

INDUCTEE PROFILE



Bob and Joan Lozinak have shared many a night with 8,000 of their closest friends at Blair County Ballpark (now Peoples Natural Gas Field).

Living the dream

Love of the game, each other, fulfill Bob and Joan Lozinak

By **Cory Giger**
Altoona Mirror

Burgers and baseball: A great American love story.

If there were a movie about Bob and Joan Lozinak, that would be the title. The backstory would include a heaping helping of hometown devotion, great work ethic, compassion and character, creating a recipe for a wonderful marriage.

The Lozinaks, Altoona Curve owners and one of the most influential couples in Altoona history, have been married for 53 years. They have long maintained a loving partnership

that legitimizes the old saying, "Behind every great man is a great woman."

"She was 100 percent behind every move I made — to this very day," Bob said.

Being so supportive has been easy for Joan, because ...

"Bob's very much a visionary," she said. "Bob is always thinking ahead."

Except, perhaps, for at the very beginning, anyway.

Long before Bob Lozinak saw the value in opening a McDonald's franchise, and long before he first dreamed of putting a minor league baseball team in his hometown, he

wasn't at all sure that he wanted much to do with Joan Bettwy.

"I wasn't interested in her at all," Bob, with a laugh, said of his younger days.

Bob recalled that his sister, Maryann, "bugged me forever" about a potential relationship with her friend Joan.

"I really didn't pay too much attention to her," Bob added.

Feelings changed, though, and the two eventually did start dating. Bob said absence made his heart grow fonder for Joan when he spent time in Alaska in the early 1950s.

The couple married on Feb. 23,

(Continued on page 10)

(Continued from page 9)

1963, with Bob calling it "an osmosis wedding" because he had known Joan's family forever.

"We're kind of different personalities in ways, but we have the same values," Joan said when asked why they work as a couple.

Bob finished his service in the Army in 1966, and at that point the young couple was simply trying to determine what to do with their lives. Bob had come back home from New Mexico for summer break the previous two years and worked at a local Esso service station, where as fate would have it, he was introduced to a man who would change his life.

The fellow, Don Workinger, came to the station driving a fancy pink Cadillac, and the Esso owner told Bob, "You see that guy? He owns a McDonald's."

"I said, man, what would be so bad about that?" Bob recalled.

So, he met with Workinger, "got the ball rolling" and, on Dec. 9, 1969, Bob and Joan opened their first McDonald's in Aberdeen, Md.

The Lozinaks knew McDonald's would turn out to be a golden opportunity and that they were on their way to a wealthy, wonderful life.

Right? Not exactly.

"I was really scared when we went to open it," Bob said.

Ray Kroc opened the first McDonald's franchise in 1955, and 14 years later, there were still plenty of doubts that it could become a national phenomenon.

"No, I could have never dreamt that," Bob said.

Kroc had a motto for what it would take to be successful in the burger business, one that Joan still remembers.

"His saying was, 'You had to have ketchup in your blood,'" she recalled.

The Lozinaks, with Bob in charge of everything out front and Joan handling the finances, embarked on a business that did indeed turn them into multimillionaires. But it didn't come easy.

"When I ran McDonald's, I was running it like a drill sergeant," Bob said. "I wanted everything to be right in the stores. I couldn't be satisfied. I was burning the candle all the time. I



Bob and Joan pose Pirates manager Clint Hurdle.

wanted it to be as perfect as I could make it."

Demand, as one can expect, was enormous for the growing franchise.

"You could never keep up with people on the other side of the counter," Bob said. "From 5 to midnight at Aberdeen, we would sell 1,100 Big Macs. That is constantly making them, and you make 12 at a time."

Their first McDonald's franchise did so well that the Lozinaks decided to open three more in 1974. They later expanded to as many as eight locations, growing a mini-McDonald's empire in their region of Maryland.

The burger success allowed Bob to start thinking more about his real passion — baseball. He first came up with an idea to put a minor league team in Altoona in 1979, but local leaders balked. Bob eventually wound up buying the franchise in Albuquerque, N.M., where he had served in the Army.

The Albuquerque

franchise pretty much ran itself, with longtime executive Pat McKernan in charge of the operation, and the Lozinaks only going out there four or five times a year.

Bob never gave up on the idea of bringing minor league baseball to Altoona, and in 1997 he got a call that finally started that process. Local business developer Tate DeWeese had done the early legwork and had hoped to get Lozinak involved in the venture.

When Bob told Joan, well ...

"She turned into a 6-year-old," Bob said. "She was so exuberant because she was from a family of 14 from Altoona.

"She said, 'What chance do you



Lozinak bio

Sport: Baseball

High school: Altoona Area (Bob), Altoona Catholic (Joan)

College: Bob graduated from Saint Francis.

Hall of Fame achievement: Bob and Joan brought the Altoona Curve and Eastern League baseball to their hometown in 1999. They are among a handful of minor league baseball owners to have twice received the prestigious John H. Johnson Trophy, given annually to the top franchise in minor league baseball.

Current residence: Churchville Md.

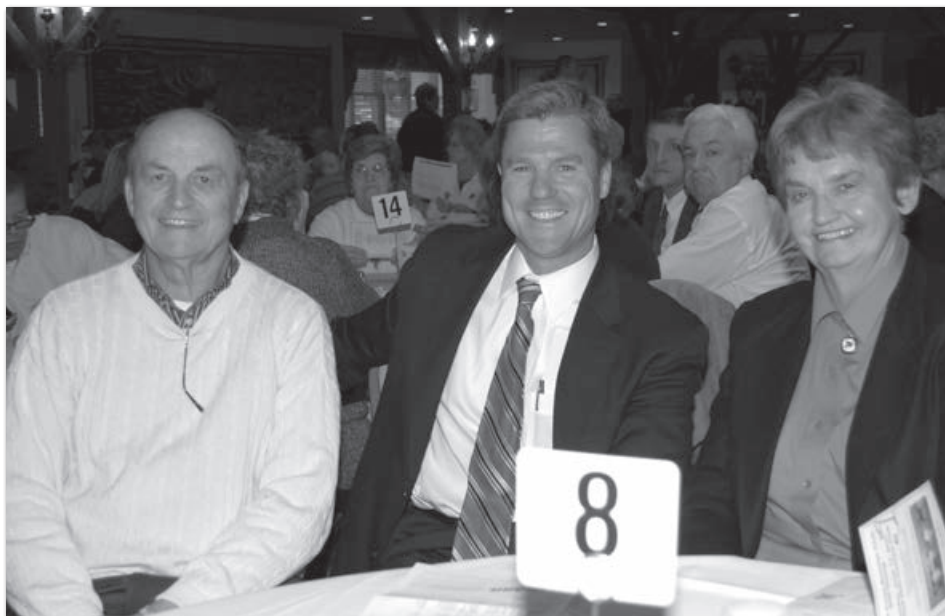
think we have?' I said about 10 percent. I didn't think they wanted to come to Altoona."

Oh, but minor league officials did want to be in Altoona, with the Eastern League adding an expansion franchise to go along with the one planned for Erie.

"It's such a family venture," Joan said of minor league baseball. "It's family entertainment, families can afford to go to minor league baseball games, the children are safe at the games."

Unfortunately for the Lozinaks, they eventually encountered a tangled web of legal issues with DeWeese, which led to a lengthy court battle. DeWeese, according to many who knew him, was a difficult person to get along with and had very little money invested in the Curve, and things got so bad that he was fired from the franchise.

As the court battle lingered, Bob and Joan had enough. They decided to sell the Curve following the 2001 season, which Joan called heart-breaking for the family. Pittsburgh at-



Bob and Joan enjoy the company of Pirates president Frank Coonelly.

torney Chuck Greenberg bought the team and owned it until 2008, while the Lozinaks moved on to a franchise in Jackson, Tenn., that turned out to be one headache after another.

Bob and Joan always dreamed of having a ballclub in their hometown, and when they sold the Curve, they never thought they'd have a chance to get the team back. But then DeWeese, still a minority owner, died on his 58th birthday in 2005, and Greenberg decided in 2008 that he wanted to sell the Curve.

Greenberg called Bob, and with fate intervening once again, the franchise wound up back in the hands of

its original owners.

"Bob got off the phone and said, 'What would you think about if we got Altoona back?'" Joan said. "Immediately I said yes. I said, 'We're supposed to be there.'"

The Lozinaks' three sons, David, Steve and Mike, have all been involved with the Curve in various roles, making it a family business. Joan is very proud of that, as well as having many mem-

bers of her Bettwy family involved over the years.

Bob and Joan both called it humbling to be inducted into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame and said the recognition is not something they expected.

"It's an honor for us," Joan said, "because we grew up in that community, and Altoona is where we learned values. People took care of each other and looked out for people."

Anyone who knows the Lozinaks knows they are a blue-collar family. They don't mind doing the grunt work — something Bob always did at McDonald's and his sons now do at Peoples Natural Gas Field — and they aren't the least bit flashy or boastful about their success.

It's all about hard work and humility for the family. They worked hard in the burger business, and they work hard in the baseball business, always with one goal in mind — to please the customer.

Getting to do that with their highly successful minor league baseball team in their hometown has been extremely rewarding for Bob and Joan.

"We've been blessed tremendously, far more than we would ever have dreamed," Joan said. "But with that blessing comes the responsibility, and we've tried to fill that commitment to the community."



The Lozinaks' succession plan features son David, now the Curve's chief operating officer.



Bob with former Dodgers manager Tom Lasorda.