



Irv Kupcinet (left) and Jack Brickhouse at Soldier Field in the early 1970s. They were the Bears radio team for 24 seasons from 1953 to 1976.



Brickhouse was Chicago's sole broadcast conduit to Bears, Bulls in a different era

By George Castle, CBM Historian

The man for all sports seasons throughout his storied career, Jack Brickhouse proved to be the *only* man for chunks of Bears and Bulls seasons in the 1950s and 1960s.

In an era when TV added telltale vision to radio's sound, Brickhouse was the sole broadcast conduit for pro football and basketball fans within signal range of the Chicago market.

Radically different NFL rules, unthinkable today in sports broadcast rights' mega-billion-dollar world, restricted video exposure of the Bears in Chicago during TV's first full decade of widespread operation. Meanwhile, in an era where the NBA was just removed from semi-barnstorming status, the Bulls were almost out of sight and out of mind to most Chicago media when they went on the road.

Brickhouse then had a monopoly on the Chicago audience. He was the only Chicago broadcast voice conveying play by play of Bears games on WGN Radio for the first seven seasons of his famed pairing with Irv Kupcinet starting in 1953. Meanwhile, he often was the sole Chicago media person on duty for half the Bulls road games from 1966 to 1970 as the team's first TV broadcaster on WGN.

Interestingly, Brickhouse generated frequent comic moments on Bears broadcasts. No. 1 was his byplay with the syntax-challenged, West Side accent of *Chicago Sun-Times* gossip-monger Kup. But he also committed simple mistakes like not catching the change of running backs or getting the field position correct. The great broadcaster would spew forth a homily like, "Time for some blast-blocking from (Jim) Cadile and (Mike) Pyle." But until the end of their run, when the home-game blackouts were ended by Congres-

sional fiat, most of the audience at home listened through the errors and malapropos. Brickhouse was the biggest name in Chicago broadcasting, and he was the audience's own, a Midwest boy made good.

Longtime Brickhouse WGN sports colleague Vince Lloyd said Brickhouse had some difficulty with football's nuances. He had been a basketball and baseball guy coming up at WMBD-Radio in Peoria, then handled everything but football and hockey in his first decade on the air in Chicago.

Brickhouse himself confirmed the difficulties of broadcasting football in an Aug. 25, 1962 article in the *Chicago Tribune's* TV Week magazine.

"The game lasts 2 1/2 hours, but there's only about 15 minutes of actual action," he said. "It's our job to ad-lib in the dead spots between plays and endless substitutions. And since deception is the key to the entire game, trying to keep up with the maneuverings of 22 men on the field from a press box a quarter of a mile away is tough – especially in bad weather."

Pioneering Chicago sports-talk show host Chet Coppock, whose family was close to Brickhouse for decades, concurred with Lloyd. But Brickhouse's style and rapport with Kup won the afternoons for hundreds of thousands of football fans.

[Listen to a highlight of Jack Brickhouse and Irv Kupcinet from the Bears-Packers game in Green Bay on Nov. 3, 1968. >>](#)

Broadcasts full of entertainment, guests

"Football probably was the weakest of Jack's sports endeavors," said Coppock, who has attended every Bears home opener since 1951. "But he covered that weakness along with Kup because they treated the game more like a country-club party or an Academy Awards presentation. They thought it was a great day if they had Bob Hope, Jane Russell or Harry Truman on at halftime. They treated halftime like an invitation to the Chez Paree or invitation to the Sherman House."

In Ed Sullivan's ballpark with his show-biz and political connections, Kup could snare celebrity guests to spice up halftimes, especially on the West Coast. He used to have a direct connection to Truman while he was president. Meanwhile, Brickhouse was well-connected with the Bears' hierarchy. A 1950 photo of the Bears' extended family included Brickhouse.



Chet Coppock's family got close to Jack Brickhouse through common friends on the Chicago Bears' coaching staff.

“He made it a point to stay very close to the coaches...(George) Halas, (Luke) Johnsos, Phil Handler, Sid Luckman,” Coppock said. “Those were really the guys Jack was sounding out. Jack just didn’t have time to go to practice, nor did he really want to.

“Jack more than compensated for his lack of football knowledge. Jack understood the rudiments of the game. Did he study seven days a week to be ready for a broadcast? No, he never had time. He did baseball through September.”

Coppock had a point. He knew Brickhouse’s planes, trains and automobiles routine, never better demonstrated than on Oct. 2 and 3, 1954. He handled the NBC telecast of the final Game 4 of the New York Giants-Cleveland Indians World Series in Municipal Stadium, airing at Saturday noon Central Time. After the game, he rushed to the airport to catch a plane back to Chicago for his 2 ½-hour network wrestling show starting at 8:30 p.m. at Marigold Gardens. Remember, this was five years before jets. The prop-plane flight likely took close to two hours to fly to Midway Airport, which would not have the Stevenson Expressway running nearby for a dash downtown for another decade. After the Marigold telecast, Brickhouse hopped an overnight train to Green Bay to handle the Bears-Packers radio broadcast the next afternoon.

[Listen to Jack Brickhouse describe his hectic travel schedule over the first weekend of Oct. 1954. >>](#)

No matter how much he might have had to skimp on the preparation renowned for many broadcasters, Brickhouse knew how to put on a good show.

“Where Jack compensated is he treated it like an entertainment vehicle,” Coppock said. “The folksiness of Jack combined with the urban zip that Kup brought to the table made them an engaging broadcast team. I remember at age 7 sitting on our freezer at our home in Northfield listening to Jack and Kup from (Los Angeles’) Memorial Coliseum or (San Francisco’s) Kezar Stadium or Memorial Stadium in Baltimore. Those broadcasts were treats, they really were.”

Brickhouse’s Bears calls won’t soon be forgotten in Coppock’s bottomless vault of Bears memories.

“I remember the 17-17 tie in 1956 (against the Giants in Yankee Stadium) when Harlon Hill caught in my opinion the greatest pass in NFL history from Ed Brown to beat Jim Patton, a great defensive back,” he said. “Jack’s call of that touchdown was like Willie Smith’s Opening Day call in 1969. It was so breathtaking, it was so up from the gut and so absolutely real and so tangible that you could just reach out and taste it.”

WGN Radio only way to follow Bears

Such a radio call well into the video era, by the time the majority of homes owned at least one TV set, was enhanced in stature by the broadcast blackout rules of the day. Brickhouse had the monopoly on the audience with his description. Since Chicago was a two-team NFL market, the Bears could not televise their road games on Sunday afternoons while the Cardinals were playing at home at old Comiskey Park. The antiquated philosophy held that any free telecasts of football would hurt the gate, even of a rival

crosstown team. Thus very few Bears games overall were televised in Chicago during the 1950s.

But with the medium and its dollars growing, Halas at least wanted the road telecasts beamed back to Chicago. Under pressure, the financially-challenged, perennial-dormant Cardinals were forced out of town for a new home in St. Louis in 1960.

With home blackouts still holding firm into 1973, forcing fans and bar owners to put up high rooftop antennas to snare Bears telecasts from South Bend or Rockford, Brickhouse and Kup still reigned supreme as the main broadcast voices. Who remembers that Red Grange and George Connor were the early 1960s Bears TV team on WBBM-TV?

Brickhouse brought his trademark “Hey Hey” call to football at the urging of Bears management. He never used it to better effect than the Dec. 15, 1963 interception runback for a touchdown by defensive back Dave Whitsell against the Detroit Lions at Wrigley Field. *“He’s gonna go! He’s gonna go!”* Brickhouse screamed as his voice dropped to vocal chord-strain, guttural level. And he finished the call with not his trademark “Oh, brother!,” but instead “Oh buddy!” The play clinched the Western Conference title for the Bears and put them into the NFL title game two weeks later against the Giants at Wrigley Field.



Dave Whitsell's interception he ran back for a touchdown against the Lions on Dec. 15, 1963 provided Jack Brickhouse with one of his all-time most memorable calls.

[Listen to Jack Brickhouse’s calls of key plays in 1963 victories over the Packers and Lions that set up the NFL title game against the Giants. >>](#)

“If Jack had one great attribute that people don’t talk about, it’s this: Jack was able to lose himself in the moment and lose himself in the game,” Coppock said. “From ‘48 to ‘66, Jack rode nothing but losers with the Cubs. But he had same enthusiasm. He was able to lose himself in the game. He was always able to find something to engage you in a game.”

Only championship call never heard in Chicago

If there was one regret for the listener, Brickhouse’s only broadcast of a Chicago championship clinching during his four-decades-plus career in the Windy City was never aired in the home market.

As was typical for the era, each team’s broadcasters split the duties on NBC’s telecast of the NFL title game. Brickhouse shared the booth with Chris Schenkel in the 14-10 Bears’ victory over the Giants. His fans never heard him on over-the-air TV in Chicago.

The NFL was so restrictive with the ancient idea of protecting the gate that championship games also were blacked out in their home market. As a further example, the first Super Bowl, in 1967 at the Los Angeles Coliseum, was never aired in Tinseltown.

Fans had the choice of purchasing a ticket for special theater-style closed-circuit telecast of the Bears-Giants games at several locations, including McCormick Place, or driving to within signal range of the South Bend and Rockford stations. The broadcast that commonly survived is the incomparable Jack Quinlan's radio call filling in for Brickhouse on WGN.

Unfortunately, WGN apparently did not save Brickhouse's calls of Gale Sayers' unworldly six-touchdown performance in 1965 at Wrigley Field. He kept up his enthusiasm on the football broadcasts for another 13 seasons after 1963. Included was the Bears' all-time dark age (24-59-1) from 1969 to 1974. The pall began to lift when Jim Finks was hired as GM as the '74 season began and drafted Walter Payton the following year.

One rare shining moment came on Nov. 14, 1971, on an uncommonly balmy 70-degree degree day at Soldier Field. The Bears rallied to tie the George Allen-coached Washington Redskins 15-15 on Cyril Pinder's 40-yard fourth-quarter run. On the ensuing extra-point try, the snap momentarily got away from holder Bobby Douglass. The lefty quarterback ran around, buying seconds, until he spotted eligible receiver Dick Butkus in the zone. A former Chicago Vocational fullback, Butkus had good hands and still played on special teams despite his superstar status. The often-errant Douglass softballed the pass to Butkus for the 16th point that held up as the game-winner.

Brickhouse's description made the atmosphere like a championship game. The play made the Bears 6-3, but they did not win a game the rest of the season. He had a similar call in 1972 when the Vikings' Fred Cox failed to connect on a game-tying field goal at the end of a Monday night game at Soldier Field, giving the Bears a rare win over the powerful Minnesotans: "*No good! No good! No good!*"

Finks switched the radio broadcast rights to all-news WBBM-AM (780) in 1977, importing his longtime Vikings radio announcer Joe McConnell to replace Brickhouse. His repartee with Kup had been the subject of biting satire for years, including a well-remembered 1975 column by the *Chicago Tribune's* Gary Deeb that popularized Kup's typical comeback, "That's right, Jack." But neither the jibes nor the more sophisticated era of NFL coverage dimmed the memories of folksy Sundays in a gentler era.

When Brickhouse acquired the TV rights for the expansion Bulls – the fourth attempt to establish a Chicago pro basketball franchise – in 1966, he now broadcast four of the five major local teams. Exempt were the Blackhawks, with hockey Hall of Famer Lloyd Pettit handling WGN's telecasts and the radio rights bouncing from station to station. Brickhouse's busy arrangement lasted just a year, until the Sox fled to WFLD-TV on the little-watched UHF dial. And the Bulls was not a stressful assignment. It was a cottage industry-style team playing at the International Amphitheater near the stockyards on the South Side.

First Bulls deal written out on a placemat

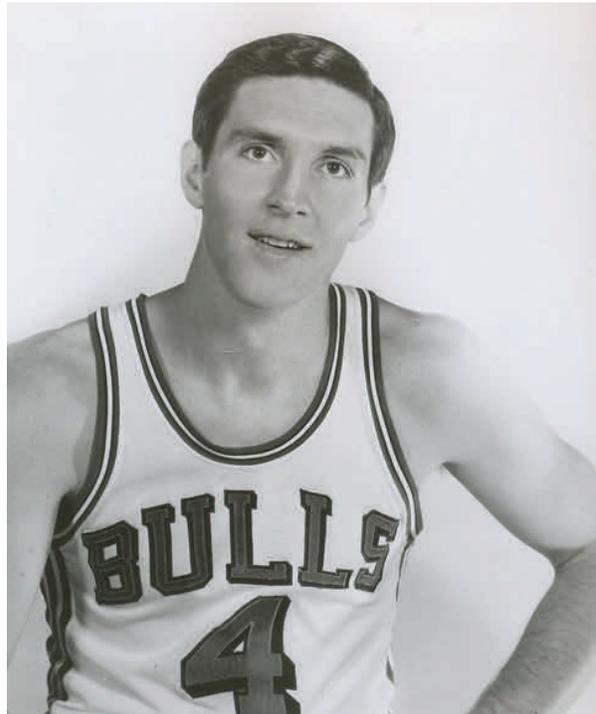
Brickhouse, a longtime Wilmette resident, met with founding Bulls owner Dick Klein of neighboring Kenilworth over “stingers” drinks to hash out the first contract at Matty’s Wayside Inn on Waukegan Road in Glenview. Somewhat listing to port, the negotiators wrote down the terms of the deal on a placemat, which Brickhouse took to show his WGN sales department. The eccentrically-constructed contract held up for seven seasons. Matty’s owners named the part of the eatery in which the deal was struck The Bull Room, which stood until the joint burned down in 2009.

[Listen to Jack Brickhouse’s remembrance of negotiating the first Bulls TV deal at Matty’s, and the conclusion of his final Bulls broadcast on April 15, 1973. >>](#)

Only a portion of the Bulls’ 41 road games were televised, with each broadcast beginning with the team’s original fight song. In the mid- and late-1960s, Chicago’s four daily newspapers typically did not send beat writers on the road with either the established Blackhawks or the neophyte Bulls. WGN Radio aired only Bulls home games with the baseball duo of Vince Lloyd and Lou Boudreau handling play-by-play and analysis (Boudreau was a former high school basketball star). Original Bulls coach Johnny “Red” Kerr kept a pocketful of change to call the city’s sports desks after games with a summary and statistics. So when Brickhouse traveled to air a Bulls game, he most commonly was the only Chicago media representative in attendance.

Eventually, the fledgling WSNS-TV, which had taken over the Sox video rights from WFLD in 1973, expanded its sports reach the same year with the Bulls. The UHF station televised all non-network road games with the new announcing team of Andy Musser and Dick Gonski. Brickhouse’s basketball farewell turned out to be a 95-92 playoff loss to the Lakers in Game 7 of the Western Conference quarterfinals on April 15, 1973 at the Los Angeles Forum.

Again, credit has to be directed Brickhouse’s way. The Bulls finally succeeded in Chicago, albeit grudgingly until Michael Jordan’s 1984 arrival, where all previous franchises failed. With home TV blackouts prevailing at the Amphitheater and Chicago Stadium, the modest number of games with Brickhouse’s basketball enthusiasm carrying them gave the Bulls enough exposure to pique fans’ interest. Early on, with UHF penetration still in a minority of the market, WGN was the only bully pulpit on which this could



Jerry Sloan was an original Bull when Jack Brickhouse began telecasting the NBA team's games in 1966.

have taken place. By '73, the majority of homes had UHF-equipped sets to enable WSNS to make a go of their Bulls deal.

Thousands of other words can be written on Brickhouse's other sports, news and radio-hosting assignments. Even though he considered an "80-hour-week like a vacation," he was proud of his other work. Since only the Hawks played on Sunday nights, that left an evening free for the creative use of his talents. Sure enough, Brickhouse was an announcer on the "They Stand Accused" mock courtroom drama originated at WGN-TV at 8 p.m. Sundays and fed to the Dumont Network from 1949 to 1952.

His command of the airwaves was supreme. He possessed the ultimate gift for gab and was paid for it.

In his 1997 career retrospective on the "Diamond Gems" radio show, Brickhouse was given the one-minute signal for a commercial break. In an adjoining announcing booth at the Illinois Radio Network studios in River North, he saw the signal, continued telling his story and wrapped it up right on the split second. At 81, he was still the consummate pro.

"Jack was a superstar, the biggest thing in Chicago," said WGN sportscaster Rich King.

There can be no more succinct, yet accurate, description of Chicago's man for all seasons.