



Wally Ritchie

From Government Finance to Major League Baseball

By John Fishbein

A former professional baseball player talks about his days in the Philadelphia Phillies and his second career in local government finance.

While teaching a course on personnel budgeting in California recently, GFOA's John Fishbein, a lifelong baseball fan, ran into former Philadelphia Phillies relief pitcher (and current financial controller at the Orange County Sanitation District) Wally Ritchie. They talked about baseball, of course, and how Ritchie made his way to a career in government finance.

Fishbein: How did you get involved in professional baseball?

Ritchie: I was always interested in baseball and played from the time that I was five. I was first scouted by professional teams while I played in high school. I was extensively scouted and followed while in college and was drafted by the Philadelphia Phillies. The Phillies selected me in the fourth round of the June 1985 draft.

I noticed that you didn't play baseball from 1989 to 1990. Was it an injury? You probably don't have to worry about those as much in your current career.

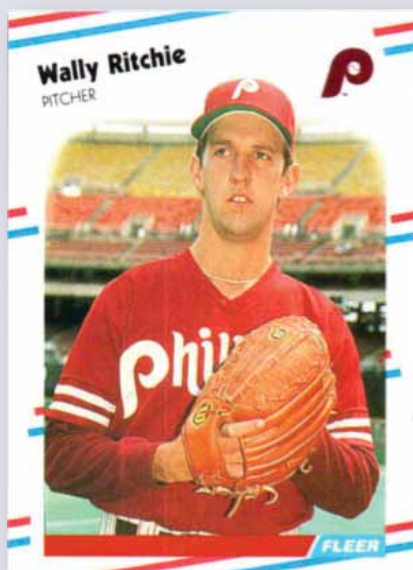
I was back in the minor leagues in 1989 and spent that year in Triple A. I was injured near the beginning of the 1990 season and ended up having shoulder surgery that kept me out for the rest of the year. Being a controller does have a lower injury risk than being a pitcher.

How did you feel watching the Phillies play in the World Series the year after you retired?

I had moved on from the Phillies and played in the minor leagues with the Detroit Tigers in 1993. I did watch the Phillies in the World Series that year. Part of me wished that I was still with them and had the opportunity to experience the post season. I had spent all of my professional career up to that point in the Phillies organization, both major and minor leagues, and had developed some really good friendships and other relationships. I was excited for the organization and my friends and was hoping that they would win. I think that everyone that plays the game at that level has a goal to reach the World Series. I understand the difficulty of reaching that point and was happy for my friends to be there. Unfortunately, they came up a little bit short and lost to the Blue Jays.

You went to Pepperdine Graziado Business School. Was that in the baseball offseason or after you retired?

I had taken an individual course here and there during my playing days, but nothing significant. I went to Pepperdine after I retired from baseball and completed both undergraduate and graduate degrees there.



Wally Ritchie 1988 Baseball Card

Wally Ritchie was a relief pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies from 1987 to 1988 and 1991 to 1992. He was in 147 games and had a career earned run average of 3.14.

What was your first job in government?

After my schooling was done, I worked in the private sector. I lived in Santa Clara, Utah, at the time, and they needed a finance director. I had a few interactions with the city manager, so I contacted him and asked about the position. I ended up applying, interviewing, and being hired as finance director for Santa Clara in 2006.

You were the city manager of Santa Clara from 2008 to 2011. How did that come about?

After being finance director for about a year, I also was given the additional

duties and title of assistant city manager. Working in a smaller municipality, staff tend to wear multiple hats. The city manager left for another opportunity and I was asked by the mayor and council to serve as the interim city manager. After four months, the mayor, council, and I agreed that we wanted to move forward with me as city manager, and the interim title was removed.

Did your baseball experience help you in managing the city?

I think there are a number of things that I learned from baseball that helped at the city. First, the value of preparation. In baseball, we would spend a lot of time practicing, studying film, meeting to review the other teams, and putting together a game plan. These ideas translated directly to city management — knowing the subject matter, being able to present your ideas, studying to know both sides of an issue, and being able to anticipate and address questions that may arise.

Second, in baseball we had a group of coaches, scouts, and other personnel to help us. In city management, I found an excellent group of city managers and mentors that I could ask questions of and get advice on different situations. I belonged to and was active in various groups on a state (Utah City/County Management Association, Utah GFOA, Utah League of Cities and Towns) and national level (International City/County Management Association, GFOA) to get the latest knowledge and best practices.

Third is communication and working with others. Baseball teams are made

up of players from all over the world with different backgrounds, languages, and cultures. You need to learn to communicate and work with different people to reach the common team goals during a season. Communication with staff and the public is key to city management. We often see competing priorities between departments or between the city and the public. Usually, we have a mutual goal of finding the best solution for the city — being able to communicate, understand the issues, discuss, and search for solutions that benefit the city allow the differing parties to work together on that solution.

Obviously, most of what we experience in one area of our lives can be applicable in another area, but these three ideas stand out to me.

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It looks like you got the baseball bug again when you left Santa Clara to be the pitching coach at Brigham Young.

I don't think that you ever get rid of the bug when something is your passion and you've been involved for most of your life. A friend was the head coach at Brigham Young University,

and he had a need for a pitching coach. We started talking and I had a chance to take the position. My family and I discussed the opportunity and realized that it was a rare chance to be involved in the sport I love at the highest amateur level, so we made the leap. It only lasted one season, but we really enjoyed it, and it was a great learning and growing experience for me and my family.

Baseball is built on numbers that tell the story of what happened in a game and the season. Government finance is very similar. As finance professionals, we track, account for, and provide the numbers

Then your career took another turn and you got back into government finance — first as finance director at Ivins City, Utah, for four years, and now as the financial controller at Orange County Sanitation District.

Things worked out and Ivins City needed a finance director. Ivins is a neighboring city to Santa Clara, and I had worked with them frequently in the past. It is a great community and I really enjoyed my time there. I grew up in Southern California and a little over a year ago, we began looking for the right opportunity to move back closer to home. I was hired at Orange County Sanitation District almost a year ago as the controller. It is a progressive,

industry-leading organization with great people that has given me the chance to be back home.

One final question — what are the major similarities and differences between professional baseball and government finance? One similarity is each has its own set of rules.

Baseball is built on numbers that tell the story of what happened in a game and the season. Government finance is very similar. As finance professionals for cities, counties, special districts, and states, we track, account for, and provide the numbers that tell the stories of our organizations.

Another similarity is that our jobs are performed in the public arena. Baseball has much larger in-person crowds, but people follow the proceedings on their computers and do research on the numbers for both professions.

I think the biggest difference between baseball and government finance is that baseball is a form of entertainment that can bring joy and enrich peoples lives in a way. Government finance allows us to make a difference and affect peoples lives on a daily basis. There is a tangible result to what we do and, hopefully, it makes life better. ■

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