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Hattaway's passing leaves Twins with heavy hearts

Former clubhouse attendant spent 60 years in organization



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MINNEAPOLIS -- Wayne Hattaway, known affectionately as "Big Fella" to most in his expansive baseball family, soundly defied any other means of description available in the English language.



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Sure, Hattaway did attend to clubhouses, manage equipment and attempt some crackpot impression of training, but his not-so-secret calling card was the acerbic tongue that shot out jabs, barbs and put-downs at a dizzying pace to anyone in his orbit, the lifelong behind-the-scenes enforcer of loose clubhouses at every level of the organization except Triple-A. Nobody was safe: not the star prospect, not the manager and certainly not the general manager.

"The way he put it was, 'I'm here to tell you how good you ain't,'" Gardenhire recalls.

Whatever Hattaway was to them, everyone agrees that Big Fella was truly unique. The Twins had never before seen anyone like Hattaway, and they likely never will again after Hattaway died Thursday night near his home in Mobile, Ala., after a brief battle with cancer, the club announced. He was 80.

"He's one of a kind," former Twins general manager Terry Ryan said. "There aren't many guys that -- oh, hell, as we say, he broke the mold. There's no doubt. He was a good person. Loved the game and loved to be around it. That's all I needed to know."

Many fans around Twins Territory might have heard of Big Fella, but even if you haven't, there's a decent chance you've seen him around the ballpark at some point. He didn't exactly blend into a crowd with the diminutive frame, bushy sideburns, enormous mustache and wretched eyesight -- and that's not to mention his preferred outfit of the massive cowboy hat and boots.

At first glance, nobody could seem more out of place in a baseball clubhouse, shooting friendly insults at some of the finest athletes in the world. But in truth, there was nowhere else he ever really belonged in his life. Hattaway began his baseball life as a 12-year-old bat boy and lingered around the game until the Twins hired him as clubhouse manager for their Dallas affiliate in 1963.

"I never looked at a title," said former Twins farm director Jim Rantz. "I just say, 'Hey, it's Wayne. You know, you're in the clubhouse. So, go for it. Whatever you want to do, Wayne. You want to call yourself a trainer? Go ahead, call yourself a trainer.'"

Whatever was in Hattaway's actual job description, there was no question that baseball was his life as he bounced around the Minors for the next four decades, introducing himself in his unique way to just about every player that passed through the Twins' organization through the ages, from Harmon Killebrew to Kirby Puckett to Torii Hunter.

He was the first to greet the players in the mornings, impatiently waited for the games to end so he could get his cleaning done and usually slept in the clubhouse. Heck, he even got married at the ballpark in Charlotte, N.C., and with pitcher and future Rockies general manager Bob Gebhard as his best man.

For as much time as Hattaway spent around all those players, he never did find the time to learn any names. That's the origin of his "Big Fella" nickname -- it's simply how Hattaway would address everyone, so that became his identifying trait.

"If he saw the President of the United States, he'd call him 'Big Fella,'" Ryan said. "That's what he does."

Big Fella was an acquired taste for many players that, well, didn't expect a small man with a thick Southern

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"I got the ice ready for you. Knew you'd be in here right about now."

Most of the things the players and Hattaway would say to each other would certainly not be fit for print, and in the heat of the competitive environment, it's borderline astonishing that Hattaway never drew a punch from any of his targets in all that time. But because Hattaway took it as well as he dished it and nobody -- *nobody* -- was safe, players often couldn't help but grow to laugh, especially because they came to realize he never actually meant any malice.

In his own way, Hattaway's constant ribbing helped players and coaches alike keep things in perspective without getting too emotionally high or low. He reminded them through his energy, joy and passion that baseball was all just a game, after all, and that they should all be having fun with it.

"If you can't handle somebody 70 years old teasing you about looking silly out on the field -- because we all look silly -- sometimes we've got to look at ourselves, you know, and be honest with ourselves," Liddle said. "And that's what Wayne did -- he made you be honest with yourself."

"He's the nicest person you'll ever meet in your life," Gardenhire said. "I mean, always, if he felt somebody was mad at him, it would ruin his day. And he, you know, he wore all of his emotions right on his sleeve. And when he's having fun, if somebody finally yelled at him, he would tell him, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Big Fella,' for the rest of the day."

Gardenhire saw the clubhouse value -- and frankly, entertainment value -- in that presence during his stint in the Minor Leagues with Hattaway as his clubbie, and when Gardenhire got the Twins' managerial gig in 2002, he arranged for Big Fella to be a part of his staff. ("Chief towel folder," Liddle says.) It never ceased to entertain Gardenhire that Hattaway would say the harsh words to his players that he sometimes wished he could say, but, well, couldn't as the manager.

The players took care of Hattaway, too. When he would travel with the team, he didn't have a per diem allotment, so somebody -- perhaps Brad Radke, Hunter, LaTroy Hawkins, Eddie Guardado or Gardenhire -- would pay for Hattaway's hotel room, while a designated rookie would walk the aisles collecting money from players for meal money.

"He had those lines with all these young studs, where, you know, nothing stinks on their body," Gardenhire said. "Big Fella would always put them in their place, and it just entertained the heck out of me. He took a lot of the stuff that I needed to say. He would just say it to them straight out, and they didn't know how to take it at first, but after a while, there was daggers flying everywhere. And he was right in the middle of every one."

"He was just one of those guys, you know, the little guy with the funniest laugh in the world, would cough every time he started laughing so hard, you'd think he's dying. You'd start talking sometimes, false teeth would go falling out, and not on purpose, because he'd get excited. It was everything. Everything he did was special and touched a lot of people's lives."

"He was unfiltered before the Camel cigarette became unfiltered," Liddle added.

And the stories. Oh, the stories. Everybody has at least one. Here are a few:

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- Rantz remembers a separate occasion when Big Fella impaled a television on a fence post. It was likely also Alabama-related.
- **Ryan:** "I think Wayne's one of the few people that thought Forrest Gump was a real figure. He loved that movie because of Forrest Gump playing for Alabama. Don't get in Wayne's way when that team is on TV."
- **Gardenhire:** "[A Minor League] bus is catching on fire, and they're all, 'Get off the bus, Wayne!' He goes, 'I'm going down with the ship!' You can't make up stuff like that. True story. Bus is on fire, smoke all in it. And Big Fella wouldn't get up, telling them he's going down with the ship. They said he was hacking up lungs, coughing, you know, and he said he's going down with the bus."
- **Ryan:** "I saw him one day in New York. We got off the bus after a playoff game, and Wayne's a huge WWE guy. He thinks that's real as well. We got off that bus and Ric Flair was there waiting for a ride or a cab or something. Wayne went over there and jumped in his arms. Wayne loved Ric Flair. Every day you're around the guy, something happens, and you just can't believe what's going on with him."
- One collaborative story for good measure:

Gardenhire: "I got ejected in the first inning [of a game], which wasn't a shocker. First hitter of the game, and all of a sudden, I'm up in the office watching the game. ... Corey Koskie slides into home plate head-first and they call him out. And we got -- he was saying he should have been safe. If there's replay, it would have been. So everybody goes running on the field jumping up and down. But Big Fella went running up and down on the field too.

"And he wasn't supposed to be out there, and one of the umpires, can't remember who it was, was, you know, pointing at him, who is this guy? And Wayne gave him the old [gesture], and he got thrown out."

Ryan: "I had a call from New York [the next morning]. I didn't realize what had happened, because I didn't see it. The Commissioner called me. He says, 'You got a Hannewald or Hasbrook or ...?' And I said, 'Hattaway?'"

"I called Wayne, and I said, 'Wayne, what are you doing here? You got thrown out of a game last night?' And he goes, 'Yeah, Big Fella!' And I say, 'You know who called me this morning? Bud Selig. I don't think you'd better let that happen again, Wayne. And on top of that, I don't know how you can question an umpire, because I know you can't see.'"

For six decades, Hattaway would eat, breathe and sleep the sport that he loved around the friends that he adored. He lived his life as his true, unfiltered self, unafraid to speak his mind to the athletic celebrities of his day, making an indelible mark on the Twins with an endless catalog of hard work, laughs, antics and absurdities that bonded generations of coaches, players and executives.

Big Fella lived a blessed baseball life of which most fans can only dream.

"I think if you talk to all of us that were around him, the one thing he always did is, he kept us grounded," Gardenhire said. "He made us understand that it wasn't life or death, and all he ever cared about, really, was that the game didn't go too long so he could just clean the clubhouse and get to sleep early. That was

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"I've never met anybody like Wayne, ever," Liddle said. "A lot of people will tell you, when you interview them, they'll say every clubhouse has somebody like that. Let me tell you something. You may think you've got somebody like that. You don't. There is no earthly way you have somebody like Wayne Hattaway."

"We want everybody to understand that we've lost a real big Twins guy and just a real Big Fella, as his name leads to," Gardenhire added. "A good man, and we're all going to miss the living heck out of him."

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