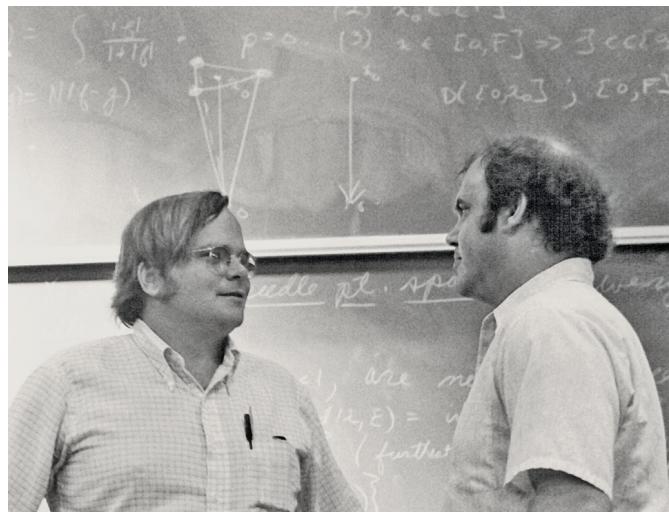


# Tribute to Joe Diestel (1943–2017)

An excellent mathematician specializing in Banach space and measure theory, Joe Diestel made a lasting, distinctive contribution as a proselytizer of university-level mathematics in general and functional analysis in particular. He organized important conferences and was able to overcome prevailing Cold War sentiment to help organize East-West meetings on functional analysis during the 1960s and 1970s. Joe's own lectures were magnetic in holding one's interest, in large part because of his evident love for the subject. Joe made no bones about the hard work that was required of him in order to understand the work of masters like Grothendieck and Pettis. One of his messages to all was that there is no shame in spending many hours to understand a difficult idea. His baseball-infused, often elegant lectures reflected the benefit of this approach.

It is Joe's books that will be his most significant legacy. In 1968 Joe got his PhD at Catholic University under Victor Michael Bogdan. In 1975 he published the Springer *Lecture Notes Geometry of Banach Spaces—Selected Topics* and in 1977 *Vector Measures* with J. Jerry Uhl. Four other books appeared in due course. All are typical of Joe: reader-friendly but uncompromising and written at a high level for serious students and lovers of functional analysis.

—Richard Aron



**Joe's influential books include *Vector Measures* with Jerry Uhl, pictured here with Joe in the mid-1970s at an informal analysis seminar at Kent State University.**

## Seán Dineen

Joe was passionate about everything: his family, friends, mathematics, social gatherings, Banach spaces, Kent State University, vector measures, baseball, tensor products, traveling, Grothendieck's inequality, practical jokes and stories. He was even passionate about the fact that he never learned to drive. He was serious about everything and, yet, everything was fun to Joe. To Joe there was a tale behind every theorem, a person behind every example, a community behind every mathematical theory, interconnections between any two mathematical areas. Whatever the social or scientific occasion, he delighted in telling the tale to whomever would listen. Joe roamed the world as an ambassador extraordinaire, explaining to the mildly initiated the works of Grothendieck, James, Pełczyński, Pettis, and Pisier. Today we are lucky he recognized and developed his gift as a communicator and that he chose to share his many insights with us.

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**Joe was always working hard to make Kent State a leading place for functional analysis and recruiting the best graduate students. Here he is pictured with some of his doctoral students. Front row: Barbara Faires, Jeffrey Connors, Joe, Rajappa Asthagiri, Emily Sprague, Berhani Ghaim, and Menie De Kock. Back row: Qingying Bu, Patrick Dowling, Tom Barton, John Alexopoulos, Paul Abraham, and Chris Lennard.**

Joe had an uncanny ability to empathize with his audience whether it was a first-year class, a group of mature academics from diverse disciplines, a social gathering in a pub, or a room full of union activists. Formally, he shared his gift by writing those wonderful books, by organizing conferences, by attending conferences, by giving endless seminars, by arranging many visits to Kent State University, and by being a very nice person to everyone he met. He enticed many a budding mathematician to follow him into analysis.

In 1976 Joe decided that he would spend a year abroad. On hearing that Ireland was due a Fulbright Fellowship in the sciences, he applied and as a result visited University College Dublin for the academic year 1977–1978. I met him for the first time when he arrived in Ireland and we shared an office, F209, during his sabbatical year. Joe made himself at home in Dublin very rapidly. Almost immediately most of the mathematics faculty were swept up in Joe's enthusiastic seminars—he gave at least three every week. At the time, he was writing chapters in what later became *Sequences and Series*. In those far-off days before h-numbers, email, mobile phones, citation indices, rankings, and rampant managerialism, our university had well-attended faculty meetings, and academics from across the disciplines had more than a nodding acquaintance with one another. It was the custom in those days to gather in the Common Room for some socializing. Joe, with his endless stories and anecdotes and willingness to engage anyone on any topic, soon got to know at least half the academics in the university. Under his tutelage, the mathematics faculty became very adept at the game of darts.

Joe's lecturing style was lively. He kept his audience in suspense by promising dramatic revelations later. He made claims, sometimes outlandish; e.g., *for fifteen years nobody understood the proof of this theorem*, that were delivered with such conviction that we immediately believed them. His elementary courses were very well attended because of their entertainment value. I was very impressed to overhear, while in a lunch queue one day, a student of his from a very basic course repeat an entertaining story about Pelczyński at a conference in South Africa. Regardless of what mathematics these students retained after their college days, they at least left with the opinion that mathematicians were interesting and normal and that they had a sense of humor.

Joe's writing style was original, lively, entertaining, and a refreshing contrast to what was accepted as standard mathematical prose. Of course, he included what would ordinarily be regarded as the main results of whatever theory he was discussing, but additionally he gave insights that would rarely if ever appear in print elsewhere. He resurrected forgotten proofs, he compared different proofs, he presented and analyzed special cases, he pointed out key lemmata and crucial turning points, and he showed the relevance, and occasionally the irrelevance, of results to other parts of analysis and mathematics. Joe was able to appreciate that the isolated scholar might wonder why the precise value of Grothendieck's constant  $K_G$  was important and so, for the benefit of all isolated scholars, he proceeded to tell the world that it was only in discussing the failure of the von Neumann-Andô Inequalities that the estimate  $K_G > 1$  was ever used.

## Guillermo P. Curbera

Joe played around with words, and it's not difficult to find examples. A random opening of his books revealed within two minutes the following examples. He did not avoid complicated computations, but when they were difficult or long or tedious he took it personally and called them *grubby manipulations* and *gruesome calculations*. Joe liked to find direct proofs of simple cases of important results—this was one of his approaches to understanding mathematics. Afterwards he would consider whether this led to a new proof. Sometimes it did, but at times his new proof might turn out to be more complicated than the standard proof. To explain on one occasion that such an approach was possible but not advisable he wrote: *But it should also be clear that such a procedure would inevitably lead us to countenance considerably convoluted combinatorial contortions.*

## Vitali Milman

Joe Diestel was the most American among all American mathematicians I knew. He liked baseball and beer. He was an excellent organizer and a very clever and intelligent person. Joe organized and led regular bi-weekly meetings in Kent for the “Ohio” group of functional analysis, and many experts visited these meetings from all over the world. They continued for decades.

Joe organized two huge conferences in geometric functional analysis, in 1979 and 1985. Many hundreds of people participated in them.

## Per Enflo

The first time I met Joe Diestel was in April 1972, at a conference in Baton Rouge. I immediately liked him, and I liked the way he talked about the development of Banach space theory. It was passionate, with many ideas of what ought to be done. With the years Joe became a dear friend and a colleague at Kent State University. He was an excellent mathematician, and he was always working hard and very successfully to make Kent State a leading place for functional analysis, arranging conferences, bringing in the best researchers, and recruiting the best graduate students. I admired his way of always standing up for high quality, his integrity, and his constant and courageous fight against mediocrity. I miss him a lot.

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I met Joe Diestel for the first time in the spring of 1989. He was giving a colloquium talk in the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Not long before I had started working in my PhD on a problem that he had posed. I was struck by his vivid style of lecturing and the passion he placed on the technical details of a proof. When I visited Kent State University for three months, I was placed with Joe in his tiny office, with no windows and 4- or 5-foot-tall piles of math papers on the floor. There was his famous refrigerator, filled with beer to treat visitors. And there I discovered Joe’s other passion, baseball.

Years later, when I started directing my first PhD student, with a tone of solemnity Joe gave a piece of advice: he said there is always a moment when the advisor, or the coach, has to tap the student, or baseball player, on the shoulder and say, “Well done, kid.” And he remarked, “It should never be too early, neither too late; just in the right moment.”

That is how I got to understand the link between Joe’s two passions. In both, mathematics and baseball, it is crucial the human factor: there are people behind, people who work, people who dream, people who fight. What Joe appreciated were those efforts and dreams via their outcome: beautiful mathematical proofs in one case, spectacular baseball moments in the other. Joe’s passion was what people create with their efforts. Joe’s passion was people.

### Photo Credits

Photo of Joe and Jerry Uhl courtesy of the Kent State University Banach Center Archives.

Photo of Joe and doctoral students courtesy of Mary Kellermann.