



## ***Original Billy Goat's expands outlets, but certainly no nay-sayer to tradition, legend***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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The trademark “cheezborgers,” chips, beer and ink-stained newspaper memorabilia were all present and accounted for.

Where was the billy goat?

“We have them on friends’ farms (in Wisconsin and Indiana),” said Billy Sianis, the third generation in his family of proprietors of Billy Goat’s Tavern. “In the 1970s and 1980s, when Charlie Finley was still around, we used to keep them on his (LaPorte, Ind.) farm.”

The Cubs may change management and the resulting tolerance toward Billy Goat’s and its alternately curse-creating-and-busting mascot. Newspapers may downsize and even move away as a neighbor of the legendary bar on darkened, dingy Lower Michigan Avenue. Billy Goat’s itself may be fruitful and multiply, as far away as Washington, D.C., with actual healthy food choices at its newest outlets compared to the hearty and (for some) heart-health-averse sandwiches in the subterranean headquarters.

Yet the horned barnyard animals, descendants of earlier generations of goats, remain the unchanging links to the founder, William “Billy Goat” Sianis. The sign in the window facing Lower Hubbard Street and, fittingly, the base of the Wrigley Building sums it all up. “Born 1934” is flashed in neon with a goat’s head also lit up. Without a goat named Murphy, a resulting curse/legend and forays onto Wrigley Field with descendant goats, Billy Goat’s is just another quaint bar and a remnant of a more colorful Chicago era.

Chicago regulations about the keeping of livestock within city limits prevent the goats from living at the Michigan Avenue Billy Goat’s, the re-located (in 1964) original watering hole. Life was radically different, certainly more unregulated, when William Sianis founded his original bar



**Billy Sianis (left) and longtime press veteran John Reyes in front of Billy Goat's Wall of Fame.**

right by the old Chicago Stadium on the West Side nearly 80 years ago. The goats lived out back. When an infant goat fell off a passing truck, the eldest Sianis merely adopted the critter and increased the size of the flock.

The goats reminded the goateed Sianis of his younger days in his Greek village. He had a new purpose for the animals in his adopted country as he quenched the thirst of hard-bitten newspapermen as they worked events at the Stadium.

### **Mascots and good-luck charms**

“He always used the goats as mascots and good-luck (charms),” said Billy Sianis, taking a break from the lunch rush the other day. “He used to go to different events at Chicago Stadium all the time. He used them as a marketing tool.”



**Sam Sianis' forays into Wrigley Field with his goat have dramatically raised the profile of the bar (Photo courtesy of Billy Goat/Modine Marketing Group).**

Never has one innocuous animal so bedeviled a sports franchise while turning one bar into a wildly-successful symbol of Chicago entrepreneurship and promotion. Billy Goat's is now a dynasty with eight locations, including one back in the old neighborhood near the United Center and another in the nation's capital. One business' tale of misfortune turned into another's boom.

You have been deaf and dumb if you live in Chicago and haven't heard of the Billy Goat Curse. Simply put, William Sianis created the most publicized hex in sports history when he cursed the Cubs for not admitting mascot Murphy to the 1945 World Series, for which he had tickets for man and beast. Blueblood owner P.K. Wrigley apparently did not get the humor in the Sianis-Murphy tandem that had been common at the Stadium for both sports events and national political conventions.

Apparently, the crew of Andy Frain ushers at the Stadium along with the arena's management were goat-tolerant. But when the same crew worked the 1945 World Series, they did not know the Cubs' rules on

admitting animals to Wrigley Field. They called Wrigley.

Two different stories have circulated in the past seven decades. One had Sianis and Murphy completely barred. Another had the pair admitted, then ejected because fans claimed Murphy smelled. Billy Sianis said the former is the tale he has heard from father Sam Sianis, now 79.

“Wrigley said to let Billy Goat in, but not the goat, because it smells,” Billy Sianis said. “The Cubs lost the World Series, and he sent Mr. Wrigley a telegram, ‘Who smells now?’ Irv Kupciet wrote that.”

Wrigley's ban "offended" Sianis, who apparently put a curse on the Cubs that they'd never win another World Series. That tidbit was reported in 1945, but was apparently forgotten for the next generation even as the Cubs dwelled constantly in the nether regions of the National League before the revival under manager Leo Durocher starting in 1967.

### **Royko, Condon quench thirst with curse story**

The nearly-concurrent resurrection of the '45 curse story came about thanks to Billy Goat's two most prominent writer-patrons: Mike Royko and David Condon. Published artifacts and photos of both, especially Royko's, abound throughout the bar. The scribes stand out among the dozens of writers and executives honored via clippings and photos. "Location, location, location" benefited Billy Goat's even more than its former Stadium location when it came to Michigan Avenue. The Chicago Tribune and afternoon sister Chicago's American published across the street. One block west was the Chicago Sun-Times Building, also housing the Chicago Daily News. William and Sam Sianis did not have to issue press releases about their place; they merely had to quench the thirst of the typewriter crowd.



**Bartender Elliott Sianis, Billy Sianis' cousin, with images of the bar's Holy Trinity of William Sianis (top), Mike Royko (left) and David Condon.**

But the widest conduit for Goat paths was provided by Royko, the Babe Ruth of cityside columnists at, successively, the Daily News, Sun-Times and Tribune. Condon was lead Tribune sports columnist, taking over Arch Ward's "In the Wake of the News" piece in 1955.

Both Royko and Condon played the Cubs for laughs when the team annually began contending – and collapsing – under Durocher. There must be some supernatural reason for the late-season flops, and they stoked humor through the mounting tragedy that continues to this day. Through besotted nights until 2 a.m., Billy Goat's closing time, the hard-drinking Royko and Condon heard the old stories. They worked the curse angle into their columns. The 1945 Sianis publicity stunt somehow became a real curse through the process that if a story is repeated often enough (and in this case, prominently enough), it becomes fact.

William Sianis died in 1970. Meanwhile, the Cubs' near-misses were helped along by Finley, a Billy Goat's regular and a Condon buddy. The crafty Athletics owner/general manager, based in Chicago, usually made at least one annual trade with longtime under-achieving Cubs GM John Holland, a Wrigley sycophant.

Knowing an easy mark when he saw one, insurance-salesman Finley typically got the best of Holland. In 1971 and 1972, Finley wheedled Ken Holtzman and Bill North away from Holland.

The Cubs got center fielder Rick Monday in return for Holtzman, while aging ex-Sox reliever Bob Locker came in exchange for North. Problem was, speedy center fielder North was coming up from the Cubs farm system just as Monday arrived. Consigned to the bench, North pouted and was traded. He went on to twice lead the American League in stolen bases while the Cubs largely slogged along with slow players.

Knowing Royko, Condon and other regulars would be watching while sensing the publicity value, new Billy Goat's owner Sam Sianis went back to his uncle's old blueprint. He brought mascot goat Socrates in a limousine to Wrigley Field on July 4, 1973 in an effort to get admitted and lift the then-28-year-old curse. Unfortunately, Wrigley was still in charge. The Frain ushers did not admit the goat. Condon wrote a column two days later. In first place at the time, the Cubs soon crumpled in a 6-29 nosedive that tumbled them to fourth, never to recover as the Mets won just 82 games to capture the NL East. The Cubs could have played 10 under .500 the rest of the way from July 4, and still won the division. The old curse story acquired legs, and Billy Goat's had a much higher profile.

The bar soon got another boost from a show-biz connection unrelated to baseball.

### **Belushi, Novello make the 'Goat' more famous**

Young gonzo comics John Belushi, Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd used to have lunch at Billy Goat's in the early 1970s while they performed improv at Second City. Don Novello, a writer at the Leo Burnett ad agency, also patronized the bar. When all four were re-united on "Saturday Night Live" in New York about a half-decade later, they remembered the grill man at Billy Goat's reciting a very basic menu, Novello's typewriter incorporating it into a famous skit that started running in 1978. The chant has not changed over 35 years, as recited by present-day grill tender Chico Garcia:

*"Cheezborger, cheezborger, cheezborger...no fries, cheeps...No Pepsi, Coke!"*

The Belushi-Murray-Aykroyd comic trio did not stand out to Sam Sianis when they ate at Billy Goat's. But he saw the skit, putting two and two together. Possessed of a Sianis' promotional bent, he grilled burgers and sold beer at ChicagoFest at Navy Pier in 1981. Dressed in their Blues Brothers black suits and hats, Belushi and Aykroyd came to the tent to chant "cheezborger...."

"They knew Billy Goat's," Billy Sianis said. "And Don Novello always said it came from here."

Obviously members of the new Cubs ownership that took over from William Wrigley III in the late summer of 1981 had a sense of humor. On April 9, 1982, first home opener of the Tribune Co. regime, Sam Sianis and his goat were invited to parade around a 34-degree, snow-shoveled Wrigley Field. The Cubs won.



**A famed "Saturday Night Live" skit with John Belushi in 1978 drew attention to Billy Goat's and its grill man's slogan.**

“Dallas Green was the first one who invited my dad,” said Billy Sianis.

And on Oct. 2, 1984, the pair were similarly welcomed before Games 1 and 2 of the NL Championship Series against the Padres at Wrigley Field. The Cubs triumphed 13-0 and 4-2, respectively.

“That was the first time they made the playoffs since ’45,” Billy Sianis reminded, as if one needed that.

So why wouldn’t the 1982 and 1984 appearances be enough to lift the curse?

Playing along with the family storyline, Billy Sianis speculates the goat was not admitted to Jack Murphy Stadium in San Diego, where the Cubs shockingly lost three in a row to blow the NLCS. Billy Goat’s human mascot Royko made matters worse, riling up the laid-back Padres fans by calling them surfers and “quiche-eaters” in his column.



**Bylines of "Goat" patrons past and present are displayed on a wall by the bar.**

“You couldn’t tell Royko what to write,” Billy Sianis said.

### **Goat stays outside Wrigley for Bartman Game**

Nineteen years later, Sam Sianis and his four-hooved companion showed up at Wrigley Field for the Division Series against the Braves. Showed up, emphasis, not invited. The Cubs did let the pair in for one game. The Cubs won their only postseason series since ’45. But the goat was outside the ballpark, by the main gate, waiting for a green light to enter that never came, for the infamous Bartman Game against the Marlins on Oct. 14, 2003. ‘Nuff said?

No invitations came for the 2007-08 postseasons, and none has been issued so far under the new Ricketts family ownership.

“If it’s a willing invitation, maybe the curse can be lifted,” Billy Sianis said. “They don’t want to admit there’s a curse. We’ll work something out later out to get the goat in there.”

Since Theo Epstein makes no promises of an ETA for all his touted prospects, the curse-lifting process could play out over years. That means Billy Sianis might be the point man in goat handling at Wrigley Field. Sam Sianis won’t ever formally retire from his budding empire, but Billy Sianis will run day-to-day operations. Another brother also works full-time, while the four other Sam Sianis offspring have various part-time roles in the “Goat.” The family business is ex-

tended – cousin Elliott Sianis normally tends bar at the Navy Pier location, but on this day worked pouring libations on Michigan Avenue.

All told, Billy Goat's has six Chicago bars, including one at O'Hare Airport. The sole suburban outlet is in Mt. Prospect. The "D.C" bar can certainly host Cubs-fan expatriates like columnist George Will.

Interestingly, the original Billy Goat's has not modernized or adopted a sports-bar décor. The only autographed baseball photos easily spotted are Cubs pitcher Milt Pappas and Reds hurler Jim O'Toole, a Chicago native. Otherwise, the place is a mini-museum to the powerful of business and publishing, and their chroniclers. One photo features William Sianis with a younger Arthur Wirtz, first of two generations to impose various broadcast blackouts of home Black-hawks games at the Stadium and the United Center.



**A photo display behind Billy Goat's bar of all-time municipal and media moguls: (from left) Richard J. Daley, Col. Robert R. McCormick, an unidentified power-broker and William Randolph Hearst.**

Sam Sianis keeps many of the furnishings as a memorial to the scores of departed patrons, recognizable and anonymous. On one wall, below photos of old-time scribes, are small plaques with the "-30-" symbol. That's an old typewritten note that a story has ended. So had the lives of those newspaper folks.

One spot is the "Wall of Fame". Left to right are photos of former Tribune editor Don Maxwell, who ran the paper according to Col. Robert R. McCormick's wishes for more than a decade after his death; Tribune nightlife columnist Herb Lyon, Chicago's American columnist/WMAQ-TV commentator/Sun-Times columnist Dorsey Connors; William Sianis; Kupcinet, Royko and Marshall Field V, the last of his family to run the Sun-Times. Only Field is still alive.

### **Schlitz joins Billy Goat's own lager**

Beers are still reasonable compared to those at sports arenas -- \$3.50. In fact, the "Goat" has its own brew – Billy Goat Lager and Billy Goat Dark. Amazingly, you can still buy Schlitz on tap here. Indeed, when Durocher implored his TV commercial viewers to "have another Slitz," he didn't figure the brew would be long gone from Cubs telcasts, but gamely hanging out at Billy Goat's.

The staple “cheezborger” is \$3.15. If you want to get your cardiologist busy, you can order a triple version of the same for \$6.85. Steak, beef roast, corned beef, hamburger, ham and egg and egg and cheese sandwiches make up the bulk of the menu. No salads were in evidence. And as the grill man said – no fries, just potato chips. That meant no mushrooms, onion rings, cheese sticks or jalapeno poppers as side munchies. Tradition is maintained.

Billy Sianis also claims the original “Goat” has survived both the 2003 move of the steadily-shrinking Sun-Times to an office across Orleans Street from the Merchandise Mart, and the earlier shift of the Tribune’s production facilities from Tribune Tower to its huge Freedom Center a mile west by Chicago Avenue.

“The reporters still come in here Thursday and Friday nights,” he said.

They’ll have plenty of grist to pick up the torch from Royko and Condon. The billy goat is in business – big business for its masters, far bigger than William Sianis could have ever dreamed when the ushers barred him and his seatmate from Wrigley Field.

When a goat issuing curses is the star of a beer commercial, you have indeed arrived.



**Grill man Chico Garcia with his "cheezborgers" all lined up. Garcia will remind you: "No fries, cheeps."**