

Alzheimer's, Reminiscence and Baseball: The Central Texas SABR Model

Case Study

© Jim Kenton and Monte Cely
Rogers Hornsby Central & South Texas Chapter,
Society of American Baseball Research, 2020

In 2015, volunteers from the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) Rogers Hornsby Chapter (Austin, TX) took advantage of a St. Louis Reminiscence League model and began a baseball reminiscence program in Austin, Texas. Unlike the St. Louis program, that was in a major league market and was "Cardinals-centric", the Austin program was adapted to be of interest to participants from all geographic areas and a variety of baseball backgrounds.

Collaboration

Volunteers from the Hornsby SABR Chapter first contacted the President of Alzheimer's Texas (Austin) to determine the level of interest to begin a baseball reminiscence program in Austin. The concept was enthusiastically received by the Alzheimer's President and planning was started immediately. The first meeting of "BasebALZ" (aka Talking Baseball) was held approximately four months later, in May 2015.

Ten months later, the SABR volunteers started a similar baseball reminiscence program at the VA Hospital in Kerrville, Texas. We soon noted that most of our participants did not live with dementia; rather they were (for the most part) isolated and alone. As a result, our program became known simply as "The Baseball Guys".

Because of our observations in Kerrville, we became equally interested in serving seniors who might be socially isolated and lonely. We "re-branded" our program name to "Talking Baseball" to be more inclusive.

In 2019, programs were started in San Antonio (Christ Episcopal Church) and Georgetown, Texas.

All programs continued to operate until the COVID pandemic shut things down in March 2020.

In the Summer of 2020, volunteers began a variety of online programs.

Austin Start-up Process

Using the start-up tools provided by the St. Louis Alzheimer's chapter, Alzheimer's Texas staff and SABR volunteers began to define program goals, responsibilities, and program structure.

The program established **goals** very similar to those of the St. Louis and Scotland reminiscence programs:

- Provide opportunities for participants to improve their socialization skills
- Help participants to be more talkative in group settings and at home
- Increase participants' confidence by providing a safe, structured and supportive program environment that was focused on areas of interest (i.e. baseball and, specifically, former favorite teams and players)
- Create opportunities for fun and laughter
- Where possible, provide positive anticipation of future events

Program responsibilities were clearly defined among the two groups:

- Alzheimer's Texas
 - Marketing – using existing channels, make community aware of the new BasebALZ program and field calls from any interested parties.
 - Screening – all participants were screened to determine their level of dementia. Both groups determined that volunteers would serve only those with early and mid-stage dementia. Another important facet of the screening process was to determine areas of interest – what teams and players did the participants follow in their youth. Armed with this information, SABR volunteers were able to build program agendas that could better ensure achievement of stated goals.

- Training – provide basic training for SABR volunteers so that they could be more effective delivering reminiscence programming and better able to handle any situations that might occur during the meetings.
- Facilities and other resources – Alzheimer’s Texas provided meeting space either at their offices or they secured off-site space at assisted living centers in the Austin area. In addition, they provided a trained social worker to assist with the first series of meetings to ease any anxieties expressed by the volunteers.
- SABR Volunteers
 - Provide baseball content for all meetings that is appropriate for (and of interest to) identified participants
 - Conduct all meetings with enough volunteers to provide necessary support for participants/caregivers
 - Provide ongoing feedback to Alzheimer’s staff

Alzheimer’s staff and SABR volunteers worked together to finalize the **program structure**:

- Establish a clearly defined “season”:
 - In order to provide for sufficient re-screening opportunities and entry points for new participants, a season was defined as six meetings occurring every other week. At the end of the season, the marketing and screening process would occur before the new season began.
 - Meetings would occur for the same time period on a set day of the week. For Season 1, it was determined that meetings would occur on Mondays from 11:00 AM – 12:30 PM.
 - The day of the week was chosen for no other reason than its convenience for volunteers and availability of meeting space at the Alzheimer’s Texas office.
 - The time was chosen to avoid those times that are typically problematic for participants with dementia (e.g. early morning, late afternoon and evening). To take advantage of this time period, Alzheimer’s Texas agreed to provide a small lunch for participants, caregivers and volunteers.

- All meetings would utilize a consistent agenda.
 - This approach would provide a more secure, safe environment for the participants – with minimal “surprises”.
 - Topics would change from meeting to meeting based on information learned from the screening process and previous meetings.
- Caregiver participation would be encouraged, if not mandatory.
 - SABR volunteers, while trained, were not proficient in handling the variety of potential issues related to dementia. Caregivers could help deal with these situations.
 - A known benefit of reminiscence programs is that socialization and conversation can continue for hours, if not days, after the meetings. Caregivers were able to participate in the baseball conversations, observe the areas that most interested their loved ones and then could continue the “baseball talk” at home.
- Multi-sensory prompts or triggers would be utilized, whenever possible, to stimulate memories of past baseball experiences and stimulate conversation:
 - Touch
 - Handouts – agenda, box score from year discussed
 - Old baseball cards spread out on conference tables where participants, caregivers and volunteers are seated
 - Peanuts
 - Activities – break in a new glove, autograph baseballs as take-home reminder of program, use bat to demonstrate old sandlot method to determine which team would bat first
 - Smell
 - Pop popcorn right before the meeting to replicate old ballpark smells
 - Baseball food – lunch menus were focused on ballpark items such as hot dogs, hamburgers, nachos, pizza
 - Sounds
 - Sing “National Anthem”, “Take Me Out to the Ballgame”, and songs relevant to year discussed (ex. “Sixteen Tons” from 1955)

- Listen to old baseball radio broadcasts and famous announcers (Mel Allen, Red Barber, etc.)
- Visual
 - Rely heavily on PowerPoint presentations to cover baseball topics – lots of pictures and could proceed at desired pace to match level of interest and conversation
 - Old baseball videos – game broadcasts, highlight videos, etc.

Season One

“Opening Day” for the first season of “BasebALZ” was May 18, 2015.

The initial group included five participants and four caregivers. This group was supported by seven SABR volunteers and, at times, as many as three spouses. Alzheimer’s Texas provided a trained social worker who attended all six sessions of Season One.

The agenda for Opening Day included the following:

- Welcome/Introduction to Baseball Reminiscence Program
- Opening Lineups – Introductions (all participants discussed these topics)
 - Favorite Players/Teams
 - First/Best baseball memory
- National Anthem – sing along with an actual broadcast from a Yankees – Red Sox game at Fenway Park on September 11, 1958
- This Year in Baseball – 1955
- Box Score Handout from August 16, 1955 game between New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox
- Seventh Inning Stretch
 - Ballpark food – hot dogs
 - Sing “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” with Whitey Ford, Yogi Berra, Mickey Mantle and Bill Skowron (using video from the “Ed Sullivan Show” in 1958)
 - Who Bats First

- Baseball videos (a variety of baseball videos, relevant to favorite players, were available to fill remaining time)
- Post-game Wrap Up/Next Meeting June 1, 2015

This basic agenda structure has remained in place during the six seasons of BasebALZ in Austin, Texas. The box score idea was soon dropped as it proved to be too much information and not useful for the participants. A “Stump the Experts” segment was added to the agenda whereby one of the participants does research to develop a series of clues to try to stump the SABR volunteers.

Lessons Learned

Comments submitted by volunteers after Season One:

- The screening process worked extremely well. Program years for “This Year in Baseball – 19XX” were chosen to reflect the baseball interests identified during the screening. There were no behavioral issues that required assistance by the social worker or any of the volunteers.
- Box scores were distributed for the chosen year to be used as a “hands on” reminder of players, teams, etc. The participants’ ability to do detailed reading made this exercise of little value and the activity was discontinued and replaced with PowerPoint slides showing the players’ names and pictures.
- “Sing alongs” were always popular – “Take Me Out to the Ballgame”, the top- rated song from the chosen year (“Sixteen Tons” in 1955), etc. However, singing the “National Anthem” proved problematic. Singing the “National Anthem” along with a recording from a baseball radio broadcast was impossible (think roundelay of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” with participants finishing seconds or minutes apart).
- Volunteers needed to continually remind themselves to let the participants respond first. The purpose of the program is to get the participants talking and having fun – not to show off the baseball expertise of the volunteers.
- Going off on a tangent is a good thing. If a participant’s reminiscences go down a path other than baseball, allow them to

- proceed. The goal is fun and socialization, not creating baseball experts.
- Volunteers needed to do a better job of previewing the next week's subject matter. Some participants enjoyed doing research and even compiling questions for the volunteers that pertained to the upcoming year and topics.
 - A 1:1 ratio of volunteers is ideal. Volunteers were able to help participants with their responses and questions. Often, volunteers had a shared interest with a participant (fans of the same team or they grew up in the same part of the country). Attempts were made to allow these volunteers and participants to sit by each other at subsequent meetings.
 - The "baseball food" provided by Alzheimer's Texas added great value to the meetings. The smells and tastes of the food helped foster the baseball mood. Lunch time provided a great opportunity for informal interaction between participants and volunteers.

Comments from Participants and Caregivers

"We would like to express our gratitude to you for taking time to volunteer at the Alzheimer's Association. We really enjoyed the "Baseball Memory" class. I especially enjoyed the camaraderie and recalling childhood memories. The feeling of support, fun and laughter was something we looked forward to each week. Thanks also to your sweet wives who came and helped. We are looking forward to the Express Game tonight and appreciate this opportunity.

Thanks again for your friendship and support. Psalms 13:5-6. "

B.P. and R. P. – participant and caregiver.

"A big special thank-you for your efforts in presenting the excellent reminiscence presentations in our baseball meetings. Your work brought many memories of past baseball experiences. This thank-you also goes to the wives for their additions to your presentations.

We loved the discussions of the historical facts related to baseball. We appreciate all of your work in making this available to the Alzheimer's group.

Sincerely, F.L. and M.L. " – participant and caregiver

" ... You are really on to something. My husband has had Alzheimer's for 11 years that we know of, he and I have been part of a variety of programs to respond to the challenges of dementia. The Baseball Memories group that you guys have created is at the top of the list. You really have a gift for bridging the divide that can result from this disease. It is a joy to see him in his element and light up, and I have learned a bit about baseball and enjoyed it all.

" PS – today as we walked out to the car, he was singing 'Take Me Out to the Ballgame' at the top of his voice ."

L.V. – caregiver

Program Growth

Season Two of BasebALZ was started in the Fall of 2015. The program has continued with Season Six ending in July 2017

In April 2016, the same group of SABR volunteers started a second program at the VA Hospital in Kerrville, Texas. The participant population at the VA was more diverse than that of the Austin program, so the structure was modified slightly. In addition, because of distance, the program was conducted once a month but year-round.

From a staff member at the Kerrville, Texas Veterans Administration:

"First off, let me say how awesome it is that your group does what it does. I myself am not the biggest baseball fan or fanatic and I find myself on the edge of my seat when y'all come and give presentations to our veterans.

Since y'all have been coming to the VA here in Kerrville we have noticed a few things about our regular participants in the program. Some of our

veterans that are not the most social or big conversation starters seem to open up during the group sessions. They can recall past games they have been to and other memories from their youth. It is amazing to see how far back some of our residents can remember the events of their days. The details that they express in the groups sometimes paint a picture so clear you can almost see it as if you are there yourself. You guys do all this through baseball knowledge and facts. It is simply amazing. One of our veterans (you know who) was able to recall an entire game and day from his youth based off of one fact from that game about a pitcher throwing the ball out of the stadium. I think that alone says something about what you guys do... It is amazing to see some of our closed-off veterans initiate conversations and even socialize in group settings who normally do not... It gives our residents a comfortable way to ease into conversation allowing opportunities to socialize and reminisce. It creates opportunities to share experiences and even have an occasional laugh... Our veterans have many stories to share and your groups allow opportunities for that. Some of our veterans do not have the best memory anymore, due to age and other various diagnoses. These sessions present opportunities to trigger memories they may have forgotten over time. In my opinion, it is a wonderful program and service that y'all provide. I know our residents and even our staff marvel at the benefits from the program.

We thank you here at Kerrville VA for bringing your services to us and look forward to continue to work with you."

In Summer 2016, BasebALZ volunteers began working with Dr. Michael Ego, from the University of Connecticut, to develop a plan to expand sports reminiscence programming in other communities around the United States. Through Dr. Ego's efforts, funding from the University of Connecticut was acquired to produce a ten-minute video of interviews with BasebALZ participants, caregivers, volunteers and the President of Alzheimer's Texas.

During this same time period, the Rogers Hornsby Central & South Texas SABR Chapter agreed to dedicate space on the chapter website for BasebALZ news and materials:

- The “About BasebALZ” page (<http://www.sabrhornsby.org/about-basebalz/>) includes historical information about the program and includes the video funded by the University of Connecticut.
- The “BasebALZ Resources” page (<http://www.sabrhornsby.org/basebalz-resources/>) includes training materials, lessons learned and a wide variety of presentations used for BasebALZ meetings. All materials are available, free of charge, to any groups interested in starting a baseball reminiscence program.
- The “Recent Posts” page (<http://www.sabrhornsby.org/category/basebalz/>) is used as a blog to post recent events such as season opening days, trips to local minor league games, etc.

In January 2017, Dr. Ego established a baseball reminiscence program in Cos Cob, CT using a model similar to the one developed in Austin.

During this time, SABR member George Sommerfeld got in touch with us regarding a senior “hot stove” baseball discussion program he was conducting in suburban New York City. After exchanging ideas, George began leading a dementia-focused baseball reminiscence program as well.

In 2018, Alan Roth SABR member Jon Leonoudakis established a BasebALZ program in collaboration with the Los Angeles Alzheimer’s Association and local VA hospital. Jon and his fellow SABR volunteers were the first to try wiffle ball as an activity – even for wheelchair vets at the VA hospital.

Our Austin and Georgetown groups benefited from Jon’s idea and enjoyed a special day at Dell Diamond, home of the AAA Round Rock Express, in February 2020:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/7rjlyamejbhbiu/Talking%20Baseball%2003092020.mp4?dl=0>

With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, our in-person programs have all been suspended. However, based upon the recent online successes of the Los Angeles programs, we are now experimenting with online delivery here in Texas and for the NYC programs.

Program Evaluation

The BasebALZ program was initiated solely as a community service for people living with Alzheimer's and dementia. Little to no thought was given to capturing empirical data and establishing baseline standards to measure future outcomes in controlled conditions.

Despite the lack of empirical data, there is enough anecdotal information (via interviews and observation) to consider the program a success. The UConn video includes two interviews with caregivers and two interviews with participants that speak to building a sense of community, friendship, fun, laughter and some carry-over outside of formal meetings.

The "thank you" notes and emails presented in this document further acknowledge that the program seems to be meeting the socialization needs of our participants.

Observation provided the best means for program leaders to evaluate the interest and participation of participants. Three examples are cited as evidence of program success:

- Participant A (Austin) – Participant A has been in the BasebALZ program each of the six seasons. Several times, over the last three years, Participant A has reacted to a presentation by exclaiming (as his eyes welled up with tears) "This is great! This is great! This reminds me of when I used to listen to the Red Sox on the radio with my dad." He would then remind the volunteers that he "always kept score" when listening.

In one "hands on" exercise, participants were given the opportunity to keep score while watching a video of Game 1 of the 1957 World Series. When a batter flied out to right field, Participant A circled a "9" on his scorecard.

He did remember.

- Participant B (Austin) – Participant B has also been in the program since Season One. Early in Season Two, Participant B asked if he could bring in a trivia question to test the SABR volunteers. The unidentified player would be from the time frame to be discussed in the next meeting.

True to his word, Participant B brought in a series of four or five clues concluding with “the player’s nickname was ‘Cakes’.” Participant B took great pleasure in “stumping the experts” even though the player was Hall of Fame pitcher Jim Palmer.

“Stump the Experts” is now a regular part of each agenda and is led by Participant B. The number of clues presented each meeting now fills up a page and a half. Participant B and his caregiver spend hours between meetings to contribute to the program. He has even emailed in his clues on the rare occasion when he cannot be at the meeting.

The fact that Participant B and his wife will spend so much time to contribute to the program is a significant indication of their commitment to the program.

- Participant C (Kerrville) – Participant C attended the initial meeting in Kerrville. During the first part of that meeting, volunteers noted that he was in a ‘sleep like’ state. However, as the presenter began discussing Ted Williams and Fenway Park, Participant C threw his head back and announced, “I’ve got a story for you.”

Participant C then told a story of going to a ballgame as a youth and seeing “a pitcher throw the ball out of the ballpark.” While no one had ever heard of such a story, VA staff were amazed that Participant C would be so conversational in a group setting (“he hasn’t talked this much since he’s been here!”).

SABR volunteers were able to piece together enough of the clues provided by Participant C to verify that, in fact, pitcher Jack Kramer of

the St. Louis Browns had thrown the ball out of Fenway Park on June 6, 1946 after a heated argument with the first base umpire.

Armed with newspaper clippings from that game, SABR volunteers were able to provide details about Participant C's story during the next meeting in Kerrville. With his memory confirmed, Participant C then told stories about escorting Red Barber on a flight from Viet Nam to Hawaii after a USO tour.

Participant C is still a regular attendee at the monthly Kerrville meetings and continues to educate the volunteers with his baseball stories from the 1940's and 1950's.

Conclusion

In its simplest form, "BasebALZ" and "Talking Baseball" are two parts passion and one part compassion:

- The passion for baseball that the participants had during their youth
- The passion for baseball that the volunteers had during their youth and that continues to the present day
- The compassion that the volunteers have for participants who live with Alzheimer's and dementia, or are dealing with isolation

Even though the formula is quite simple, the results are extremely positive.

Contacts:

- **Jim Kenton:** SABR Central/South Texas BasebALZ project leader; email: jmkentn@gvtc.com
- **Monte Cely:** SABR Rogers Hornsby Chapter communications; email: cely@swbell.net
- **Catherine Campbell:** President – Alzheimer's Texas; email: ccampbell@txalz.org