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'This Old Cub' clicks like Santo's heels

Jeff Santo blew what might have been the best shot in his movie because he tried to help his father.

Serves him right.

Ron Santo, wearing a prosthesis on one leg shortly after amputation surgery on the other, was being filmed in his living room as he practiced pressing himself into a standing position on his walker. Suddenly, you hear a frantic voice shout, "Jesus!" as the camera topples and then the elder Santo's familiar, scratchy voice saying, "I'm all right. I'm all right."

Cut to Ron, on his back, explaining how he lost his balance. Then, after being helped to his feet, asking, "Did you catch that on camera? It was a great fall."

Only a few scenes earlier, Jeff caught a mild scolding from Ron for reaching, instinctively, to help his father out of bed.

"I'm supposed to do this by myself," Ron said. "You're worried about me falling. I've fallen before."

So, for not following Dad's orders, we have to score that one E-documentarian. In all, though, Jeff made few missteps in "This Old Cub," a sweet look at Ron's playing days, the battles with juvenile diabetes that ultimately cost him both legs, and the bitter disappointment last year of not being voted into the Hall of Fame by the Veterans Committee.

The work got its first showing before a large audience Sunday, as the closing act of the annual Cubs Convention at the Hilton Chicago. Jeff was on hand in the hotel's Grand Ballroom to see a packed house — heck, it was a packed house. 35 minutes before showtime, and by the time the opening credits rolled people were sitting on the floor of the balcony watching through a wrought iron railing — give the film a standing ovation.

"First, I was amazed how many people showed up," Jeff said. "The room's so big, over 1,000 people in here, and as it went through, it was amazing to hear everyone laugh and to get everything and just follow the ride of the movie."

"I was blown away by it at the end when they stood up and gave it a standing ovation. Can't ask for much more than that. It was wonderful."

OK, so debuting a Santo documentary before a Cubs Convention audience is a little like premiering "Lord of the Rings" in the Shire. But Jeff would have had a winner with this one if the deck weren't stacked, and even White Sox fans or those unfamiliar with baseball should do themselves a favor and see his effort when it gets a theatrical release in Chicago and Arizona in March.

Younger fans familiar with Ron mostly as a slightly daffy broadcaster will find the images of Santo the player — his matinee idol looks, his dashing defensive play at third base — illuminating. When they're not laughing at the clothes the Cubs wore off the diamond, they will have no problem believing, as Santo explained, he and his teammates were treated "like rock stars" during the headiest days of the 1969 season.

Everyone will be moved by the difficulties Santo encounters each day and handles with cheerful grace — difficulties worsened by surgery last October to have his bladder removed, leaving him with an external bag that collects his urine.

As Santo described it earlier during the convention, "I move on the side of my bed, I take all my pills, I unhook my bag, I put my legs on and I'm ready to go."

Easy as 1-2-3, huh?

"You do what you have to do," Santo said.

Of course, Ron didn't have to consent to Jeff, a filmmaker for the last decade, following him around with a camera crew. Indeed, for the most intimate scenes, Jeff was alone with Ron using a small, hand-held camera, and even then Jeff had to do some coaxing.

"He'd be like, 'Ah, I don't know,'" Jeff said, effecting his father's rasp. "I'd just say, 'I gotta get it.'"

Ultimately, Jeff got what he needed, usually in a refreshingly unobtrusive manner. Unlike most of what passes for reality on television these days, Jeff's featured performer rarely seems aware of the camera, much less concerned with playing to it.

The film, however, unabashedly plays to Cubdom's eternal angst — and Sunday's audience picked up on every cue.

When Jeff inserted a shot of the infamous black cat that sprinted in front of the Cubs' dugout during their '69 collapse, the crowd groaned.

When the narrator, Joe Mantegna, noted the Cubs were within five outs of the World Series last season, groans and laughter.

And then there's the Hall of Fame stuff, which, because we know the outcome, is a little like watching someone park himself on a folding chair in the middle of Lake Shore Drive.

You know Santo is going to get flattened.

Except, when Cubs media relations director Sharon Panozzo calls with the news he didn't make it into the Hall, we finally get what the news cameras on hand that day last year didn't.

We get to hear Panozzo, first apologizing, then asking if Santo would consent to a conference call later in the day

with media back in Chicago.

Shaking off the hurt, Santo considered the request for about two seconds before saying, "Um, yeah."

Against all odds, there is far more laughter in Jeff's work than sadness.

Of course, any film that incorporates Ron's banter with broadcast partner Pat Hughes is going to have some laughs. Any film that shows a grandfather cruising in circles on his electric cart in a cul-de-sac while his 4-year-old grandson lines Wiffle balls off a tee in his direction, or shows the two of them riding off down the street, cart and scooter side-by-side, is going to warm the cockles.

But this isn't just any film. It is a lovingly drawn illustration of why Santo and Cubs fans see so much of themselves in each other.

It is a lesson that losing doesn't make one lovable, but getting up and trying again to win after every loss does.

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