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REFEREE
YOUR VOICE SINCE 1976

ALL SPORTS
SAY MORE
WITH LESS

SOFTBALL
EJECTION
BEAT

SOCCER
STRAIGHT
RED

FOOTBALL
STRATEGIC
FOULING TACTICS

BASEBALL
SAMURAI
STORY

VOLLEYBALL
COACHES
AIN'T SUBS



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ON EMPTY**

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WENT WILD**

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**GOT HIS
VOICE BACK**

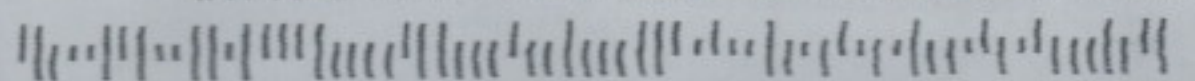
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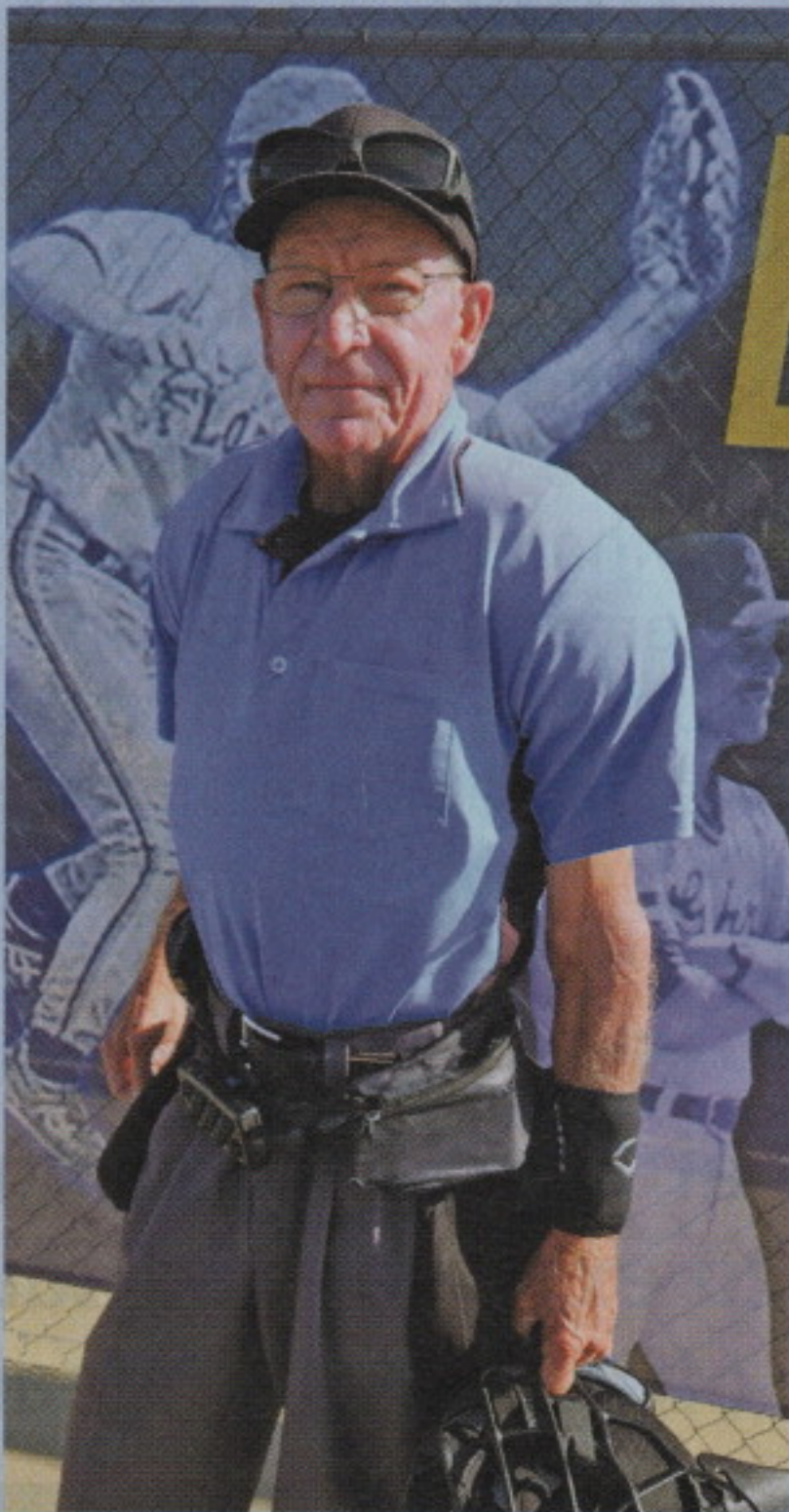
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VOICE M

Glen Van Hill wouldn't let a laryngectomy stop him from calling baseball. He created a device to vocalize the balls and strikes, safes and outs, and more.



Glen Van Hill feels very much at home on a ball field. The 64-year-old Buena Park, Calif., resident has devoted much of his life to baseball. He played the game growing up before switching to fast-pitch and slow-pitch softball as an adult.

In the mid-1980s, when his son's local Little League was short on umpires, Van Hill picked up a mask and chest protector.

District 62 needed umpires, and he wanted to help fill the need. In short order, he was working at other levels. Baseball is a year-round pastime in Southern California, and Van Hill viewed umpiring as a form of community service, a way of giving back.

"I always kind of liked the job nobody else wanted to do," he said.

By the spring of 2010, Van Hill had been umpiring for some 15 years and was highly respected. But that year, his world was turned upside down when he found himself having trouble with his voice on the field.

"I was out in the field, and I noticed my voice was like squeaky," he said. "I was like, 'That didn't sound great,' but that was the first little inkling that I had a problem."

It was Van Hill's wife, Carol, to whom he's been married for 44 years, who persuaded him to see a doctor.

"He was doing a lot of umpiring for Little League," she said, "so we both thought it was probably from straining his voice. Several weeks later, it still wasn't getting any better, and was actually getting worse, so I encouraged him to see the doctor."

Hill's doctor suspected there might be an issue with his stomach. He prescribed medication and had Hill undergo a colonoscopy.

After several months with

no improvement, Hill saw a gastroenterologist who did a scan down his throat and saw something troubling on one of his vocal cords.

That something turned out to be cancer, although Hill wasn't formally diagnosed until 2014. He underwent 30 rounds of radiation therapy and a portion of the affected vocal cord was removed.

"I had a voice, but it was pretty rough," Glen said.

But even after the radiation regimen was completed, Van Hill felt something was still amiss. A surgeon confirmed his suspicion.

"He took one look and said, 'It's not good.'"

Surgery was the only option, and on Sept. 3, 2019, Van Hill underwent a total laryngectomy, during which his larynx and vocal cords were removed. He spent roughly a week in the hospital and was unable to speak for about a month. Regaining his power of speech was a lengthy process.

"During the first year after my surgery, I relied on an electrolarynx," Van Hill said, "or attempted esophageal speech." (The latter is a technique in which compressed air is injected into the upper esophagus. The patient is taught to rapidly expel air to induce vibration of the muscles and tissues of the cervical esophagus and hypopharynx. Esophageal speech is often difficult to learn and has fallen out of favor in the medical community.)

"It was very difficult for me," Van Hill said. "Often, I simply chose not to speak at all if I could avoid it."

Seeking support, Van Hill joined a local chapter of the Lost Chord Club, a national organization that provides support to those who have been diagnosed with cancer of the larynx.

"That brought quite a bit of

MESSAGE



BY RICK WOELFEL

After a laryngectomy, Glen Van Hill created a device to vocalize calls. It consists of a speaker, battery pack and button board to choose what recording to play.



VOICE MESSAGE

normalcy," Van Hill said, "to see how other people coped with it."

Van Hill dealt with depression following his surgery, but he was determined to return to umpiring, and his goal of getting back on the field gave him an abundance of motivation.

"For me, umpiring has always been more than a hobby," he said. "It's a test of focus, judgment and resilience. It pushes me every time I step behind the plate, and I love that challenge."

"When I'm not umpiring, I play pickleball, but nothing compares to being back on the diamond. I also missed the friendships and camaraderie in the umpiring community. I wanted to be part of the third team again, the umpires who keep the game moving and make baseball possible."

Hill was back on the field just 53 days after his surgery. But he realized he needed to find or create a way to communicate with coaches and his partners.

"At one point, I even tried using cards with my plate meeting instructions written on them," he said. "Showing them to the coaches and asking if they understood."

"Eventually, I realized I would

have to use the electrolarynx to conduct plate meetings and communicate with coaches and others involved in the game. However, I knew it would be challenging to use during play, especially when talking to the catcher or batter. There was no way I could use it to call balls and strikes."

Van Hill, who had retired from McDonnell Douglas/Boeing Aircraft after a 35-year career, focused his technical expertise on the issue and designed a voice box that would replicate the audio of an umpire making calls.

"At first, I was just using one little button that would let you record your voice," he said. "Press the button and it would say what you wanted. But, I needed something more compact."

The solution was a sound board manufactured by Adafruit Industries of Brooklyn, N.Y. The device itself holds audio files.

One of Van Hill's sons (Van Hill and his wife have three grown children and four grandchildren) called it to his father's attention.

"My son was doing music for a wedding reception," Van Hill said. "He discovered the sound board. I looked at their website, and it was

perfect for what I needed."

The next step was creating and collecting a series of audio clips that would encompass the verbal calls an umpire makes during a game. Van Hill reached out to a high school umpire Facebook group in hopes of finding someone who could give him what he needed.

Owen Baker-Flynn responded. A veteran umpire from San Francisco, he is also a professional voice artist.

Baker-Flynn recorded eleven voice clips covering the basics, such as "Ball," "Strike," "Safe," "Out" and "Infield fly." Later, at Van Hill's request, he recorded 11 "secondary" calls, including "Balk" and several clips related to ball-strike counts.

"It's the most important voice-over I've ever done," Baker-Flynn said. "I helped somebody continue to do what they wanted to do."

In the aftermath of his laryngectomy, Van Hill looked into tracheoesophageal voice prosthesis (TEP) surgery. Members of his support group told him about the procedure, which involves making a puncture between the trachea and esophagus and inserting a voice prosthesis, which allows air from the trachea to move into the esophagus and vibrate a muscle to create voice.

To talk, the patient places a finger or thumb over their stoma.

"I asked my doctor about getting one," Van Hill said, "but he initially refused. He didn't want to risk creating a puncture in my freshly rebuilt trachea and esophagus. It wasn't until 15 months later that he finally agreed to do the procedure. That was in mid-December of 2020."

Van Hill recalls waking up in the recovery room following the surgery.

"When I woke up in the recovery room, I immediately occluded my stoma with my thumb and began speaking with the nurses," he said. "What an incredible feeling that was. I discovered I had a fairly serviceable speaking voice. While I couldn't yell or project loudly — and certainly couldn't call a game with it — it was good enough for close conversations. That also gave me a great excuse to tell coaches, 'No long-distance conversations.'"



Van Hill's left hand rests on his homemade device, ready to press a button to verbalize ball or strike, or nearly two dozen other calls.



Since then, Hill has been working a busy schedule, from Little League to various levels of travel ball to high school and adult league games.

He was sidelined in August 2021 to undergo surgery for a recurring cancer in his lymph node, yet he returned to the field by late September, continuing a career that has spanned three decades.

Van Hill received high praise from assigners and partners.

Stu Rains, who assigns various levels of baseball in Southern California and also umpires college baseball, said Van Hill has worked for him for a decade, including six years at the high school varsity level.

Rains said Van Hill has qualities that are invaluable to an assigner.

"He's reliable; he always has his partner's back," Rains said. "He always wants and is ready to work. He's always flexible on schedule changes. He's one of my go-to guys because I can always count on him."

John Young first got to know Van Hill when he was a Little League coach, and Van Hill umpired his games. When Young took up umpiring himself, Van Hill became an umpiring partner and mentor.

"He's always looking for ways to improve either understanding rules or mechanics," Young said. "He's never satisfied with the status quo."

Young says that Van Hill has a technique for elevating the status of his partners in the eyes of the coaches.

"When we worked travel ball tournaments together, and we introduced ourselves to coaches at home plate, Glen would always say the same thing, 'This is John, the best umpire I know,'" Young said. "When he first started saying that, I thought, 'Wow, what a compliment.' Then I thought, 'I bet he says that to every partner that he has to make sure everybody feels that way.'"

Gary Gilman assigns various levels of baseball in Orange County, Calif., near Los Angeles. Van Hill has worked for him for more than eight years.

"I trust Glen implicitly on and off the field," he said. "Because he's a professional, he accepts every

assignment and he shows (when he's) available to work. He's a man of his word."

Gilman said coaches expressed surprise at first when Van Hill appeared on the field with his voice box.

"But they quickly came to understand that his entire body of work and his love for the game spoke volumes as to his character," Gilman said. "He is out there for the right reasons. In all honesty, I wish I had an entire staff of Glen Van Hills."

Carol Van Hill says her husband's passion for umpiring was a key to his recovery.

"Getting back on the field meant giving him back one of his big reasons for living," she said. "I think he also enjoys giving people hope and encouragement by umpiring with a handicap."

Van Hill himself chooses not to see himself as disabled.

"After my laryngectomy, I had a choice: let cancer define me or challenge myself to keep doing what I loved," he said. "I chose the challenge. I wanted to prove to myself — and to the world — that I wasn't beaten. I wasn't disabled. I could still do one of the hardest jobs on the field, one that not many people have the skill, knowledge or even desire to take on, but that every game needs: umpiring."

Outside of officiating, Van Hill indulges his passion for pickleball and, during the basketball season, he operates the scoreboard at a local high school. He also enjoys spending time with his four grandchildren.

For his part, Van Hill is grateful for what he has done and what he is able to do.

"I'm grateful to be healthy and able to do what I love," he said. "I realize not every laryngectomy patient is as fortunate; many face ongoing health challenges or difficulty finding fulfilling ways to stay active or earn a living. I feel incredibly lucky to be where I am today."

Rick Woelfel is a freelance writer and podcaster from Willow Grove, Pa. He had a 50-year career officiating basketball, baseball, softball and football. ■



ONE BOX, 22 CALLS

Glen Van Hill's Umpire Voice Box has been designed to vocalize 22 different calls, including several in-game messages to partners.

The primary calls are:

1. Strike/"Haaaaa."
2. "Ball."
3. "Out. He's out."
4. "Safe."
5. "That's interference."
6. "That's obstruction."
7. "Yes, yes he did."
8. "Infield fly, infield fly, infield fly if fair."
9. "Time."
10. "Foul."
11. "Play."

Then, using the switch to access the secondary calls, Van Hill can also vocalize:

1. "Balk, that's a balk."
2. "1 and 2."
3. "2 and 2."
4. "3 and 2."
5. "2 and 1."
6. "3 and 1."
7. "Catch, catch, that's a catch."
8. "Ball's on the ground."
9. "I'm staying home."
10. "I've got the line."
11. "I've got third if he comes. I've got third."

