



All the Best Podcast
Episode 46: “National Pride”
Featuring Washington Nationals First Baseman, Ryan Zimmerman.

Ryan: July 12th, 1988. I fly to Cincinnati to the all-star game with Crown Prince Saud, His Royal Highness, the prime minister of Kuwait, the cousin to the Amir. We get off the plane together, but the thrill for me was going into both the American league and national league locker rooms. Bart Giamatti was great, but he let Whitey Herzog of the Cards, introduce me to the national league. I warmed up in the locker room, catching bare handed and throwing to Gary Carter. The players were really friendly from coast to coast, and they all looked very, very young, much younger than our kids. And that seemed hard to believe, hard to digest. I must have had the support of 75% of the people there. We signed baseballs kidded around and Billy Martin came up to Carl Lender's box and we kidded with him. He wants to help. I was afraid I would get booed going out in the field, but I went out with two little league players.

The place was full. 55,000 and literally the cheers were terrific. And each of the kids threw the ball into the dirt, I might add. I asked the little girl, are you nervous going out there? She said, "yes." And I said, "so am I. Come on and let's go together." I grabbed them and walked to the mound though I was supposed to walk out alone. I think that was good because who wants to boo a 9 year old and a 12 year old kid. It was really exciting out there. I had warmed up with Carter and I didn't want to throw the ball into the dirt. So I overcompensated and threw it high and outside. Though he grabbed it and the crowd gave us a good hand, and of course I went on cloud nine.

George: In the first place, I believe that character is a part of being President.

Barbara: And life really must have joy.

Sam: This is "All the Best." The official podcast of the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. I'm your host, Sam LeBlond, one of their many grandchildren. Here, we celebrate the legacy of these two incredible Americans through friends, family, and the foundation. This is "All the Best."

George: I remember something my dad taught me. He said, write your mother, serve your country, and he said, tell the truth. And I've tried to do that in public life. All through it.

Barbara: You are a human being first and those human connections with children, with friends are the most important investments you will ever make.

George: We stand tonight before a new world of hope and possibilities for our children. A world we could not have contemplated a few years ago.

Sam: On behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. This is "All the Best."

Ryan Zimmerman was the first draft selection in the history of the Washington Nationals, and quickly emerged as the face of the young franchise as their third baseman and later first baseman. He's the all-time homerun leader in DC baseball history. He's a two-time all-star, a two-time silver slugger winner and the winner of the Rawlings gold glove. In 2017, Ryan was named the national league comeback player of the year by the Major League Baseball Players Association. Ryan is also an active leader in the community, establishing the ziMS foundation in 2006, which is dedicated to the treatment and cure of multiple sclerosis. Ryan is on the board of the National MS Society and the Washington DC chapter. Ryan and his wife, Heather, have also started the Pros for Heroes COVID-19 relief fund, supporting frontline healthcare workers during the pandemic in Washington, DC. Ryan, thank you so much for joining us on All the Best. How are you doing today?

Ryan: I'm good. Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Sam: Ryan. Congratulations are in order. You now have the distinction of being the first major leaguer on the podcast, which also makes you the first World Series champion on the podcast, All the Best. We are so happy to have you. Can you describe last year for us, especially for those of us who are Nats fans, who couldn't get enough of it?

Ryan: Yeah, man. I mean, it was a wild year, I guess, is the best way to put it. You know, the way we started so much has been made about the 19 and 31 start, people were writing us off, telling us we should all be traded. They should fire the manager. We got swept in a four game series at city field against the Mets. And sorta after that game, when we got swept, we had a decision to make, whether we wanted to just basically start making vacation plans for the end of September or take it one day at a time and try and crawl our way back

into this thing. We knew we were talented enough, it was just a matter of kind of getting back within striking distance. And anyone who's played sports knows they don't want to play that team that just barely makes it in.

And I think that's kind of what we were shooting for. And we had done it the other way. We had been the team that clinched the division in early September. We'd been the team that had almost won 100 games and was one of the favorites to win the World Series. So to kind of do it the other way last year, to scratch and claw and fight our way into that wildcard game, and then to win that game the way we did it almost just started to feel like it was our time to win and I think that kind of gave us some momentum and we just carried it with us.

Sam: What a magical year, it really was Ryan, for you and the Nationals. So in addition to being a world champion, you've also been an All-Star twice, you've won a gold glove, you won two Silver Sluggers. You also took home the Lou Gehrig Award. Out of all these awards, which one is the most meaningful to you and why?

Ryan: Yeah. I mean anything, you know, individual is special, I think, but baseball is, I always say it's the ultimate individual team sport. You know, it's me versus the pitcher. It's me making a play in the field, but you play so many games and it takes so many different people doing things right to win a game that the individual awards are great but I think ultimately last year is what everyone strives for. I think anyone would tell you that hasn't won a World Series, they would trade in all their individual awards to win a World Series, and I think that kind of rings true throughout every professional sport. But as far as the individual ones, I think the Lou Gehrig Award is pretty special. My parents, and, you know, a lot of my family background has been, I was raised on just being a good person,. I think. You know, treat other people like you want to be treated. And the Lou Gehrig Award is more for obviously your play on the field, but it's also the stuff you do off the field. And so many athletes, which is a good thing nowadays, use their platform for various good things that they do in the community. And I think it's cool how athletes have kind of been looked upon to use their platform to do good things.

Sam: Ryan, you were the very first draft pick in Washington Nationals team history back in 2005, you are Mr. National. So I can only imagine how difficult the decision you made in June to forego playing this year due to the coronavirus must have been. Can you talk about that decision in the middle of this surreal year?

Ryan: Yeah. Like you said, it's a tough decision, man. I think one of the craziest years I've ever been a part of and I think pretty much any of us have ever been a

part of. There's so many different angles I had to think about when I was making that decision. And I think it's such an individual decision, you know, it's different for everybody. Everyone's got a different situation that they're in, whether it's family or work or things like that. So after kind of going through all of our options and having a newborn at home and having my mom who's very high risk, I was in a good situation to not have to go through the season with the risks that it presented. Some guys weren't as lucky as me to have that choice. And you know, I talked to some guys who weren't really comfortable playing, but I don't think they really had an option, you know, where they were in their career to basically sit out.

And some guys were perfectly fine playing, which I respect that as well. It was a tough decision. But at the end of the day, I think for me and my family, it was the right thing to do. I miss playing like crazy. I miss the guys, I keep in touch with them. I watched the games, you know, but I definitely miss baseball. It's been a part of my life for 20, 25 years. It's the first time I've been able to do anything during the summer in a long time. So that's been interesting. It's been challenging. I think being home has been great. I've been seeing my family a ton, but also I've never been home or around this much. So it's been challenging for me. It's been challenging for Heather, even though she might not say it, but it's been fun to see my kids and my wife more. And we're trying to make the best out of an interesting situation.

Sam: Well, I don't want to throw you under the bus, but I did see at the golf course. So I think hopefully this is one of the ways that you're getting some of that competitive energy out of your system.

Ryan: Yeah. Lucky for me, golf is supposedly one of the safest things you can do so that worked out pretty good. It's still important for me to try and do some stuff for Heather, to try and get away and do a little bit, but yeah, I enjoy playing some golf and I'm taking advantage of having some free time that I usually don't have.

Sam: Ryan, I want to talk about your mother, Cheryl. Her influence inspired you to start the ziMS Foundation. When did you start the foundation and what's your focus?

Ryan: Basically, I got called up in 2005. That off season, I was sitting at home and we kind of decided, like I was talking about earlier, we have this platform and this ability to help people that you know, other people aren't lucky enough to have. So we kind of sat down as a family and talked about if we wanted to do something like this and literally in our living room decided to do a golf tournament. And that was kind of the first thing that we did and literally still

running it out of the living room and have been doing it for the better part of 15, 16 years and mostly family run. I mean, pretty much all volunteer. We pay someone to do some website and technical work because we're not so great at that. But other than that, it's my family and volunteers that have been with the foundation for a decade plus.

So it's something that's really special to us and we're very proud of what we've done, being kind of just a small family run foundation and I think most importantly, we enjoy it. My mom really enjoys doing the work and it lets her sort of get in touch with people that all throughout her struggles and her, I guess, bout with the disease. She's been able to talk to people that are going through similar things that she has gone through. So it's been something fun for us and we've met so many awesome, interesting people that have helped us along the way. And it's been an awesome venture for us.

Sam: Your slogan for the ziMS foundation is "Bringing home a cure." How close are we to bringing one home?

Ryan: So, it's really come a long way. The simple answer is yes, we've come a long way. I think before 2000, there was only a handful of treatments even available. Now there's close to 20 that can do anything from altering the way the disease affects someone to slowing down the progression of the disease. So basically allowing people to live a more normal life after they're diagnosed, which really wasn't existent. It definitely wasn't existent in 1996, when they first diagnosed my mom.

Sam: From my grandparents, my entire family learned the importance of service to others, which is also the theme of our podcast. It seems like the same thing is true for the ziMS foundation. It's a family affair. What's it like working together as a family to make a difference in a cause that is so close to your hearts?

Ryan: My dad always jokes and says, it's a labor of love, you know, because when you get into planning foundation events and doing big golf tournaments or galas that are hundreds of people you don't really realize how many things go into doing that. And if you want to be an effective foundation, your overhead needs to stay as low as possible. You know, so many things, especially in DC, we've learned, you know, you go to these great parties and they raise millions of dollars. And at the end of the night, you realize, you know, 80% of that was spent to put on the event. Every dollar counts for whatever you're doing, but kind of our goal is to be as efficient as possible. For that to be possible, my parents have to put in tons of hours of work. I'm the one that actually gets off the easiest. You know, I put in some work, but you know, they're the ones, you

know, my family, my brother back in Virginia Beach and the good group of 15 or 20 key volunteers that we've had down there that have been involved with the foundation since day one, they're the people that have allowed us to be so successful. So to have a group of people like that around my mom, around my family, has made it capable for us to do what we've done. And it's like you said, truly a labor of love

Sam: Ryan. I know how rewarding it can be to work on things with family. I've had the opportunity to work on a couple of projects and see them through to fruition with my family. And it sure is an amazing thing. We are in a pretty interesting time. I think we talked about that earlier. We have the COVID-19 pandemic changing our everyday life in so many ways and one thing that has done is really shined a spotlight on the frontline healthcare workers during these incredibly challenging times. I know you and Heather have taken notice and started your Pros for Heroes COVID-19 Relief Fund. Can you share with us why you felt the need to start this fund, how you are both supporting our healthcare workers and who you recruited along the way to help in the cause?

Ryan: Yeah. This thing kind of just came out of nowhere. We have good family friends here in Virginia. They have three kids that our kids play with all the time and the husband's actually a doctor at Inova Fairfax. You know, Heather and I are sitting at home during the beginning stages of this thing, wondering, you know, what can we do to help? Once we realized kind of what our situation was, we're going to be hunkered down for a little while, we had nothing but free time on our hands. We were like, how can we use our resources to help these people? Like you said, the frontline healthcare workers, everyone's running away from this thing and they're literally running right into it, trying to help people in need and then having to go home to their families and their kids and just putting themselves in the worst possible position.

We talked to them, he said the coolest thing to do just to start off would be kind of having meals and hot food ready for these people. So that's how it started. I reached out to some of the athletes on the other teams that I knew, some of the guys on the Nats with me and asked if they would be willing to obviously donate. And then what we would do is we actually found a local company to do the food and we would do the dropoffs, but we would Zoom in to the ICU's or the places that were hardest hit and kind of surprised the healthcare workers there. We'd kind of get as many of them that could come into a meeting room if they could get away from their shift for five or 10 minutes and kind of Zoom in and just tell them, thank you and let them know that the people out here appreciate what they're doing.

Because I mean, they're working, you know, a 7 to 7 shift and they're basically going home and sleeping and coming home. So they were getting in that cycle of where, you know, they're doing this stuff and not really seeing how much people appreciate what they're doing. So I had Backstrom come on with me, I had Brian Kerrigan hop on with me. I had a bunch of my teammates hop on with me and just letting them know how much we appreciate what they were doing was worth more than the food or any of the money that we donated. It kind of snowballed. We ended up as of right now, I think we've raised right at \$\$400,000. A lot of that went to food deliveries. We did two separate \$100,000 donations to the Inova Fairfax charity that they then use for anything from PPE equipment or even for daycare, for a lot of the nurses who had nowhere to put their children. So just things that weren't being thought of, they had some extra money now to make them as comfortable as they could be as they're going through something that they probably never thought they'd have to go through in their life.

Sam: Ryan, I want to take it back to baseball. You know, we've got the local celebrity in DC and now the national celebrity, Dr. Anthony Fauci, who had an unfortunate first pitch. I'm sure you saw it. It wasn't great. My grandfather threw out a couple of first pitches as Vice President and President. And of course my uncle George maybe had the most dramatic and memorable first pitch in Yankee Stadium during the World Series after 9/11, when he fired a perfect strike, unlike Fauci, I might add, but if you've never done it, I'm sure throwing out the first pitch can be super nerve-wracking. If you would, could you give our listeners some advice on a successful first pitch?

Ryan: Yeah and I caught a lot of flack for that because I actually talked to him the night before.

Sam: You're the one who gave him advice?

Ryan: On the Nationals Facebook or whatever it was and you know, I told him exactly what I tell everyone, you know, warm up before you go down. I think everyone just assumes they're going to go out there and just toss it in. And you know, it's easy. Anyone can do this. It's only 60 feet, blah, blah, blah. And then you get out there and you get nervous and you're on a hill and you're not on flat ground. And he realized it looks a lot further. So my first advice to him was make sure you throw in your warm up underneath. If you're going to do it, you need to go to the mound. I mean like throwing from the grass in front of the mountain stuff.

I mean, if you're going to go out there and do it, you got to go for it. So he was like, okay, I'm in on that. I got it. And then I told him to aim higher than he

really thinks he needs to aim because you don't want to bounce it because that's the worst thing you can do. You'd rather be high like most of them are. But unfortunately I don't think he listened very, very well. I even told them, you know, there's no reason to be nervous. There's going to be nobody in the stands. And I actually talked to Sean Doolittle afterwards because he caught the first pitch and he was wearing me out, you know, what'd you tell this guy? And then he was like, but seriously, I've never seen someone more nervous to throw the first pitch. That's what he told me. So I think he needs to get another chance because he was supposedly, he was a pretty good athlete in high school. He was a basketball player. So I think if he had another chance, he'd do a little bit better. But yeah, that was a tougher, especially to watch.

Sam: I can only imagine how nerve-wracking it is. I remember talking to my uncle George about his first pitch at Yankee Stadium and he said how nervous he was. And, and even the letter that you read from my grandfather talks about how nervous he was, you know, he's the President of the United States. You know, he's got cameras on him all the time. So it just goes to show the sports is the ultimate equalizer. Ryan, I want to end with this. What does the future hold for you? Do you see baseball continuing for a couple more seasons or has your time away from baseball opened up your mind to some opportunities outside that may be more appealing at this time?

Ryan: You know, I think this has kind of made me realize a lot of things. I realized I do like being around my family a lot more, you know, I've never had a chance to do that, to be around and to help out in the morning and to be able to actually be there. My oldest daughter has done some horseback riding lessons stuff and to be able to actually drop her off and take her places. Just to be around, I think is something that you don't realize how important it is until you know, you're there and you see truly how important it is. So just being around has been awesome. Not being around the game and not playing has made me realize how much I still love the game. This would have been my 16th year, I think it was so, you know, I'm towards the end of my career.

I'm not a guy that's going to probably play 150 games anymore. So you transition into that role of 90 to 100 games, which is what I was kind of looking to do this year. And I was actually excited to see how that went. But to answer the question, I think, you know, my body still feels good. If I'm healthy, I still feel like I can be productive. I don't know if I can really go out like this, you know. It's like, you can't leave like this. Everyone's like, well you won the world series. You can just ride into the sunset. But you know, I still feel like I have some good years left in me. And I've been doing a pretty good job of staying in shape and staying ready. And the real answer is we'll ramp things up here in October and November and see how I feel.

And if they'll have me back, I'll probably give it another go next year and see how it goes. And you know, I miss the game so much. It's all I've really ever known. And I've always said, once I feel like I can't help the team or I can't be productive, then it's time to go. You don't want to be the guy that gets told to leave. You know, you gotta know when it's time, but last year I felt good towards the end. I mean, during the playoff run, I felt healthy and I felt productive and hopefully I can continue doing that for another year or two. And now that we have a son, I gotta let him at least see me play a couple of times.

Sam: Well, you said one or two years. I mean the National League's trying out DH stuff, why not three to five years? What do you think about that? You think there's an option there for you for a DH role?

Ryan: I mean, the DH definitely expands the career a little bit more. So I'm all for that. I've said that, you know, the last four or five years and make both leagues have the same rules. And I know traditional fans are gonna kill me for that, but it levels the playing field on both sides and it extends careers. I would love for that. And that'd be great for me.

Sam: Well, Ryan, thank you so much for joining us on All the Best. Please send my best to Heather and thank you for all that you're doing to help our local community, our healthcare workers who deserve everything they're getting and all your great work with the ziMS foundation. We're thrilled to have you, hope to see on the golf course soon.

Ryan: Yeah. Thanks for having me, man. It was an honor to be here and I really appreciate it.

Sam: I'm Sam LeBlond reminding you to listen, share, and subscribe to "All the Best" on Apple podcasts, Spotify and everywhere great podcasts are found. Thank you for joining me as we celebrate All the Best.

Barbara: Both George and I believe that while the White House is important, the country's future is in your house. Every house, all over America.

George: Preparedness, strength, decency, and honor. Courage, sacrifice, the willingness to fight, even die for one's country. America, the land of the free and the brave. And God bless the United States of America. The greatest country on the face of the Earth.

