

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

'67 Near Miss Sox – under-loved by South-Side fans

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The dilemma is never adequately explained or nailed down.

Why don't the White Sox draw more fans?

Or, more specifically, why didn't Sox rooters -- who supposedly demand winners to spin the turnstiles -- turn out in greater numbers when the team was in contention, if not entrenched in first place by large margins?

The issue without an answer carried through my coverage of the Sox in this millennium. Sox management exhibited all kinds of mental gyrations to explain why the 2000 team, cruising to an easy divisional title, had plenty of seats to sell over the Labor Day weekend. Five years later, as the World Series-bound Sox zoomed to a 15-game lead, the ballpark was not bursting with near-sellouts every night. And in 2012, the sight of near-empty bleachers for a Yankees mid-week series was startling while chronicling another first-place team at mid-summer that eventually folded later in September.

But I had pondered the South Side attendance and ballpark issue long before I wrote my first words about a Sox figure -- Rogers Park native Dewey Robinson, a rookie pitcher in 1980. And the base of data centered on the 1967 Sox, which turned out to close out the famed "Go-Go" era due to a last-week collapse in a four-team American League race.

The '67 Sox had plenty of hype and exposure. The simultaneous arrivals of Eddie Stanky and former mentor Leo Durocher as managers before the 1966 season focused attention on non-somnolent faces of the franchises. The Sox were in their final season on WGN-TV in their first 20-year run on Good Ol' Channel 9, this time televising some home night games in addition to all Comiskey Park day games and about 15 road night games. Radio rights had reverted from longtime home WCFL-Radio, which had adopted a Top 40 rock format, to clear-channel WMAQ-Radio (later morphed into WSCR-The Score all



The '67 Sox had plenty of hype to appeal to fans via fiery manager Eddie Stanky.

-sports station). Instead of WCFL's directional east signal at night, WMAQ offered the Sox the same after-dark regional/national coverage as AM neighbor WGN did for the Cubs. In fact, WMAQ's daytime signal at 670 AM.

Sox continued in the race long after Cubs fell back

Both teams were in first place in July, the Cubs for the first time that late in the season since 1945. Ed Sullivan vowed he'd bring his hyper-popular Sunday-night CBS variety show to Chicago if the teams played each other in the World Series. But the Cubs quickly fell out of contention after the National League-leading Cardinals trounced them in early August matchups. The Sox soldiered on, either in the AL lead or just a game out all the way through the end. The formerly dynastic Yankees, which had frustrated the Sox in so many seasons since 1951, were now an AL bottom feeder and out of the way for the Sox's aspirations.

The reward for their plucky efforts under Stanky was their lowest attendance since 1958 -- 985,634, seventh in the AL. Attendance had steadily dropped from 1,250,053, second in the league, in 1964, when only a late Yankees winning streak prevented a pennant for the 98-win Sox. In Stanky's debut season in '66, the non-contending Sox drew 990,016, but could not match that modest number for a wire-to-wire contender in '67.

I had long suspected the social and racial upheavals of late Sixties Chicago and the lack of a Midwest-wide Sox fan base hurt the Sox gate. Unfortunately, the stereotype of Comiskey Park existing in a "bad" neighborhood became ingrained in the mid-1960s. The successor new ballpark has never totally shaken that tag. If a canard is repeated often enough, it's deemed to be true.

Some historical investigation took me to another 50th anniversary angle -- the reunion of South Shore High School's Class of '67 at the north suburban Max and Benny's deli. I had been told most of the baseball rooters in this group were Sox fans then and now. They could offer first-hand explanations why they and so many others did not storm the gates at 35th and Shields to root on a first-place team.



Bo Blinski (second from left in front) confirmed that white flight from the South Side was a factor in declining Sox attendance. But Esther Benson (third from left in front) said she had no problem attending games at Chicago Stadium before the near West Side was re-gentrified.

Sox neighborhoods' fan base flees

My supposition was the Sox, very much a Chicago-only team, could support itself in the Go-Go Era from the various ethnic neighborhoods on the South Side, itself bigger than most American cities. But white flight from these enclaves throughout the Sixties scattered fans away from the easy commute to 35th Street. The Sox could not make up for the steady attendance loss from the suburbs or downstate. Going into 1967, WGN-TV set up its Continental Baseball Network at the behest of downstate stations, which had been requesting Cubs, not Sox, telecasts, for a number of years, based on the rooting interests of their audiences.

I was not off-target in my conclusion when I talked to Bo Blinski, who organized the '67 reunion long, long distance from his home on the south shore of Maui, where he operates a health spa.

"One of my favorite places as a kid was Riverview, and it closed in '67," said Blinski, organizer of the reunion. "When racial unrest happened at the time and everything changed quickly, people fled in all directions to find a place they thought was safe. I felt the white flight impacted the Sox, totally."



Bruce Levine (left) recalled how younger people turned away from sports in '67, while buddy Ricky Kahen claimed Sox fans of his age cohort were never further away than their transistor radios.

Chicago mayors. Comiskey was separated from the rest of the Daleys' stronghold by Armour Square Park on the north and a wide array of railroad tracks to the west. I never saw the supposedly hazardous area when I parked on Shields by 31st or 32nd streets for night games starting in the mid-1970s. The neighborhood was quiet and residents often sat on their front porches.

However, other egresses to the ballpark fueled the perception of danger. Prior to the opening of the Dan Ryan L in 1969, the only L station accessible to the ballpark was

Blinski vocalized the remembrances of other reunion attendees. And, in turn, their perceptions were confirmed by Mark Liptak, a Sox historian and longtime contributor to the Chicago Baseball Museum.

"Starting in 1965 it was deemed that Comiskey Park was in a dangerous area," said Liptak. "If you were white, you were taking your life at risk. That perception became reality."

On the northeast corner of 35th and Shields, the ballpark actually existed in all-white Bridgeport, home of four Chi-

three blocks east at State Street on what is now the Green Line. If you took the L from the North Side and did not transfer to the Dan Ryan median-strip line at Lake Street through the 1970s, you ended up at 35th and State. The walk to the ballpark took you past the northern border of the infamous Robert Taylor Homes. Later, in a realignment of L lines, the North Side L, routed through the subway under the Loop, was connected to the Dan Ryan route.

Joe Fine, a former South Shore prep pitcher and another reunion attendee, recalled being leery of traveling to the ballpark.

"Taking the transportation was no good," he said. "Even if you parked one or two blocks away, you were (taking risks)."

And yet Blackhawks fans in the Sixties -- later joined by Bulls rooters -- regularly packed old Chicago Stadium on a pre-gentrified West Side.

Fans packed Chicago Stadium in contrast to Comiskey

"When we lived in Rogers Park, we went to games at Chicago Stadium. That was a bad neighborhood," recalled '67 alum Esther Benson.

Another social factor was apparently at work in '67. The dyed-in-the-wool baseball fans who entered South Shore in 1963 to the No. 1 hit French lyrics of the Singing Nun graduated to a far different beat, say exhibitionist/lead singer Grace Slick of the Jefferson Airplane.

"Younger people were tuning off things like sports and were into other things," said The Score's baseball maven Bruce Levine, still another Class of '67 member. Obviously, he meant sex, drugs and rock 'n roll, augmented by a healthy amount of protest against the escalating Vietnam War.

Ricky Kahen, Levine's buddy in '67 and '17, recalls going to few games, but never being further away from the Sox than his transistor radio. The voice emanating from its speakers at the time was Bob Elson's, a classic, precise play-by-play voice from radio's Golden Age, but one deemed behind the times in style by '67. Elson was hardly the right Sox salesman in the era. The brass eventually got it right by hiring Harry Caray to replace Elson for the 1971 season.

Finally, the very nature of Sox fans made many hesitate on ticket buying. Liptak said the mindset exists then and now.



Bob Elson may have been dapper of dress and broadcast style in the 1940s, but he was out of his time as Sox radio voice by 1967.

"The Sox are the only one of the original 16 franchises to never make the postseason in consecutive years," he said.

Thus Sox fans are in a "show me" stance. A one-shot World Series obviously was not enough to sustain big crowds long-term. In '67, the Sox were eight years out from their last Fall Classic appearance. The 2005 World Series triumph was followed by a brief attendance spike the following season, then nearly a decade of declines. At the time, manager Ozzie Guillen said the Sox would need to win five straight World Series to take the town away from the Cubs.

So, just like the JFK assassination, Vietnam and Watergate, the seemingly puzzling lack of passion of '67 Sox fans had decades-long reverberations that even continue into the present. Attendance declined so dramatically post-'67 that the Sox nearly moved to Milwaukee, and were a ripe candidate for relocation on three other occasions.

Not all the lessons of the time were learned by Sox brass. But with a complete rebuild under way, it's never too late for fresh approaches to luring the curious to the south side of 35th street.