

# Pittsburgh Post Gazette

## Teamwork

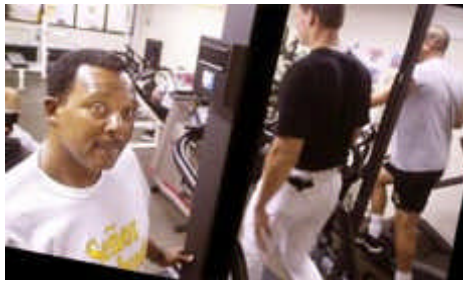
### PIRATES' COACH GOES TO BAT FOR CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AMONG PLAYERS

By Diana Nelson Jones  
*Post-Gazette Staff Writer*

Warren Sipp has spent nearly 14 years in the den of treadmills, bench presses and Jammin' Squat machines in the concrete caverns of Three Rivers Stadium. And he has long been convinced that a baseball player's strength and conditioning are not enough.

The Pirates strength coach, Sipp knows the state of the players' physical well-being. What he doesn't always know -- and if we get squishy here, remember, this isn't the sports page -- is how they are doing emotionally.

Sipp welcomes an intensely diverse little community into what he calls "my piece of the world." The part he plays is a component of how they perform on the field. And how they perform depends, in large part, on how well they blend as a team, better than the sum of their parts.



*Pirates strength coach, Warren Sipp, knows the state of the players' physical well-being.*

For instance, if a John Rocker were to walk into Warren Sipp's world, one of the first things he would see is a huge map of Latin America. He would see pictures of people and scenes from, say, the Dominican Republic. Maybe no purple hair, but certainly pink doorways. He might hear Afro-Cuban music on the CD player.

"These things are here to teach the guys how to see they belong together," says Sipp. In his efforts to encourage cultural sensitivity, he says, "I feel a little like Uncle Bob. But a lot of these guys are awfully young."

A sports-conditioning instructor at the University of Pittsburgh for 17 years before he joined the Pirates in 1986, Sipp says, "I have always had a particular interest in getting people together." An African-American, Sipp grew up in Akron, Ohio, in an Italian-Polish neighborhood. "Even in high school, I got tired of the same people eating with the same people. My thinking is, every once in a while, you have to eat with someone you don't normally eat with."

"When I started here," he says, "the Latino players seemed timid about coming into the weight room. Then I'd see them out in the picnic area [at Pirate City, the team's spring training complex in Bradenton, Fla.], laughing and singing, and I thought, 'That's what I want in the weight room.' I asked myself, 'How do we make this a culturally friendly environment?'"

Sipp's natural proclivities merge with a front-office impetus to make Pittsburgh a desirable destination for Latino players. The team, through scouting, has a long-standing presence in Latin America, but these recent efforts recognize the need for amenities and aesthetics -- the little things a small-market team *can* do for advantage.

Several years ago, the Pirates hired **Rhonda Coast**, an official with the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, to teach a class in Spanish to coaches and staff. She also worked in English with Mexican pitchers Ricardo Rincón, Elmer Dessens -- both since traded -- and Francisco Córdova, the starter who was hampered early in his career by an American-Indian dialect that still strongly flavors his Spanish.

**Coast** also worked with Sipp to translate the players' fitness manual into Spanish, and she has translated other documents for the team.

When you call Pirate City, a recording offers the choice of pressing "1" for English and "2" for Spanish. The water machine in the weight room identifies the water as "frío" as well as "cold."

Sipp now knows enough Spanish to enjoy Córdova's ornery attempts to throw him off by counting in errant numbers during the one-two-three-four repetition of leg stretches they do together.

A few years ago, Sipp ordered the cable music program DMX for the training room and designated certain days for certain music -- one day the all-Latin station, one day country, one day alternative rock. When the all-Latin station changed, Sipp brought in a CD player and encouraged members of the team to bring music from their countries and regions. A couple of

times, other players would cut the music in mid-song, and Sipp to the rescue, in his low-key way, would say, "If you don't value his music, you don't value his culture. It's part of who he is, and you are teammates."

As a result of Sipp's efforts, Pirate infielder Abraham Nuñez affectionately dubbed him "Señor Sepulveda," a moniker he wears proudly on a T-shirt. Sepulveda has no English translation, just a first syllable that sounds like Sipp.

"Yes, it's been effective," said Nuñez of Sipp's efforts to make players from his native Dominican Republic and other Latin countries feel welcome. "It's like a union, we get closer. It makes it easy on me to get along with you if you understand my culture."

First baseman Ivan Cruz of Puerto Rico agrees. "Definitely, it makes a difference. I was with the Yankees and Detroit before, and there was no effort there. Here, it was both surprising and I was very flattered that he cared. Because he is doing it in his own environment, it's his place and that's the standard that he has set."

In the new PNC Park, which will open in 2001, the weight room will have a 19 1/2-foot ceiling, and windows: "The baseball gods are smiling on me," Sipp says. He has requested a shelf for plants and says he will invite the players to bring plants in. He intends to project photos and messages on the big walls, everything from team members' baby pictures and hometown photos to Spanish words and phrases and scenes of Pittsburgh, with information about events going on in the city.

One day shortly before much of the weight equipment was trucked to Bradenton, a smattering of players, including Pittsburgh natives Chris Peters and John Wehner, spent the morning working out in the windowless room.

Ty Hill was also there. He is Sipp's counterpart in Altoona, where the Pirates' AA team plays. "With a lot of American players," says Hill, "it never occurs to them to think about how it might feel if you came here from another country. I think a lot of Latin players respond to Warren's efforts to promote understanding."

Peters says Sipp "is willing to help with anything. I've spoken with him about things that have nothing to do with baseball. And he tries to get guys educated. I've learned a little Spanish, and some guys have learned a little English."

Wehner recognizes the value in Sipp's efforts to strengthen team camaraderie. It could, he said, make a difference between winning and losing.

The least-happy teams he has played on -- those that weren't winning -- were prone to factions, he said, whereas chemistry was strong on a Pirates team of supposed losers that contended to the end: "In '97, we had a close-knit group that was really fun. I think chemistry comes from having fun."