

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Where have you gone, Gowdy and Garagiola?

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Ah, for the good ol' days when you searched for postseason baseball on TV, it was an automatic switch to an NBC affiliate with some combination of Curt Gowdy, Joe Garagiola, Vin Scully, Tony Kubek and Bob Costas.

The world was simpler. The games were reliable and accessible. You remember the old NBC themes as the network that had televised the World Series since 1947 knew the game inside-out.

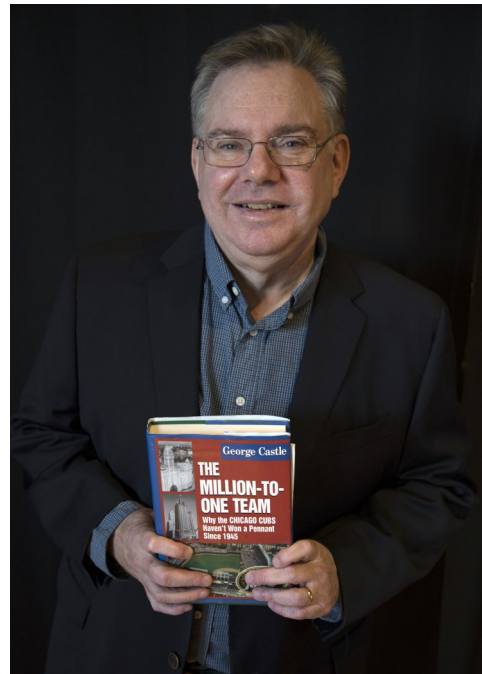
Of course things changed. Like Jack Brickhouse's proverbial camel sticking his nose in the tent and eventually occupying it with its whole body, cable TV's supplementary role soon became the mainstay. A baseball fan would have to pay for a cable connection to get his baseball fix in both the regular and postseasons. The public has accepted it.

But I never thought being a faithful cable subscriber, I'd suffer a blackout of a Cubs playoff game advertised as free and available from MLB Network via my Comcast castle system. I was hurled back in time to the 1963 Bears-Giants NFL Championship game at Wrigley Field or the 1971 Game 7 of the Hawks-Habs Stanley Cup Finals at Chicago Stadium.

Radio days.

The following is what happens when that camel's body takes up the tent and there are no considerations for anything else.

For the Cubs-Giants Game 2 telecast on Oct. 8, MLB Network sought to promote its brand with as the exclusive provider of the well-rated game. Since MLB Network is only available via a premium package, unlike the NFL Network and Big Ten Network, the honchos offered a five-day free trial from Oct. 6 to 11, with Game 2 as the linchpin attraction.



George Castle wasn't smiling as much as he is here when he found he could not get the Cubs-Giants telecast as advertised by MLB Network.

I don't subscribe at present to MLB Network. They do a great job with live games, roundtable shows and documentaries. They provide Costas a play-by-play outlet decades after his main employer, NBC, gave up the baseball rights. But I simply cannot watch any more baseball than the overfull televised menu to which I have access on my present cable plan. Budget also is a consideration – all cable connections are too expensive anyway, the main prompt of the massive cord-cutting under way. Millennial daughter Laura already has snipped her cord, and was over the previous night to watch the Cubs and Giants.

But being a native Chicagoan, I'll take a freebie anytime. Finding out that Channel 233 on my north suburban Comcast system would carry the game, I prepared for a Saturday night "in" with playoff baseball. Emphasize "in." Six days after undergoing right hip-replacement surgery via the deft hands of Dr. Alexander Gordon, I was confined to the house and the main floor with its one cable connection via a digital adapter box. I'd have to "settle" for a 19-inch screen with HD picture rather than the 32-inch big screen downstairs. At this point in my recovery, traversing the 12 stairs down to the basement was not an option.

A few minutes before the 7 p.m. first pitch, I inputted Channel 233 into my remote. Nothing happened. No channel showed up between 230 and 237, the latter Fox Sports 1, the Cubs' previous postseason carrier. I was told Channel 410 might be an option. Again, no such frequency showed up when the numbers were inputted in the remote.

Turning on Pat and Ron on The Score on a replica old-school radio, I worked the phones. Finally Comcast technical support, the only department open on a Saturday night, said there was some kind of mea culpa from the company about incorrect information being given out.

Tiny adapter cannot get game as advertised

A tech support supervisor then explained the digital adapter, a tiny black device simply relaying the channels from the main Xfinity connection downstairs, could not accept the Comcast commands to add a Channel 233 to the menu. If I could watch the more sophisticated Xfinity connection, I'd get the game. Sorry, I did not have three hulking Cubs to carry me downstairs; they were otherwise occupied.

One ridiculous suggestion crept through. A voice on the other end suggested someone disconnect the Xfinity box and re-connect it upstairs so I would watch the game.

Upshot was there was not total truth in advertising. A cable subscriber could not watch the game on all Comcast equipment. The tech guy to whom I spoke said he had gotten similar calls. Both MLB Network and Comcast had not covered all their bases prior to the telecast.

Comcast needed to have also offered the MLB Net feed on one of their little-used access channels that was picked up by the dumb little digital adapter. And while seeking exclusivity to promote its product, MLB Net should have offered the game to an over-the-air station for those not able to receive the signal. The latter is a common tactic when ESPN has a Bears telecast. The more eyeballs, the merrier, and even better exposure for a quality product.

I got a \$20 credit from Comcast after some uncommon, caring customer service. Meanwhile, a company supervisor said he'd pass along the goof-up to higher powers.

It should not be hard to watch a playoff baseball game. It wasn't, back in the day. And the strange feeling is it will be much harder in the future.

I don't expect the baseball TV rights bubble to last into the 2020's, after far more cord cutting. Such a sentiment was dispatched to a contact at MLB Network. The hope is the feeling was passed on, and that those who determine how and when we get our games aren't living in a fantasy world.