that pitch at, (expletive)?

That umpire was Steve Palermo.

Stevie Palermo was 12 years old when he told his dad he'd make it to the big leagues. He smiles when he says this, because doesn't every boy tell his father he'll make it to the big leagues?

But Stevie did, as an umpire, and his father a lifelong Red Sox fan walked by his side out to Fenway Park for his big-league debut on April 7, 1977. Palermo was on the field the next season when the Red Sox and Yankees had a one-game playoff for the division championship.

Stevie was the one who signaled fair ball on Bucky Dent's homer that effectively ended the Red Sox's season.

You couldn't call that thing foul, Stevie? his father asked.

Dad, he replied, it was like 20 feet to the right of the pole.

Palermo lived a charmed baseball life. He was behind the plate for Dave Righetti's no-hitter in 1983, and for the last game of the World Series that year. Players and managers knew him as the best balls-and-strikes umpire in the game. Eventually, they only came out to argue on occasion, tired of watching replays prove Palermo correct.

Palermo always loved baseball, and looked to promote it whenever possible. Between innings one night in Boston, he picked off a boy's glove from the railing and came back a minute or so later, reading the name on the leather.

Ethan Kerr? Palermo yelled. Is there an Ethan Kerr here?

The boy jumped up and down. I'm Ethan! That's my glove! Palermo gave the glove back to the kid, who smiled when he saw there was a ball in it.

Four years later, a letter arrived at the hospital:

You probably don't remember me, but you gave me a baseball at Fenway Park one night. I read about what you did, how you saved those two ladies. You are a hero. I'll always remember that. Your friend, Ethan Kerr.

Debbie Palermo, Stevie's wife, broke down crying.

Cody and Mitchell were two boys with brain damage. Steve met them at the hospital, where they were all patients. The boys were big baseball fans and thought it was cool to meet an umpire, so every night they'd climb in Steve's bed to eat cookies and watch games.

Steve loved it just as much as the kids did. Baseball took their attention away from their own realities. The boys asked questions. Steve gave answers. When it got late enough, the boys said good night and went to their regular beds to sleep.

You hear brain damage and think these kids are slow, Steve says. Every night, there were crumbs in my bed and they'd go sleep in clean beds. You tell me who's the slow one.

Steve and Debbie met here in Kansas City.

He fell in love with that smile right away. He asked her out for dinner the next night. She said yes.

Her dad and brother went to the Royals game the next day. When they came home and heard whom she was going out with, her brother said, I hope it's not the guy who was at second base today. He missed two calls.

Palermo was umpiring second base that day, and the line has been retold countless times in the nearly 25 years Steve and Debbie have been together.

She's the real hero at our house, Steve likes to say.

There is thought behind those words. Palermo has had plenty of time for thought. Kids born the day he was shot just graduated from high school. He umpired 14 years in the big leagues, long enough to form an identity, but that was 18 years ago long enough to be tortured about what might have been.

Palermo has considered all of this more times than you could know. If he'd just turned this way, instead of that way, maybe the bullet would have missed. Or it could have hit him in his rear end, and the whole incident would have ended up as a short line on the transactions page.

If he'd had more time to think about it, he and his friends could have been smarter, could have split up and tackled the shooter from behind before he'd had the chance to pull the trigger. Then Palermo wouldn't need that cane, wouldn't feel this pain. He'd be in his 33rd year as an umpire. Probably a crew chief by now, having worked a few World Series.

Yes, Palermo has thought about all of this. So have his friends, the two others who went after the muggers. None of them regrets what they did.

I'd chase again, says Corky Campisi.

I can't just sit around and let that happen, says Terence Mann.

If that was my wife being attacked, I hope someone would do the same for me, says Palermo. Richie Garcia is one of Palermo's closest friends. He was there that night in Dallas, the crew chief on the field and with the guys when they went to a friend's Italian restaurant after the game.

Garcia wasn't feeling well, hampered by what would later be diagnosed as rheumatoid arthritis, so he went back to the hotel early. He was in a dead sleep when the phone rang, when he heard that his friend had been shot.

Serious guilt, Garcia says. I was with him, and I left him. I should've been there. I was the crew chief, plus him and I were very, very close. I felt terrible. I couldn't go back to work. Tuesday morning, Garcia will call Palermo, just as he does every year on the anniversary of the shooting.

Dixie Bristow turned 66 last week. She's been married 16 years now, and still smiles when she talks about last summer, when she and her brothers and sisters all rented cabins near Branson to hang out.

They're spread all across the country now, so they don't get together as often as they'd like. Dixie doesn't think she'd have made it if not for Palermo and his friends saving them from the muggers. No telling what they would've done to us, she says. I wouldn't be married. Might not even be here today.

This, as much as anything, is Palermo's legacy. He saved the life of a mother of two. Then her son introduced her to the man she would marry less than two years after the shooting. They don't talk much about that night, though Dixie has shown Bill the article in Sports Illustrated and the tape of the 20/20 episode.

Dixie happened to be with her son one day when he stopped by to pick up his paycheck. Bill was at the office too, and he was attracted to Dixie immediately. Bill's birthday came a month or so later, and Dixie came out to celebrate. They married less than a year after that, and have been happy ever since.

Attempts to reach the second woman for this story were unsuccessful. According to Dixie and others, she quickly began feeling a kind of survivor's guilt. It was the second woman who clutched her purse, who fought back. Who knows?

Maybe if she'd made it a little easier, the incident wouldn't have escalated into a shooting that left Palermo's life forever changed and a Desert Storm veteran named Kevin Bivins who declined to comment for this story currently serving a 75-year sentence for firing five shots.

Palermo is aware of those feelings. It's why he let communication with the women fade out. He could see the anguish on their faces, could hear it in their voices. He doesn't want to be a reminder for them.

This is the other side of how Palermo changed history.

Steve is intense. Always has been. He was that way as an umpire, screaming back as hard as he got, and he's that way in normal life. His intensity is the reason his family no longer plays Monopoly.

He was utterly dedicated to his craft in a way you don't often see, says Bob Costas, a close friend. So when the thing that defined him is taken away from someone as intense as Steve, he struggles with it.

Steve and Debbie came home from dinner one night. They were happy. Steve put some music on the stereo and sat in his favorite chair. Debbie went to the bathroom to take off her makeup. When she came out, she asked Steve if he was OK.

Yeah, I'm fine, he said.

Then why are tears running down your face? she said.

There are tough moments. If you see Palermo, he will smile, and if you talk to him, he will likely make you laugh. It's not a misrepresentation of his life. He is a happy person. Always has been. That doesn't mean there aren't tough moments.

Shortly before midnight on New Year's Eve a few years back, Palermo was walking in his house when his left leg broke. He just put his left foot in front of his right, lost track of where each foot was, and fell.

Doctors call it a problem with his proprioception. It happens sometimes at parties. Debbie will poke Steve, and he'll apologize for standing on her foot.

This is part of Palermo's story, part of what he wants to tell.

There are people every day who commit suicide because of the problems in their lives. He's heard too many stories to not believe he can make a difference.

When he was in the hospital, a poster stared back at him from the wall listing all of Abraham Lincoln's failures before he became president. Even at night, a light kept the words readable in case he had trouble sleeping.

Adversity doesn't mean impossibility, he says, and this is what he wants people to hear. Adversity just means you figure out a way around it. I want people to know, look, it's tough, but you can come back from these things.

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