

Scooter forced to miss funeral

LAS VEGAS — You could hear the sadness in Phil Rizzuto's voice Tuesday night as he worked Yankees-Red Sox in Boston for WPIX-TV.

Hours earlier, Rizzuto's teammate and friend, Mickey Mantle, was buried in Dallas.

"I should've been there," the Scooter said sadly on the air Tuesday night.

Why wasn't Rizzuto in Dallas? Speculation spread earlier this week that after Ch. 11 management learned Bobby Murcer, Scooter's broadcast partner, was going to Mantle's funeral, they told Rizzuto he couldn't go.

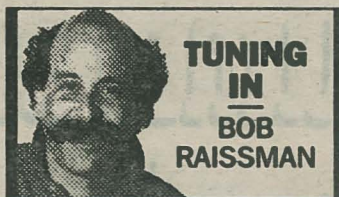
When presented with that bit of information yesterday, a Yankees source familiar with the situation, said: "What you're telling me is more true than not true."

Where does the truth lie?

Sources said that after Mantle died, Murcer went to PIX brass and told them he didn't care if they wanted him to go or not — he was going.

Sources said after Rizzuto learned this, he knew he was in a touchy spot. If he went to Dallas, he knew Paul Olden would be left alone in Boston to do the game. And Rizzuto had missed a few games this season for personal reasons.

But Rizzuto desperately wanted to go to Mickey's funeral. His fondness for Mantle and the realization Rizzuto is an important and visible link to Yankees tradition were im-



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portant reasons for him to go.

Rizzuto could not be reached yesterday, but his marketing agent, Brandon Steiner, said he discussed the situation with Scooter.

"I could hear it in his voice," Steiner said. "Over the past two weeks he was very shaken over Mickey's rapidly deteriorating condition. Phil purchased two open-ended (plane) tickets to go to Dallas.

"The bottom line is Phil loves Mickey very much. He wanted to be there."

Steiner said he didn't know if Rizzuto pressured PIX suits to allow him to go to Dallas.

"The whole situation was weird, and everything happened very fast," Steiner said. "I really don't know what WPIX' position on the whole situation was."

But at least five times on the air Tuesday night, Rizzuto said: "I wished there would have been a way to have gotten on a private jet (to fly to the funeral and back for the game)."

WPIX-TV boss Michael Eigner heard Rizzuto's on-air comments and said yesterday that "Phil was overcome. It was a tough day for everybody."

Eigner said Rizzuto going to Dallas never became an issue.

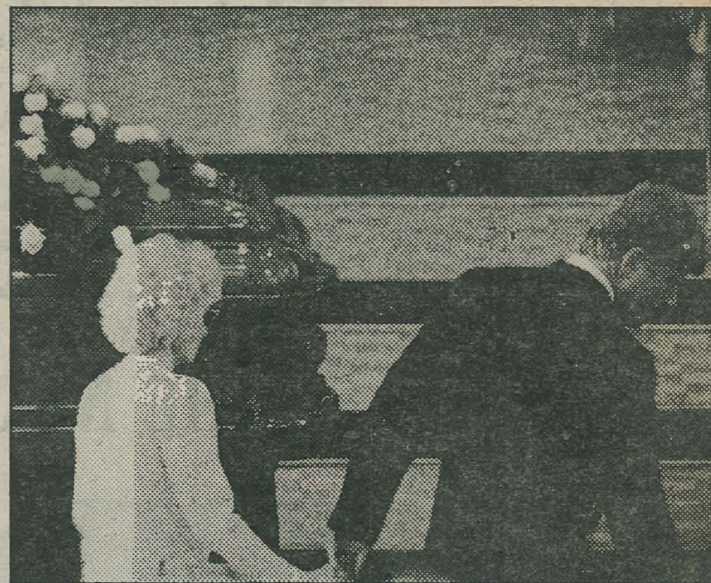
"We knew we wanted to present an important and significant tribute to Mickey (on Tuesday night)," Eigner said. "(PIX Yankees producer/director) John Moore talked to Phil and told him it was important that he be in the booth to carry and convey the message to fans about Mickey."

But before making that plan, did Eigner — after Murcer said he was going to Dallas — consider telling Rizzuto if he wanted to go to the funeral, PIX was behind him and would give its blessing?

"I didn't really think about that," Eigner said. "I thought it was important for Phil to be in Boston because of the (Yankee) fans. We just felt he had an obligation. Bobby was in Dallas and we needed Phil. We needed his presence."

Eigner's concern over having Rizzuto in Boston cannot be minimized. His sensitivity about having a true Yankee link to discuss the funeral and Mantle at a time when fans needed someone like Rizzuto to lean on is understandable.

It also appears Scooter didn't press the issue. Scooter badly wanted to go, but it's not his style to look for a confrontation.



JOHN ROCA DAILY NEWS

NO GOODBYE: Phil Rizzuto (l.) badly wanted to be at Mickey Mantle's funeral (above), but WPIX wouldn't let him go, saying that Yankee fans needed the Scooter on TV during their day of grief.



the funeral. He should have left the decision up to Scooter.

Olden is capable of doing a game himself. If PIX management wanted a second person in the booth Tuesday night, they could have called on Su-

zyn Waldman, who was on the scene for WFAN.

In this case, Rizzuto's feelings should have been considered. For over 50 years, he has been a part of the Yankees' organization and tradition. And no Yankee has given more of himself to the fans than Rizzuto.

If Olden had opened Tuesday's telecast by saying, "Bobby and Phil are in Dallas attending Mickey Mantle's funeral," Yankees fans would have understood.