

'It Ain't Over Till It's Over': RT Kendall Pays Tribute to the Great Yogi Berra

When I get to heaven, I am going to ask the Lord, "Why was I a New York Yankee fan?"

I was born and bred in Ashland, Kentucky, just up the river from Cincinnati, Ohio. I should have been a Cincinnati Reds fan—as my father was. But for some reason my heroes were Joe DiMaggio, arguably the greatest all-around baseball player that ever lived and Yogi Berra, almost certainly the greatest baseball catcher of all time.

When I shook Joe DiMaggio's hand in Fort Lauderdale in 1962, although I was 27 years old, I was as excited as a 10-year-old boy. I ran into Joe two or three times in those days and even chatted with him some.

But meeting Yogi Berra was more difficult. I eventually decided it is easier to meet the pope than to meet Yogi (he was so well protected). However, this venture came many years later—it began 10 years ago.

My son, T. R., had given me a plaque of "Yogi-isms" for my 70th birthday. These sayings included "Never answer an anonymous letter," "When you come to a fork in the road, take it," "You can observe a lot by watching" and, of course, "It Ain't Over Till It's Over."

It was the latter saying that gripped me most. I wanted to write a book on the theme of finishing well and call it *It Ain't Over Till It's Over*. I phoned the Yogi Berra museum in New Jersey and asked to speak to Yogi, or to get an address. I

could see quickly that I was getting nowhere so I put the quest aside for a while.

Dr. David Ireland kindly invited me to preach for him at Christ Church in New Jersey a few years ago. One of his church's campuses is in Montclair, New Jersey.

On the way to the church the driver said, "Yogi Berra lives in this town."

"Really?" I asked. "I want to meet that man."

But nobody knew where he lived. However, I discovered later that the Fox News sportscaster Harold Reynolds attends Ireland's church. At about the same time I was invited to speak at The Cove, Billy Graham's Training Center, in Asheville, North Carolina. James Brown (known as "J. B.") attended my seminar. When I told J. B. of my wish to meet Yogi, he said to me, "I think I can make that happen". He immediately phoned Harold Reynolds.

It took 16 months to meet Yogi Berra. But when I finally met the man who looks after him, I explained why I wanted to meet him—to get Yogi's permission to use the aforementioned saying as a title of my book on finishing well. I did not need it legally. But I said I would not remotely consider using it without Yogi's permission.

I learned that Yogi is a serious Catholic who celebrated mass every day. Yogi was touched that I wanted his permission. He agreed to meet me. T. R. and I flew to New Jersey.

J. B. even came up from his home in Maryland to be present for the occasion. Yogi personally gave us a private tour of the Yogi Berra Museum and Learning Center, a part of Montclair State University. Harold Reynolds later went with me to spend some time with Yogi. Together, Harold and I knelt and prayed with him.

When I finished the manuscript of *It Ain't Over Till It's Over*, I sent it to Yogi to read.

He replied with a blurb I could use on the front cover: "I hope this book will help many people."

Yogi had his 90th birthday this May.

In August my wife, Louise, went with me to see Yogi.

We took *It Ain't Over Till It's Over* and presented a copy to him. He was delighted to see us and thrilled to have the book.

This was my fourth visit with the esteemed Hall of Famer.

I always prayed with him, but this time I suggested we also pray the Lord's prayer together.

"I don't know that", he said.

"Yes you do," I replied.

Louise said: "It's the 'Our Father.'" That is what Catholics call it.

I prayed with him, and then the three of us prayed it aloud together. Someone then took a photo of the three of us with him holding *It Ain't Over Till It's Over*. I had a feeling it would be the last time I saw him. It was.

It turned out that the book *It Ain't Over Till It's Over* only has one chapter on finishing well.

It is largely about not giving up on praying for things you want—healing, miracles, seeing the salvation of loved ones and persevering in faith—especially when you hit a wall and think all is "over."

Having witnessed to Yasser Arafat several years ago, I even express the hope of seeing him in heaven. We should never, never, never give up hope. After all, "it ain't over till it's

over.”