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Tony La Russa goes to bat in Las Vegas for cats and dogs



By Ron Kantowski
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A headline on the news release said Hall of Fame pitcher John Smoltz would be part of an all-star lineup at the seventh Leaders and Legends fundraiser benefiting fellow Hall of Famer Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation at Aria this weekend.

No, Smoltz did not bat eighth, swapping places with a cuddly Bichon Frise.

Batting pitchers eighth and winning World Series and Manager of the Year awards were among the things for which La Russa was known during his 33 seasons that produced 2,728 managerial wins, the third most in MLB history.

Now he is becoming almost as widely known for finding homes for orphan cats and dogs.

It started with one orphan cat during the 1990 season.

A calico darted through a hole in the Yankees' bullpen fence at Oakland Coliseum, where stray cats were known to live under the stands and exist on a diet of peanuts and Cracker Jack.

The frightened cat eventually made its way to the A's dugout and into a nearby bathroom. A's manager La Russa closed the door and the game continued.

La Russa's wife, Elaine, watched it all unfold on TV. She told her husband that the cat's chances for survival after being taken to a city shelter were no better than Dave Stewart's pitching on short rest.

The next day La Russa drove to the city shelter and did a Rollie Fingers. He saved the calico by taking it to another shelter near his home in Contra Costa County, where it could be put up for adoption. The calico was named Evie, after then A's owner Evie Haas. It took a lot of calls to the bullpen before Evie the cat finally was adopted.



Boston Red Sox special assistant Tony La Russa speaks with a player during baseball spring training, Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2018, in Fort Myers, Fla. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

The experience led the La Russas to create a foundation for cats and dogs who have run out of time.

Founded in 1991, Tony La Russa's ARF has rescued more than 40,000 cats and dogs and spawned a roster of related programs creating awareness in the mission. These include Pets for Vets, which matches U.S. military veterans with emotional support pets and provides free veteran wellness clinics.

When La Russa speaks about Pets for Vets and the other programs and his foundation in general, the pride and passion comes through like Rickey Henderson with ducks on the pond.

"When we started ARF 27 years ago, we realized that a companion animal has a therapeutic, magical effect on people with needs," he said ahead of the fundraising gala. "People rescue animals, but animals also rescue people. They have this amazing quality.

"We like to think we're saving lives on both ends of the leash."