

Calling perfection

Bob Wolff, radio announcer for Larsen's 1956 gem, shares thoughts on the changing art of sportscasting

By Devra Maza
Special for USA TODAY

When the New York Yankees' Don Larsen took the mound Oct. 8, 1956, there had been three perfect games thrown in baseball's modern era. Larsen, who had been wild in his previous start, seemed the least likely pitcher to throw the fourth.

The idea that he would do so in a World Series, or that Bob Wolff, the broadcaster for the hapless Washington Senators, would be the one to call it, was even more unlikely.

But Wolff knows a thing or two about perfection. Not only did Wolff call Larsen's gem for an enthralled nationwide and armed forces radio audience, but at 90, he is now the longest-running sportscaster in history. His career longevity gives him a unique perspective on how the art of calling games has adapted to changing times and technologies.

"It's the most meaningful game I've seen for its historical importance and for the effect it's had on my life," Wolff says of Game 5 of the 1956 World Series between the Yankees and the Brooklyn Dodgers. "It's become a very big part of my persona."

On Sunday, Wolff will call the play-by-play for the Old-Timers' game at Yankee Stadium, a showcase he has announced for more than a decade. There, he is scheduled to reunite with Larsen and catcher Yogi Berra 55 years after what remains the only perfect game in World Series history.

Wolff almost wasn't there. In 1956, World Series announcers were chosen from the pennant-winning National and American League teams. This did not bode well for Wolff.

"I could never be on a winning team because the Senators wouldn't win in my lifetime," he says.

As the Yankees' Mel Allen and Dodgers' Vin Scully landed TV broadcasting spots, Wolff understood. "They knew the teams best and watched them play all season. Today it isn't about talent; it's based on if your network has the games. Now they're lucky they get seats."

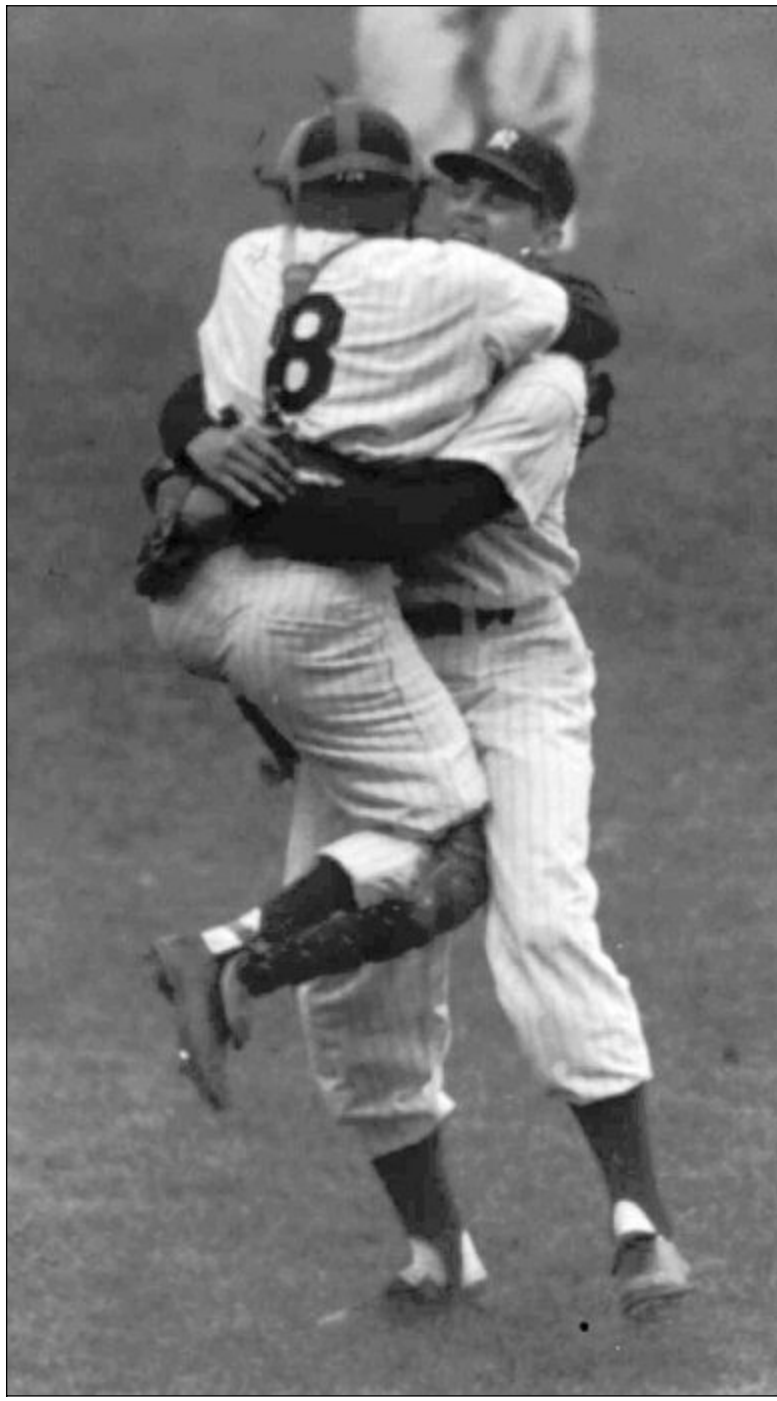
But the lucky stars were on Wolff's side — the All-Stars to be exact — as the 1956 All-Star Game was played at Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C. That game would prove to be pivotal in Wolff's career. Its broadcast was sponsored by the Gillette Safety Razor Company. When Gillette became the sole sponsor of the World Series on radio, company officials remembered Wolff's performance and tapped him to join Bob Neal. The pair would alternate throughout the series, each calling half the game.

Luck remained with Wolff as he drew the fifth game's second half. Before taking the microphone in the bottom of the fifth, Wolff informed producers he had no intention of using the word "perfect."

"I feel to this day you shouldn't have to use that word," Wolff says. "Broadcasters should have vocabularies good enough to say '21 in a row,' 'so many up, so many down,' 'no base-runners allowed.' You can tell the story the same way without using those words until the end."

And that, according to Wolff, delivers a greater impact while respecting a superstition that adds to the suspense. "The players recognize it's part of baseball tradition," says Wolff, who believes sportscasters should be part of that tradition as well.

What Wolff sees instead is a deterioration in the vocabulary of sportscasters, sometimes resulting in literal mistakes. "A defensive player can't be 'credited' with an error because there's nothing good about it," Wolff says. "He can only be 'charged' with



AP file photo

In the booth: Bob Wolff described Yogi Berra's iconic embrace of Don Larsen after Game 5 of the 1956 World Series for radio listeners nationwide.

one." But Wolff's perspicacity goes beyond the poetry.

"Great calls used to be based upon the use of words as an art form, but now TV has changed that considerably," he says. "They put captions on pictures so now the great calls don't have literary value so much as emotional value. Think of one of the best calls of all time: 'The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant!' ... It's an instinctive thing. The best sportscasters give voice to the crowd's emotions."

And if you can add literary value to that, you're batting a thousand.

"Words carry nuance," says Wolff, who has been called The Human Thesaurus. "I believe a part of my strength is matching the right nuances with the right words and not just using the same ones over and over again."

To Wolff, sportscasters who endlessly repeat phrases are like pitchers who throw only fastballs. They have fewer options: "Some aren't as prepared or as quick. Some get hysterical about nothing."

One sportscaster whom Wolff admires is Bob Costas, who returns the favor. "Bob is simultaneously credible and engaging. He has a genial authority, which is a rare combination," Costas says. "He exudes honest enthusiasm. It's not just a broadcast persona. He's actually a nice guy."

Costas credits Wolff's "very pleasant, distinctive voice" for adding to his appeal. For Wolff, the vocal delivery of a call is as important as its content. At the end of the Larsen game, Wolff made what he refers to as a "singing call," one that literally rises with the action.

Should announcers use the words "perfect game" or "no-hitter" as one is unfolding? Vote online and listen to the final moments of Wolff's call of Larsen's perfect game at baseball.usatoday.com.

"It just burst out of me," he recalls. "You channel the emotion, excitement and tension." While TV let the crowd's cheers and the shot of Berra leaping onto Larsen speak for itself, Wolff was the only one describing the scene.

"I thought that was the greatest sight I'd ever seen in a baseball game. The little catcher, at 5-8, jumping up in that 6-4 pitcher's arms, that was the big picture of the game, and it still is." The image would become as iconic as the call it inspired.

Wolff would go on to become the only announcer to call championship games in all four of America's major sports on his way to both the Baseball and Basketball Halls of Fame.

And he hasn't stopped working. Wolff is celebrating a quarter-century at News 12 Long Island, where he does his weekly "Point of View" commentaries, and has just released his latest book, *Bob Wolff's Complete Guide to Sportscasting*.

But it is that October day in 1956 for which he is best known, giving him the legacy of a perfect announcer of a uniquely perfect game.

"Forevermore, I'm going to be linked with one of the greatest baseball moments of all time. And I do know this: Nobody will ever top it," Wolff says. "The most they can do is tie it, and I think that is sufficient to know for the rest of my life."

Screenwriter Devra Maza writes features on baseball for USA TODAY. Her poem, *The Great Greg Maddux*, is in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

AL leaders (through Wednesday)

Batting		OPS		Slugging pct.	
Based on 3.1 plate appearances for each game a player's team has played.					
Gonzalez, Bos	74	304	55	109	359
Martinez, Det	60	220	32	73	332
Konero, Chi	73	272	39	89	327
Cabrera, Det	75	257	54	84	327
Bautista, Tor	67	237	56	77	325
Young, Tex	74	296	30	93	314
Ortiz, Bos	72	268	47	84	313
Ellsbury, Bos	74	297	53	92	310
Joyce, TB	68	223	40	69	309
Kendrick, LA	62	243	36	74	305
Lind, Tor	25	115	15	32	148
Doubles					
Gonzalez, Bos	15				
Zobrist, TB	24				
Ellsbury, Bos	22				
Gordon, Chi	22				
Quentin, Chi	21				
Cabrera, Det	15				
Lind, Tor	15				
Home runs					
Bautista, Tor	22				
Granderson, NY	21				
Konero, Chi	21				
Teixeira, NY	21				
Granderson, NY	21				
Cruz, Tex	17				
Ortiz, Bos	17				
Quentin, Chi	17				
Cabrera, Det	15				
Cabrera, Det	15				
Lind, Tor	15				
Home runs batted in					
Bautista, Tor	22				
Granderson, NY	21				
Konero, Chi	21				
Teixeira, NY	21				
Granderson, NY	21				
Cruz, Tex	17				
Ortiz, Bos	17				
Quentin, Chi	17				
Cabrera, Det	15				
Cabrera, Det	15				
Lind, Tor	15				
Doubles					
Gonzalez, Bos	15				
Zobrist, TB	24				
Ellsbury, Bos	22				
Gordon, Chi	22				
Quentin, Chi	21				
Cabrera, Det	15				
Lind, Tor	15				
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Ortiz, Bos	17				
Quentin, Chi	17				
Cabrera, Det	15				
Cabrera, Det	15				
Lind, Tor	15				
Home runs batted in					
Bautista, Tor	22				
Granderson, NY	21				
Konero, Chi	21				
Teixeira, NY	21				
Granderson, NY	21				
Cruz, Tex	17				
Ortiz, Bos	17				
Quentin, Chi	17				
Cabrera, Det	15				
Cabrera, Det	15				
Lind, Tor	15				

NL leaders (through Wednesday)

Batting		OPS		Slugging pct.	
Based on 3.1 plate appearances for each game a player's team has played.					
Reyes, NY	71	315	55	105	335
Kemp, LA	76	271	49	89	328
Castro, Chi	72	307	42	99	322
Votto, Cin	70	290	33	93	321
Votto, Cin	75	274	50	87	318
Smith, Col	62	213	36	67	315
Ethier, LA	75	272	36	85	313
Holloman, Col	64	216	33	67	310
Braun, Mil	75	278	54	86	309
Berkman, STL	65	215	43	66	307
Home runs					
Fielder, Mil	20				
Kemp, LA	20				
Berkman, STL	17				
Bruce, Cin	17				
Pujols, STL	17				
Howard, Phi	16				
Stanton, Fla	16				
Braun, Mil	15				
Young, Ari	15				
Doubles					
Beltran, NY	21				
Votto, Cin	21				
Upton, Ari	21				
Coghlan, Fla	20				
Montero, Ari	20				
Boutt, Hou	20				
Reyes, NY	20				
Young, Ari	20				
Home runs batted in					
Fielder, Mil	20				
Kemp, LA	20				
Berkman, STL	17				
Bruce, Cin	17				
Pujols, STL	17				
Howard, Phi	16				
Stanton, Fla	16				
Braun, Mil	15				
Young, Ari	15				
Doubles					
Beltran, NY	21				
Votto, Cin	21				
Upton, Ari	21				
Coghlan, Fla	20				
Montero, Ari	20				
Boutt, Hou	20				
Reyes, NY	20				
Young, Ari	20				
Home runs batted in					
Fielder, Mil	20				
Kemp, LA	20				
Berkman, STL	17				
Bruce, Cin	17				
Pujols, STL	17				
Howard, Phi	16				
Stanton, Fla	16				
Braun, Mil	15				
Young, Ari	15				

AL leaders (through Wednesday)

Batting		OPS		Slugging pct.	
Based on 3.1 plate appearances for each game a player's team has played.					
Kemp, LA	620				
Fielder, Mil	1,033				
Berkman, STL	1,013				
Braun, Mil	945				
Votto, Cin	930				
Smith, Col	922				
Stanton, Fla	549				
Home runs					
Fielder, Mil	20				
Kemp, LA	20				
Berkman, STL	17				
Bruce, Cin	17				
Pujols, STL	17				
Howard, Phi	16				
Stanton, Fla	16				
Braun, Mil	15				
Young, Ari	15				
Doubles					
Beltran, NY	21				
Votto, Cin	21				
Upton, Ari	21				
Coghlan, Fla	20				
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Home runs batted in					
Fielder, Mil	20				
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Berkman, STL	17				
Bruce, Cin	17				
Pujols, STL	17				
Howard, Phi	16				
Stanton, Fla	16				
Braun, Mil	15				
Young, Ari	15				

Giants 2, Twins 1

Minnesota	ab	r	h	bi	bb	so	avg
Revere cf	4	0	1	0	0	1	.259
Casilla 2b	2	1	0	0	2	0	.265
Cuddyer rf	4	0	3	1	0	0	.291
Young lf	4	0	0	0	1	1	.254
Valencia 3b	4	0	0	0	2	2	.215
L. Hughes 1b	3	0	0	0	1	2	.254
Rivera c	3	0	0	0	3	0	.172
Tolbert ss	2	0	0	0	2	1	.194
Nishioka	1	0	0	0	1	0	.200
ph-rs							
Duensing p	2	0	0	0	0	2	.000
Burnett p	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000
Mauer ph	1	0	0	0	0	0	.200
Perkins p	0	0	0	0	0	0	.000
Totals							
30 2 4 13 14							

► **Batting** — 3B: Cuddyer (2); 1B: R. I. Anderson (30); Team LOB: 5.
► **Baserunning** — CS: Revere (3).
► **Fielding** — DP: 2.

San Francisco	ab	r	h	bi	bb	so	avg
Rowand cf	3	0	2	0	0	0	.