

Rally Squirrel's Unite

Being from St. Louis and being a Cardinal fan for my entire life (favorite team-the decade of 1960's Cardinals), all of us that are a part of Cardinal Nation know how important the Rally Squirrel was to the success of the Cardinals in the last couple of weeks of their World Championship season.

There is no denying that the Rally Squirrel was the 10th man on the field for the Cardinals, made a ton of money for the St. Louis area merchants, brought together a team that was not totally clicking most of the season with injuries and inconsistent play and inspired and united an entire Metro St. Louis Community.

One chance happening by a little furry creature for whatever reason had the nerve to run directly in front of homeplate during an extremely important game and changed the course of a season. Honestly, no one could have thought that one up.

It is amazing how a different focus than the total seriousness of the game can really relax players, give them a little more focus and potentially bring them together. I brought a stuffed squirrel to one of our fall tournaments as our Rally Squirrel. The players who are 15-17 years old, made the squirrel part of the team immediately. They named him Stanley after Stan the Man Musial and Stanley was attached to the inside of the fence facing the field by the dugout gate as if he was watching the game. The players took turns taking care of Stanley after the games throughout the weekend. They have video and pictures of Stanley doing flips on the palm of a player's hand, hitching a ride in the back pocket of a player, hanging out of a pocket of a backpack, eating breakfast with the players and on and on. We did not lose a game that weekend. Coincidence?

At St. Louis CC/Meramec, we had Flea, Tick and Kyle. Three stuffed dogs that came from different backgrounds that united many years of Meramec players. Flea came from a Petsmart in St. Louis and was the first to come to the team in the form of a present from one of the players to me. Flea looked like a Siberian Husky. The second dog to come to Meramec was a smaller version of Flea that I found in a store in Canada. The team named this one Tick. Kyle (his name was on his tag) was a stuffed Coyote from Arizona where we took the team every year for spring training.

I borrowed a choke chain (I am a cat person) from a dog friend of mine and put it around the neck of the three dogs keeping them as one. The message to my team at Meramec was to make the other team choke. I wanted them to put the pressure on the other team from the start to the finish of the game. We wanted to set the tone of the game by the way we approached our pre-game warmup, how we carried ourselves around the field, our hustle, our enthusiasm and our look of determination. Having "the boys" on the fence symbolized our approach to the game and reminded each player on the way out to the field and on the way back into the dugout what our approach was and what our goal was and that was to win as a team.

When we got the lead and as the innings went by, all I had to do if we started to let down or even just as a reminder, was to put my finger in the choke chain and give it a tug. They knew that meant for them to get their focus back and to put the pressure back on to the other team. It was fun to see the players touch the dogs coming or going through the gates and I knew they were locked in when they did that. You could see the positive looks on their faces and the strength in the way that they walked.

Find your type of Rally Squirrel, Stanley, Flea, Tick or Kyle and teach your players what you want it to symbolize. Stanley is still with the players and will rejoin the club next summer. Flea, Tick and Kyle are forever immortalized in scrapbooks that the Meramec players received. They are retired now and living on the windowsill in my utility room. I pass them everyday and when I look at them I still think of what they helped us accomplish and still feel that feeling of strength from them.

They are a lot of other things that you can use instead of a stuffed animal. Party City has bags of inspirational bracelets that say things like Game On, Defense, etc. or they can be personalized in color and saying by companies like Oriental Trading. They can write a word or saying on their gloves, visors, or anything they can look

at anytime during the game when they need to calm down a little, take a deep breathe, regroup, whatever they need to do to be the best that they can be and be mentally tough. Encourage them to especially write something on their glove or wrist band.

Every team needs to be able to counter the intensity of tough games with something they makes them laugh, smile a little or feel a sense of calm with. Find whatever that is for your team and I guarantee it will help your team be more successful.