

Lou Piniella was born into baseball

Under his mom's steady guidance, game and family intertwined for fiery manager

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By Melissa Isaacson, ESPNChicago.com

CHICAGO -- In the winter, they would sit at the kitchen table drinking coffee and talking baseball.

"Lou," **Margaret Piniella** would question impatiently, "why don't you have this guy bunt?"

"Mom," he would reply patiently, "this guy makes \$8 million. He doesn't want to bunt."

But you didn't argue with **Margaret Piniella**. Or if you did, you'd better have a good answer ready. When **Lou Piniella** grew up, you respected your elders. All of them.

"Everybody's parents looked out for everybody's kids, and if you weren't respectful on one side of the park where other parents were watching you, they'd let you know about it and your parents on the other side would find out," recalled Tony Gonzalez, one of Lou's oldest friends from their days in West Tampa, Fla. "This age of technology and the fast-moving world we're living in, a lot of that has been lost.

"One thing about **Lou Piniella** and all of our friends, I don't think any of us have forgotten where we came from."

Ezra Shaw/Getty Images



Lou Piniella returned home to Tampa during his career, managing the Devil Rays for three years.

For the second and final time in his career, **Piniella** is going home to Florida, retiring as manager of the Chicago Cubs on Sunday to help manage the care of his mother, now 90 and in failing health.

The first time he left a job with his family in mind, **Piniella** was with the Seattle Mariners.

"My father was not doing well and my daughter was going through a divorce, and it was time for me to come home," he explained in an interview a few years ago about his decision to manage Tampa Bay.

There were other issues that made leaving Seattle logical, just as there are for him to leave the Cubs now, with Sunday's mess, a 16-5 loss to Atlanta, serving as Exhibit A. And there are those who will say it was too easy walking away from a team at the depths.

But that conclusion is too simplistic.

They were all there together in the little house on Conrad Street. Margaret and Louis and baby Louie, plus Margaret's brothers Joe and Mac and Mac's wife Gloria, living under the roof of Margaret's parents, **Marcelinno and Benina Magadan**, who had emigrated from Spain.

It was before the house on Cordelia Street, the one across from the park where Margaret would become a recreation director, where her boys would spend all day all summer, where her oldest son, Lou, would become a star and where it eventually would be renamed Piniella Park.

Conrad Street is where **Joe Magadan** cut down a broomstick and gave it to his little nephew with a tennis ball and where Margaret watched Lou catch "fly balls" as they rolled off the roof.

By the age of 2, Lou was a fixture at his mother's side, regulars at the Tuesday and Thursday night Intersocial League baseball games in West Tampa, where his father, Louis, was a talented pitcher and uncles Joe and Mac were top players, as well.

Later, Lou would become a bat boy and he and his buddies would learn the finer points of the game from watching and talking, taking the conversation from the field to the dinner table each night. But it was Margaret who taught them how to play.

"His father was wonderful, but she was the athlete of the family and that was well before women's lib," said another Piniella childhood buddy, **Carmine Iavarone**. "Everyone says Lou takes after his mom."

Margaret Piniella was tall and strong, a standout in basketball, volleyball and softball. In grammar school, she played first base for the boys' team.

"I was the only girl playing," she said proudly when I interviewed her two years ago. "They begged me to play."

She watched with pride as Lou became one of Tampa's top baseball and basketball prospects. There were those who said he was just as talented as a youth league football player, but Margaret wouldn't allow him to play in high school.

"Yes, he could've been good," she said. "He was good in everything. But I wouldn't let him. Neither of my kids played football. Too rough. My brother Joe, the oldest, lost a kidney playing football [at **Loyola University in New Orleans**]. It almost killed him. So I told Lou, 'No football.' They could play tough, but no tackle."

And that was that.

When Lou was a regular on every sportscast flinging bases in anger, no one in Tampa wondered where it came from.

Often, **Margaret Piniella** would stay in her car behind the left-field fence during Lou's games so she wouldn't become too excited. But just as often, she would be courtside during Lou's basketball games for **Jesuit High**, exchanging words with opposing fans, infuriated when officials would call fouls on Lou for retaliating.

She was not fond of those stories. But when asked about her son's temper on the baseball field and in the dugout as both player and manager, she explained it this way.

"They say he has a temper," she said. "Well, everyone has a temper. I have a temper ,too. But when the game's over, that's gone. I go home, and I'm a different person. That's the way Lou is, too. He just wants everything to be perfect."

At Piniella Park, it was a familiar sight to see **Louis and Margaret Piniella**, long since retired, sitting on their porch, not 50 yards from the third-base dugout, watching softball games and calling out to position the outfielders.

Up until very recently, mother and son would still talk baseball and Margaret would still question her son about the decisions he made.

She probably would have plenty to say about Sunday's game. Surely, it was not what Lou envisioned as the final game in his managerial career, and afterward, there was no sweeping retrospective. Only tears.

"I get emotional, I'm sorry," Piniella said, his voice breaking. "This will be the last time I put on my uniform. It's been very special to me."

When he went home for his Uncle Joe's funeral three weeks ago, he went to lunch with Tony and Carmine and they talked about this. He had taken the lead when wife Anita's father was nearing the end years ago. He had come home when his father was not well.

It was simply time to come home again.

"These people hovered over him," **Iavarone** said of the extended Piniella family. "And ever since he became a man, he was away from them in baseball, so you have a little guilt feeling, too. It's a really sad time.

"When I saw him the other week, he was very down. He said that he told his mom, 'Don't worry, I'm going to take care of you.'"

And in that way, it was an easy decision.

"He said, 'I just gotta take it over,'" **Gonzalez** said. "That was a driving force that makes the decision for him easier. If he was just doing it because his team wasn't winning, I don't think he'd feel right about that because he's not a quitter. But I think the strain from losing his uncle three to four weeks ago and then his mom being put back into the hospital, he's the guy. He takes care of everything.

"We were brought up in very loving environments. Our parents were very, very close to us, and it's a passage time, going from one generation to the next. They took care of us and, on the way out, we're taking care of them. That's just the way it is."