

JIMMY BRESLIN

Last Phone Call

Something was bothering the old man. Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons is 91 now, and he is retired from training race horses and he sits in a little living room in Miami Springs and watches television, but the other night he didn't want to see any more of it because he had this thing on his mind about Frank Graham.

"John," he called over to his son, "let's get Frankie Graham on the phone. I want to talk to him."

The call was put through to Graham's home in New Rochelle. Lillian Graham, his wife, answered.

"I'll get Frank," she said.

"And I'll get Pop to the phone," John Fitzsimmons said.

In Miami Springs, John Fitzsimmons pushed an aluminum walking cage over to his father, and Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons, using a crutch to get up, got into the cage and made his way to the phone.

And in New Rochelle, Frank Graham, 71, burned inside as his wife and his daughter Mary had to help him out of the easy chair and over to the phone.

These were two men, with the hearts that men should come with, and as they came to the phone they were hating what the years had done to their bodies.

"Hello, Frankie, how are you, son?" Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons said.

"Fine, Mr. Fitz," Graham said.

"Well, I heard you were very sick and I wanted to call you, son," Mr. Fitz said.

REMINISCENCES

"No, I'm fine," Frank Graham said. He weighed what his bones weighed and he had been standing up to cancer as if it were flu. But tell you he was sick? Huh. Children tell you they're sick, not men.

Then the two of them talked about a racing book and about the old horses Mr. Fitz had trained and Frank Graham had written of, horses like Gallant Fox and Johnstown and Nashua and Bold Ruler and Graham was talking about all the winners running on the track now who had been sired by Bold Ruler.

Then they said goodbye and hung up and they hated their way back to their chairs and in Miami Springs, Mr. Fitz felt better. They had been together for 50 years. At least he had spoken to Frankie Graham before the little guy went.

He went yesterday, in a hospital in the Bronx. Frank Graham was a sports columnist for the New York Sun and then, of course, for the New York Journal-American, which printed him until his death. He meant a lot of things around this town. He wrote a sports column in a way that made you hear the ptole in it talking, and so few ever have been able to do that. And while he wrote his columes he was an ad for everything that the people in his business should be. In his business? Hell, people everywhere.

CONSIDERATIONS

"How do you get home?" Frank asked the waitress when he finished dinner in this place on 40th Street one night.

"I get the train at 9:20," she said. "If I miss that, I have to wait until 11:10."

He looked at his watch. It was 8:45. "Let's go," he said. "May I have the check?" Nobody had coffee after dinner. The waitress' getting home meant more to Frank Graham.

A week later, he met for dinner at the same restaurant and the people were sitting down and talking over a cocktail and Graham cut in and said, "Now everybody order right now. Let's not cut it short with the time. She has to make a 9:20 train. If she misses that, she has to wait until after 11 o'clock."

To tell of Frankie Graham like this in his presence would produce disaster. He was a little man who spent his life waiting to cut into the conversation so he could say something good about a guy who was being talked about. But let somebody compliment him and he reacted as though it was a subpoena.

Inside, he came as tough as they ever did out of the Bronx. One night, at a cocktail party, a guy with a long face came up to him and said, "We just blew a photo." The photo was a decision by a movie company not to do a picture Frank had written. The decision was worth \$100,000, and money and Frank Graham were not the best of friends, but Frankie just looked over the drink and said, "Oh?" and then turned around and resumed his conversation and never mentioned the thing again.

His wife and children were Roman Catholic, but he wasn't of any particular denomination and he usually could be found sitting in a car outside of a church someplace, waiting for his family to come out of mass. Which was all right. The guy was a kind of a church of his own.
