



Sox pre- and post-game, prospects, Dahl – all in a day’s work for WLS’ McKnight

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Connor McKnight has got a lot of plates balancing in the air at the same time.

In his second season on the job, the host of the White Sox pre- and post-game show and “White Sox Weekly” on WLS-Radio first has to navigate a big commercial load with frequent breaks and promos for Steve Dahl’s afternoon-drive show leading up to the game. McKnight’s got to make the show flowing and snappy, getting in all the segments featuring the likes of Ed Farmer, Darrin Jackson and Don Cooper while accommodating the cash flow via sponsors in an iffy ratings year.

He can’t just concentrate on the 100-losses-bound Sox parent club. With the rebuilding plan in full swing, McKnight has to keep at least one eye on the Sox’s farm system to update the prospects’ progress. Callers on the post-game show hunger for news on the future since the present is just little more than place-holding. All the while, the fans still putting credence into the Sox big-league season need plenty of Dr. Phil-consoling, so McKnight continues the post-game tradition mastered by predecessor Chris Rongey on The Score AM 670.

And even before McKnight does the bulk of his pre- and post-game work, he serves as the sports presence on Sox fan Dahl’s program, necessitating some quick dashes from the broadcast booth down to the clubhouse and dugout for interviews and manager Rick Renteria’s batting practice chat.

Nothing should be too hard for McKnight in the wash. After all, he got his first big break in radio in a kind of “American Idol” tryout for a sportscasting gig in the summer of 2009 on The Score. With a behind-the-scenes production job virtually assured at CSN Chicago or New York, he went for broke for a chance to work in radio against huge odds – and won.



Connor McKnight has to keep his eye on myriad player minor-league tracks as Sox pre- and post-game hosts.

“It comes down to having a good coordinator (producer) in Dave Vaslowsky,” McKnight said of the pacing of his shows. “He and I go through a lot. Dave worked on GameDay on ESPN Radio. He’s got the brains.

“I know what stories need to be told. There’s a pre-game news story on the broadcast. The Sox made a lot of news (with trades and callups of top prospects).”

Sox first major Chicago team on WLS since antiquity

Other than the actual baseball play-by-play broadcasts, McKnight is the top sports presence on the legendary WLS. The Sox and ancillary programming represent the 50,000-watt station’s first major Chicago team rights since its earliest days in the 1920s.

Booming out to the majority of the country at night in its prime, the Big 890 was for decades the Prairie Farmer Station, serving up programming aimed at the rural audience, then more isolated from the big cities than today. Then, from 1960 to 1989, ABC-owned WLS was one of the country’s legendary rock outlets, home to the likes of Dick Biondi and Larry Lujack.

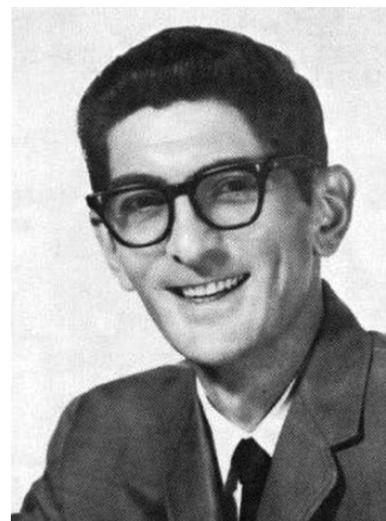
An all-talk format, with former Wrigley Field Left Field Bleacher Bum bugler Mike Murphy briefly hosting the only sports show on Sunday nights in the early 1990s, has bled into the present day under Cumulus Broadcasting ownership. None of the assorted formats was deemed compatible with the blocked-out hours required for regular sports play-by-play. Update man/reporter Les Grobstein, a rain-man of Chicago sports memories, was the only memorable sports voice in the final decade of rock programming.

Many fans typically do not find their way to the 890 frequency between station tradition and the Sox’s floundering fortunes, on purpose by management design to get worse before they get better. WLS’ power output does not seem equal to its rocker days 40 miles north of the southwest suburban Tinley Park transmitter, right off Interstate 80. WCBS in New York, at 880 AM, can sneak onto car radios at night next to WLS in Chicago’s northern suburbs.

So it might be awhile before McKnight becomes a familiar voice to the majority of baseball fans within WLS’ signal range. He won’t lack for content as he tries to build his brand, however long that might take.

Cooper a featured attraction

McKnight never has to start off the pre-game with all the pressure to carry the show himself. Sox broadcasters Ed Farmer and Darrin Jackson do their bit with the latter helming the pitching matchups. The most colorful pre-game element takes place before



WLS was far better known as legendary deejay Dick Biondi's first Chicago stop than an outlet for sports play-by-play.

the first game of every series when pitching coach Don Cooper has a segment. Cooper's honesty is a must-listen.

"Coop is a great resource, it's awesome information," McKnight said. "He's frank and forthright when he needs to be. You couldn't ask for a better pitching coach."

The big McKnight task in 2017 is news on the prospects.

"We have a segment on every post-game show -- the farm report," he said, professing not to shy away from inevitable hiccups on the prospects' upward progression. "Development's not linear...it can be herky-jerky. I came up as a prospect guy. I was a big fantasy baseball player in college. We look at guys who aren't Eloy (Jimenez) or Lucas (Giolito). In any rebuild, there are always players who come out of nowhere.

"I've gone about this process forthright. (GM) Rick Hahn has not minced words. Sox fans have appreciated that. Not all have understood every step of the way. During the show, and on White Sox Weekly, we're discovering aspects of players just hitting the roster that are fun to watch. With (Yoan) Moncada, there was a lot of watching and celebrating.

"Not everyone succeeds. I remember covering the Cubs for a different shop. (Jorge) Soler looked as good as anybody (before flaming out with Kansas City)."

McKnight carefully declines to put a timeline on the transformation from Sox rebuild to contender. By 21st century marketing standards, the process can't drag out to an age-old "five-year plan." The problem is the Cubs as a role model enjoyed abnormally fast development and few years-long struggles by the position players that stocked a World Series champion.

"Even if you ask the top brass with the Cubs, they didn't expect all their talent to come on-line when they did," McKnight said. "The Astros would say something similar. Look at (the recent) Royals and the Indians in 1990s. It took time. I would imagine we'd see all these guys at a major-league level, and find out what they'll look like. If I knew the answers.

"Look back at any first round with the draft, maybe start with 2010. There's a bunch of busts. Baseball's incredibly hard. It's frustrating for a lot of guys."

Top prospects Jimenez and Luis Robert are just 20. McKnight points out hardly any major leaguers are that age and contributing anything significant. Fans simply must let the process play out. Obviously, they'll need to balance surprises with disappointments.

Longtime predecessor Rongey never had such an expansive rebuilding program as a major chat grist. He had to do a quite a bit of post-game consoling to mourning Sox



Yoan Moncada's upward progress was a reliable source of fan talk for Connor McKnight.

fans. Fortunately, Rongey and McKnight were on the same team, so he picked up a few things about handling post-game callers.

“I talked a lot with Chris a lot,” he said. “I really learned a lot from my time at The Score. I love everybody who calls the show. Some say we don’t take enough calls. But we take every call we can get. I enjoy that kind of conversation with callers. While I love what Chris did, I’m a different human being. Unless someone is clearly wrong, I’m understanding. Let’s have the conversation. Ricky put down a couple of bunt signs fans did not love. But after the conversation, I try to understand where they’re coming from. I try to give both sides.”



Don Cooper is always a verbally colorful segment for Connor McKnight at the start of every Sox series. Photo via [Eddie Welker](#).

McKnight’s early baseball experiences dovetailed with the beginning of the typical player development process in the low minors. Born in Evanston and living his early days in Vernon Hills, his family eventually moved to Appleton, Wisc. The east-central Wisconsin city once was the cradle of Sox prospects like Goose Gossage and Terry Forster when the local Class A Midwest League team was named the Foxes. More recently, Appleton hosted the Timber Rattlers. McKnight’s brother Ian served as mascot Fang.

He dabbled in journalism while at the University of Wisconsin, then served as a high school English teacher.

Tryout stemmed from brother’s desire to chug

Moving to broadcasting, he finished up a CSN Chicago internship when the visiting Ian McKnight wanted to imbibe from beer in a tube at the Lion Head bar in Lincoln Park. The timing was fortunate – The Score was staging its tryouts at the bar.

“I went up there and gave it a whirl,” Connor McKnight said, realizing his brother, possessed of a radio voice, desired to try out, too. A few weeks later, Score boss Mitch Rosen called him at the family lake house in Wisconsin, informing him he made the second round. He interviewed with Rosen at the office in the NBC Tower before serving on a panel at the 115 South Bourbon Street bar.

“There were four of us with (Score host) Laurence Holmes as emcee,” McKnight said. “The fanfare was large. My family came down to watch it. Mitch and Drew (Hayes, a station executive) and Dan Bernstein taking turns and grilling us on sports knowledge. Laurence said be cool, calm down. It was an intense thing. I was a high-school English teacher in another life, where you are up on stage in front of a lot of people who can’t see you sweat. I drew from that.”

McKnight won the tryout, beating out nearly 1,000 applicants.



Connor McKnight will now play off Steve Dahl, pictured here, on the latter's afternoon show, prompting some quick McKnight dashes to the broadcast booth from the Sox clubhouse. Photo via [Jauerback](#).

“(The CSN production job) would have been great, but I always had a hankering to be a broadcaster,” he said. “I was really jacked to get the gig. I didn’t know what I was getting into.”

First was reporting and substitute hosting on The Score. Then McKnight worked at WGN’s short-lived sports-talk station at 87.7 FM, also employing the likes of David Kaplan and Chicago Tribune columnist David Haugh. Unlike several colleagues, he landed on his feet at WLS.

Now his routine seems old hat, but it never really was.

“It’s like driving a stick shift,” McKnight said. “Once you master it, you don’t remember learning it. But while doing it, you have to pay attention.”

He can more easily pay attention now with eyes wide open. Early on, McKnight drew a grueling split shift. He was the sports voice on Big John Howell’s WLS morning show, running home to the North Side to nap before ballpark/pre-game duty for home games. That is the hazard of the profession – radio mic jockeys drawing drive-time sportscasting or hosting duties, then having to cover or monitor games at night.

Even the greatest in the profession have had to cut short their sleep. The St. Louis Cardinals’ Jack Buck sometimes drew morning-show hosting duties on KMOX-Radio while handling baseball play-by-play at night. The joke was Buck needed the money – he had nine children.

Now McKnight typically works one straight-through night shift starting with the beginning of Dahl’s show. He’s only weeks into the new assignment, so he can’t yet scout how best he’ll play off Dahl’s veteran routine. But he does know he’ll have baseball as a common talking point with the Sox fan, best known for sparking the wildest promotion in the game’s history via Disco Demolition Night at old Comiskey Park in 1979.

“I have to figure out how to best split responsibilities to get all my (pre-game) Sox stuff done,” McKnight said. “But knowing that Steve’s team is the Sox will help. And knowing he’s so intrinsically tied to that day everyone knows about. My dad worked Chicago in the early 1980s and was a huge Steve and Garry (Meier) fan. That’s cool. Knowing you got that familiar baseball lexicon from Steve will help.”

McKnight better pay attention to the next-man up from Triple-A. He doesn’t want to stutter and sputter when Dahl gives him the third degree of interrogation.

In a sports-talk business where incessant Bears talk is king, there’s no such thing as too much baseball information, no matter if it’s on a station better known for “Ron Riley’s Batman Club” or ex-Royals exec Rush Limbaugh’s incendiary proclamations.