



Dave Pallone.  
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## Pallone, Dave (b. 1951)

by Linda Rapp

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Because of the prevalence of homophobia in the culture of men's professional sports, umpire Dave Pallone remained closeted until he was outed and forced out of baseball. Since leaving the game he has become an advocate for glbtq rights.

David Pallone, born October 5, 1951 in Waltham, Massachusetts, grew up in a middle-class family in the adjacent city of Watertown. His father, Carmine Pallone, an immigrant from Italy, was a factory worker and also an ardent fan of the Boston Braves. While still in his teens, Carmine was offered a contract to pitch for the St. Louis Browns, but with the Great Depression in force, his father forbade him to accept it and told him to take a less risky job as a vegetable picker.

Carmine Pallone taught his son to pitch and took him to Red Sox games (the Braves having decamped to Milwaukee in 1953). Dave Pallone dreamed of pitching in Fenway Park, thinking, as a teen, that realizing his father's unfulfilled dream "would really make [his] dad proud."

Pallone pitched for his high school team, but his skill was not equal to that of his father. There was no hope of a college athletic scholarship, let alone a contract as a professional baseball player in his future.

In the summer of 1970 Pallone was working two jobs as a stock boy in a grocery store and a caddie. During a baseball game, he heard an ad for the Umpire Development Program in Florida. Having missed the particulars, he called the Red Sox office for more information and learned of another opportunity, a training course for umpires at the Ted Williams Baseball Camp in nearby Lakeland, Massachusetts.

Pallone excelled in the course and felt that he had found his calling. At the age of nineteen he entered the Umpire Development Program and, upon completing it, earned a contract to work in the minor leagues in 1971.

Life in minor league baseball has never been glamorous, and in the early 1970s it was even less so than it is now. Players on teams from small cities and towns competed before relatively meager crowds in stadiums that were generally far from state-of-the-art. Low salaries, paltry allocations of meal money, "fleabag hotels," and bus travel are frequently mentioned in reminiscences of the era. For umpires, it was much the same, minus the bus trips; they had to provide their own transportation.

By this time Pallone had realized that he was gay but also recognized that coming out would jeopardize his prospects of pursuing a career in baseball.

In 1975 Pallone was offered the opportunity to work in winter ball in the Dominican Republic, and he jumped at the chance since being selected meant that an umpire's skills were well regarded and that he might be on his way to the big leagues.

Pallone continued to advance and was promoted to Triple A ball, the highest tier of the minor leagues, at

the start of the 1976 season.

Feeling pressure to develop a heterosexual relationship, Pallone began dating a woman. Hoping that he would somehow learn to feel a sexual attraction and have a successful and socially conventional partnership, he proposed marriage to her on Christmas Eve 1977, a decision that he immediately regretted. He quickly called off the engagement and, he stated, felt "angry, guilty, sorry, [and] ashamed" for having caused pain to a good and decent person.

Although Pallone stated in his memoir, *Behind the Mask* (1990), "At that point I didn't know for *certain* that I wanted to be with a man for the rest of my life," it was clear that the realization was dawning on him. Nevertheless, he did not explore his feelings, but rather devoted himself to his goal of becoming an umpire in the major leagues.

His opportunity came in an unexpected and tumultuous way. In 1979 major league umpires went on strike before the season. Because the game could not proceed without officials, umpires from the minor leagues were offered contracts. Thus did Pallone reach the majors—and also become branded as a "scab."

Replacement umpires received a guaranteed two-year contract, after which their continued employment would be based on evaluations of merit. Confident of his abilities, Pallone signed on.

During the strike, Pallone worked in the National League as a crew chief, the manager of the umpiring squad and the ultimate arbiter of calls on the field. He and his crew were in a difficult position: players, especially some of the game's stars, attempted to intimidate or undermine their authority by repeatedly and conspicuously disputing their calls. Pallone resolved to stand firm in the face of opposition, and he assured the members of his crew that he would also stand up for them.

When the veteran umpires ended their strike some six weeks later, Pallone went from being a crew chief to working as a "swing" umpire, filling in for umpires who were on vacation or incapacitated. This situation inhibited the new umpires from developing a rapport with a regular crew, but it is unlikely that they would have had much success even with a consistent assignment. The veteran umpires shunned the "scabs," refused to associate with them off the field, and even during games would not come to the assistance of a new umpire taking flak from a player or manager.

Without the camaraderie of other umpires, life on the road was lonely for Pallone. On a more personal level, after the disastrous engagement, he had no intention of initiating another romantic relationship with a woman, but, he wrote, "I was still combating my emotional feelings about my sexuality," and so he did not establish any connections with gay men either.

That changed in November 1979, when, through friends in Boston, he met a man with whom he fell in love. He delighted in spending time with a loving and caring partner, but he was apprehensive about being seen in public with his lover since the atmosphere in baseball—indeed, in professional sports in general—was homophobic, and Pallone feared that being identified as a gay man would hamper, if not end, his career.

Much of the time the couple had no choice but to be apart since Pallone was on the road from the beginning of spring training until the end of the baseball season and his lover, called Scott in his memoir, was pursuing a graduate degree in Massachusetts. When he could, Pallone would fly to Boston on off days, and Scott would sometimes join him in other cities for a few days. Caution was their watchword during the visits. "If we ran into a player or manager I knew," wrote Pallone, "I would introduce Scott as my friend--and from then on try to avoid running into that same person again."

The ostracism by other umpires continued during the 1980 season, but Pallone concentrated on his work on the field and was gratified that several managers made a point of telling him that he was doing a great job. Thus, it came as a complete surprise when, after the season ended, National League President Chub Feeney told him that he might be fired for low ratings. Pallone was never allowed to see what the actual ratings were, but he suspected that his had been sabotaged by union umpires.

In the end, Pallone was retained but placed on probation and sent down to Triple A at the start of the next season. Almost immediately, however, he was recalled to the majors to work as a replacement for umpires planning to take their vacations early in anticipation of a strike by the players. Shortly after his return, though, the six-week strike began, giving Pallone more time to spend with Scott, although the two maintained separate residences to keep up appearances.

Pallone had scarcely arrived in Florida for spring training in 1982 when he received the shocking news that his father, whom he had seen just days before, had died of a heart attack. Back in Boston, Pallone had the consolation of Scott's comfort, but the latter "had to stay in the background" during the funeral.

Scott had not known his lover's father. "If my dad had met Scott too many times, he would have been too hard to explain," wrote Pallone. A few days after the funeral, Pallone took Scott to the cemetery and "introduced" him to his parents—his mother had died years earlier—and "told" them what he had never been able to during their lives: that he loved another man.

During the 1982 season Pallone was still being shunned by veteran umpires, but his deepening relationship with Scott helped him cope. His happiness came to an end on a November night when Scott was fatally injured when the car in which he was riding was hit by a van driven by a drunken teenager. Another friend from the car called Pallone, who raced to the hospital and was able to see Scott and talk to him. Scott could not speak but squeezed his hand in response before he died.

Pallone attended Scott's funeral in the role of friend. Scott's parents and sister had met Pallone but did not know the true nature of the relationship. "It was all I could do to keep myself from embracing them and sharing their grief, and telling them that Scott meant as much to me as he did to them," recalled Pallone. "But I just walked away like everyone else and tried not to draw attention to myself."

Depressed by the loss of his lover and the very lonely experience of his grief, Pallone wondered if he would be able to withstand the shunning from veteran umpires without Scott's support. He turned for spiritual guidance to a friend who was a priest in the Boston area. Father Piermarini assured him that he was a good man and counseled him to doubt neither himself nor God. He also advised him to practice the injunctions given in the book of Matthew: "Love your enemies. . . . and pray for them which despitefully use you."

Whether or not prayer had anything to do with it, Pallone found himself in a much more congenial situation in 1983. He was assigned to the crew of chief umpire Bob Engel, who began the season by telling Pallone, "I don't like all this ostracism crap." He had talked to the other crew members, he said, and "we all hope it stops."

Pallone was finally working with men who were prepared to be mentors instead of antagonists to their younger colleagues. In addition to Engel, veteran umpire Paul Runge was particularly helpful in sharing his knowledge and experience of the game. Pallone quickly developed great respect for both men and, to his delight and relief, friendship as well. Whereas in previous years he had come to the umpires' locker room and found his equipment vandalized, now he might find bits of it hidden, but only because the others were playing pranks on him—and he could strike back, all in the name of good fun.

A highlight of the year came in July, when Pallone was on the crew that umpired the All-Star Game. He

called the moment bittersweet, though, because Scott was not there to share it with him.

As time went on, however, Pallone found himself longing for another close and loving relationship. Never having been part of the gay community and not knowing much about it, he began reading books and magazines such as *The Advocate* to learn about gay culture.

He eventually made his first trip to a gay bar despite his fear that he might be recognized. During the 1983-84 off-season, he frequented a Boston bar called Buddies and began making friends. He was increasingly bothered by being closeted but still felt that he had no other choice if he wanted to remain in baseball.

Pallone also began going to gay bars on the road. He was discreet; nevertheless, rumors of his homosexuality started to crop up among baseball insiders, possibly more because of his lack of a wife or girlfriend than anything to do with the bars.

However, it was a groundless rumor that brought Pallone trouble. In August 1986 he learned that Reds manager Pete Rose had allegedly told an umpire that Pallone had tried to pick up a man in a Cincinnati bar. Pallone suspected that a certain umpire who continued to be hostile to those who had worked during the strike had concocted the story. He wanted to confront Rose, but Engel and Runge dissuaded him, predicting that the rumor would die down.

It did not. Pallone soon received a call from Kevin Hallinan, the head of security in the Commissioner's office, who asked him about the matter at the behest of Feeney. Pallone acknowledged having been to the bar but denied having tried to pick anyone up there. Hallinan claimed to have talked to witnesses but would not name them. Pallone subsequently repeated his denial to Feeney himself but felt that the National League President did not believe him. He was therefore not surprised when Feeney by-passed him to give a spot in the play-offs to another umpire.

The irony of the whole situation was that the Cincinnati tavern named in the fabricated story was a straight bar.

After the 1986 season both Feeney and supervisor of umpires Blake Cullen retired. Pallone was not sorry to see Feeney replaced by A. Bartlett Giamatti, but he feared that the new supervisor, Eddie Vargo, an umpire who had refused to talk to him and had snubbed him in public, would attempt to hurt his career.

One of the first things that Vargo did was to move Pallone to a new crew. Pallone was disappointed to lose the camaraderie of Engel and Runge, and he worried about a return to "the bad old days" of ostracism. As it turned out, the new crew, headed by Lee Weyer, was courteous and professional, but the group dynamic was not one that led to the warm rapport that he had enjoyed with Engel's crew.

All went well until late September, when, in a St. Louis bar—another straight bar—Pallone met two brothers, one of whom "kept hitting on [him] all night." At the end of the evening, the brothers begged a ride home and invited Pallone in, but then abruptly told him to leave. Immediately thereafter, the new story of a pick-up in a bar was swirling through baseball. Pallone surmised that someone may have orchestrated the set-up.

That fall Pallone worked the play-offs on a crew that included Engel. At dinner after the first game, Engel asked about the new rumor. Pallone could no longer bear dissembling, and so he came out to Engel and his wife, Pat, who had also become a good friend. Both Engels received the news with equanimity: Pat Engel said that she already knew (thanks to "woman's intuition"), and Bob Engel "suspected" Pallone's sexual orientation. Both pledged and gave their continued friendship.

In April 1988 Pallone was in the middle of one of baseball's most famous mêlées. In a game between Cincinnati and New York, with the score tied and two out in the top of the ninth inning, Pallone called a Mets hitter safe at first base. Instead of attending to the action of the game, the Reds' first baseman argued the call, allowing a New York runner to score what proved to be the winning run.

Volatile Reds manager Pete Rose raced from the dug-out and began berating Pallone for having taken too long to make the call. In the course of the confrontation, Rose shoved Pallone—grounds for immediate ejection—and then did it again. The other umpires arrived to restrain Rose and remove him from the field.

Meanwhile, the Cincinnati broadcasters had been denigrating Pallone. The crowd, listening to their radios, responded by throwing whatever they could—including a boom-box—at the umpires, who had to leave the field for their own safety.

After the game, Rose claimed that Pallone had poked him in the face during the argument. Game film put the lie to this, but incensed fans called Pallone's hotel and made death threats.

Giamatti imposed a thirty-day suspension and a ten-thousand-dollar fine on Rose and reprimanded the broadcasters for their role in inciting the dangerous behavior of the crowd.

Pallone regarded Giamatti as something of a father figure who had his best interests at heart. In a conversation about a month after the incident in Cincinnati, Pallone came out to him, and Giamatti told him that his sexual orientation made no difference to him "as long as it doesn't interfere with the game itself."

In September 1988, however, Giamatti, newly elected to the post of Commissioner of baseball, called Pallone to his office and offered him the choice of requesting a leave of absence or being forced to take one because the district attorney of Saratoga Springs, New York was about to investigate him in connection with a ring of men having sex with teenage boys. Pallone knew and had visited two of the men and was aware of the scandal, but he assured Giamatti that he was not involved. Giamatti refused to budge, and Pallone requested leave.

A few days later a newspaper article falsely reported that Pallone had resigned. Stories about the district attorney's investigation quickly followed.

The district attorney's office had two accusers against Pallone, a fourteen-year-old boy and an anonymous adult who had appeared in television interviews with his face and voice disguised and who claimed to have identified Pallone from baseball cards. (Baseball cards of umpires *do* exist, and there was a 1988 Pallone card; nevertheless, finding one would have been relatively difficult.)

Pallone's two acquaintances, both already sentenced, exonerated him, and the anonymous adult accuser added to his previous criminal history by getting arrested twice more on unrelated charges and was dismissed as a credible witness. The motives of or pressures on the fourteen-year-old remain unknown, at least to the public.

On November 1, 1988 the district attorney's office dropped the investigation of Pallone, a fact that received scant notice in the press.

Pallone set up a November 30 appointment with Giamatti to arrange his return to the game, but the Commissioner asked him to retire to avoid being fired. Pallone was devastated to hear this from a man

whom he viewed as a compassionate guide. He believed that Giamatti only asked for his resignation under pressure from club owners and because, he wrote, "Maybe he figured I was better off out of baseball now, and that the whole mess might be a blessing in disguise."

Pallone's initial impulse was to fight to retain his job and fulfill his dream of umpiring in the World Series, but he eventually realized that it was not to be.

In January 1989 Giamatti wrote Pallone a letter, stating that "among the reasons for the League's decision to terminate your employment were substantial allegations that you engaged in certain conduct which could be interpreted as serious misconduct or acts of moral turpitude." Despite this, and somewhat incredibly, Pallone remained convinced that Giamatti had his welfare in mind, and he mourned the Commissioner's sudden death in September 1989.

In his life after baseball, Pallone has become an advocate for glbtq rights. He published his memoir, *Behind the Mask: My Double Life in Baseball* in 1990. Soon thereafter he became a public speaker, appearing on television shows such as *Larry King Live* and *The Today Show* as well as at workshops to educate the public about diversity, the effects of discrimination, and the need for all people to be respected equally. "I truly dislike the word 'tolerance,'" commented Pallone. "I want to be accepted and respected, not tolerated."

Pallone has been invited to speak about diversity in the workplace by such entities as Microsoft, Pfizer, Pillsbury, and the Los Alamos National Laboratory.

He has also conducted numerous workshops at colleges and universities around the United States, and he believes that the atmosphere there is improving. "I am one of the lucky ones who can say they've seen differences from 1990 to 2007," he commented. "Yes, there is still bigotry in America, even on college campuses, . . . [but] I am really encouraged with the young people of today." Nevertheless, he stated, "We still have a long way to go."

He thinks that the way may be particularly long in men's sports, especially in the "big four"—baseball, basketball, football, and hockey. In 2007 he cautiously predicted that an active player might come out within the next five years, although he noted that he had said the same thing in 1995.

One of the most rewarding aspects of Pallone's work is hearing from glbtq young people who have taken strength from his book or his programs. Some have even told him that he kept them from committing suicide.

Pallone and his partner, Keith Humble, a hospital financial manager, reside in Dallas, Texas. The couple has been together since the mid-1990s.

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