



'Enigmatic' best definition of 1980s decade for Sox

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(This is the first in a series of historic themes involving the Chicago White Sox. The theme will change each time in order to give you the broadest range of some of the finest moments over the past 70-plus years. It is our hope that fans, regardless of age, will get a new appreciation of the great players, great moments and great memories that the Sox have brought to generations of Chicagoans.)

The 1980s saw the White Sox franchise transition from the way things used to be to new frontiers and opportunities. New ownership, a new stadium and a new philosophy took hold at various times and ultimately advanced the organization.

But like all progress it came at a cost. It was measured in the destruction of the original Comiskey Park, in the letting go of a beloved (to say nothing of one of the best) GM and in a threat that alienated, for a period of time, a loyal fan base. We're going to look back at the "Enigmatic '80s" in four parts; this first part will look at what happened on the field and in the organization focusing on the 1981 and 1982 seasons.

The '80s represented another "split personality" decade for the Sox. Like the '60s and '70's, the Sox started out pretty well only to be in complete disarray by the end of it -- in fact the Sox almost moved to St. Petersburg / Tampa Bay in 1988.

During the '80s the Sox had four winning seasons, none after 1985. For the decade the Sox were 758 - 802. That's a .486 winning percentage with an average record of 76 - 80.



Carlton Fisk hitting against the Cubs in an exhibition game at Wrigley Field in 1981. Fisk's arrival just before the '81 season was the big spark for the new Sox era.

The lack of stability which plagued the franchise in the 1970s wasn't as bad in the 1980s, but there were changes. Bill Veeck's last season as owner was in 1980. He sold to a group headed by Jerry Reinsdorf and Eddie Einhorn after his initial sale to shopping mall inventor and millionaire Edward DeBartolo, Sr. was turned down by American League owners.

Reinsdorf originally was supposed to be part of a group getting the New York Mets. Einhorn, a television executive, was trying to get the San Diego Padres when the White Sox fell into their laps.

Television became a focal point for the franchise in the '80s with disastrous results, at least in one area.

SportsVision changes the game

In May 1982 the Sox became the first sports franchise to move the bulk of their games off free TV on to pay cable. Einhorn's idea, SportsVision, was ahead of its time because Chicago wasn't ready, nor was the technology ready, for this move. The Sox alienated their fans by forcing them to have to pay for an entertainment value they had been getting for free since 1948.

Meanwhile, the Cubs kept their games on WGN-TV -- newly-minted as a "superstation" seen across the country -- which seemed to turn a generation of youngsters into fans of the North Side team because they could actually see their games.

The list of broadcasters who worked Sox radio and TV were numerous during the decade. Harry Caray, Jimmy Piersall, Lou Brock, Don Drysdale, Ken "Hawk" Harrelson, Lorn Brown, Early Wynn, Frank Messer, John Rooney, Tom Paciorek, Gary Thorne, Joe McConnell, Rich King, Del Crandall and Wayne Hagin all took turns at various points calling the action.

From a managerial standpoint Tony LaRussa began to understand the game and his abilities as Sox manager from 1980 through June 1986, when he was fired by Harrelson -- a short-term GM -- after Jerry Reinsdorf approved it. LaRussa had all four winning seasons in the 1980s and won the division in 1983. After he left, Doug Rader -- interestingly the author of the "Winning Ugly" tag in '83 as Rangers manager -- replaced him on an interim basis before Jim Fregosi was hired. Fregosi lasted through 1988, when he was replaced by the young, optimistic and positive Jeff Torborg.

The Sox always had an All-Star representative during the 1980s (the rules stated they had to) but the number of players who made it were the fewest in



Notre Dame of Niles product Greg Luzinski provided the additional beef to the improved Sox lineup.

decades. Only seven players made the team in the 10 years wearing White Sox colors. Those chosen were Ed Farmer (1 selection), Carlton Fisk (3), Britt Burns (1), Ron Kittle (1), Rich Dotson (1), Harold Baines (4) and Ozzie Guillen (1).

So with that as a backdrop let's take a closer look at the 1981 and 1982 seasons.

1981 Season 54-52 .509 percentage

On Jan. 29, 1981 the syndicate headed up by Reinsdorf and Einhorn purchased the team. Almost immediately things began to happen. In fact they happened before those two got the club.

Working with Eddie DeBartolo's money, Bill Veeck signed both Jim Essian and Ron LeFlore in November 1980. GM Roland Hemond then picked up Tony Bernazard in December and signed Billy Almon in February. Much like in 1971, Hemond was getting talent by any means necessary. But it was on March 18, 1981 the baseball world was stunned to find out that Red Sox All Star catcher and future Hall of Famer Carlton Fisk signed a deal with the White Sox. Then, Chicago-raised strong boy Greg Luzinski was signed away from the Phillies on March 30, 1981. Everyone realized these were no longer the same "sad sack Sox."

Reinsdorf himself in 1987 mentioned that the Fisk signing gave the Sox a large measure of credibility. Before the signing Reinsdorf said the Sox were "the Rodney Dangerfield of baseball". They got no respect. After he signed, it was a different attitude.



Harold Baines came into his own as a hitter under the new Jerry Reinsdorf-Eddie Einhorn ownership.

Einhorn was the first to see the potential value of getting a player like Fisk and Hemond quickly came on board with the idea. Those two men worked with Jack Sands, Fisk's agent, to get the deal done.

And so on April 10, 1981, the "new look" Sox found themselves in Boston on Opening Day. In something that even Hollywood couldn't have cooked up, native son Fisk found himself at the plate in the eighth inning, with one out, two on, and the Sox trailing 2-0 against Bob Stanley. Stanley threw a sinker that didn't break, and Fisk promptly drilled it over the screen in left field putting the Sox ahead in a game they'd eventually win 5-3.

The Sox started strong at 10-3 by April 26. As the season rolled along it was clear this was a team on the rise. The new stars like Fisk and Luzinski blend-

ed well with the young ones, namely Britt Burns and Harold Baines. In late May the Sox went to Anaheim and annihilated the Angels in three games, outscoring them 34-11.

By June 11, the Sox had swept a short series from the Yankees and were only 2 1/2 games behind Oakland when play stopped due to another players' strike. Those two games with New York took place before crowds of more than 33,000 despite the almost certainty that play would be ending. Signs pleading with both sides to not stop baseball were everywhere at Comiskey Park.

Ironically given what would happen 13 years later, Jerry Reinsdorf saw no sense at all in the labor stoppage. He spoke out against the cancellation of play at meetings and along with five other owners was dubbed "the moderate six." "This strike is asinine and insane. We should stop it," he said at one point.

The Sox didn't get back into action until Aug. 10. And just like in the first half, they broke out of the gate, winning nine of 15 all on the road. But that was the last gasp for the club. Starting Aug. 28, the Sox lost 14 of 17 and were finished. Einhorn proclaimed that there would be "no more Septembers" as the Sox went into the off season.

One of the big off-season ideas was SportsVision and the idea that Sox fans would pay to see their team play on the relatively new medium called cable TV. The idea was Einhorn's, but Reinsdorf was an enthusiastic supporter.

On the Tenth Inning show after the Sox blew out Baltimore 18-5 on April 23, 1981, Harry Caray asked Reinsdorf how those new avenues would be impacting his judgment on things connected with the Sox. Reinsdorf said that he agreed with Einhorn, that you can't just "give" the Sox product away on free TV and felt the additional revenue would help the Sox acquire top talent. Reinsdorf also mentioned that he didn't like the way player salaries were rising and that eventually something would have to be done to control them. (That situation came to a head in 1994.)

1982 Season 87-75 .537 percentage

The Sox worked at getting better in the off season.

Chet Lemon, who had second thoughts about signing a long-term deal with the team, after verbally agreeing to one, was traded to Detroit for left-handed power-hitting Steve Kemp. Both players were All-Stars and both were eligible for free agency after the season.

The Sox also stole Tom Paciorek from Seattle. The first baseman was also an All-Star, hitting .300, and did some of the funniest commercials baseball had ever seen. He was going to help both on and off the field.



Manager Tony La Russa directed the Sox's improvement in 1981-82, but also became a lightning rod for criticism. Photo credit [Keith Allison](#).

Roland Hemond also used his longstanding ties with the Mexican League and plucked right hander Salome Barojas from the Mexico City Reds. Barojas would get five saves in his first five appearances in 1982 and end the season with 21.

As in 1981, the Sox got off to a blistering start, setting the franchise record by winning eight in a row to open the season. The first five of those were on the road, at New York and Boston after a freak snowstorm hammered the central part of the U.S. and forced schedules to be rearranged.

LaMarr Hoyt was the story in the early going. The burly right hander opened the season in the bullpen, where he picked up a few wins, then moved into the starting rotation where he continued to win. In fact Hoyt won his first nine games to start 1982, a franchise record.

By May 22 behind the pitching of Britt Burns and Hoyt, the Sox were 14 games over .500 at 26-12. On this night with Jerry Koosman on the mound in relief of Steve Trout, "Super" Joe Charboneau would make the final out as the Sox would win 7-3 over Cleveland, giving them the best record in baseball.

But this turned out to be the high-water mark. By July 15 the bottom was ready to drop out and it did as the Sox lost five straight to the Brewers in Milwaukee.

During that same weekend Ron LeFlore left the team to be with his pregnant wife. The trouble was he didn't tell anyone on the team about it. On July 29 the Sox fell all the way back to .500 at 49-49. The calls for manager Tony LaRussa's firing were loud and long. Pitching coach Ron Schueler was dismissed and the team was in disarray.

LaRussa didn't help matters by showing up with some of his coaches unannounced at the SportsVision studios after a night game and nearly getting into a fight with broadcaster Jimmy Piersall.

Piersall described what happened. "I had said during a show that whoever was coaching the outfielders wasn't doing a very good job. They were out of position; they were throwing to the wrong base. It was a bad situation. So one night about 11 or 11:30 at night, LaRussa, Charlie Lau and Jimmy Leyland drive down to the studios. They told the guard they had an appointment to see me and he let them in. I'm in the studio and they march in. LaRussa yells, 'are you trying to get Leyland fired?' I didn't know who was coaching the outfielders so I said 'no, but whoever he is he's doing a lousy job.' They started to act tough when one of our producers walked in, he was a real big guy, about 6-4 and when they saw him they left. I tore Tony's ass from then on. LaRussa acts real tough but he isn't and Leyland is nothing but a little phony."

The Sox showed some guts in September. After falling behind by nine games they staged a rally that cut the Royals divisional lead down to 3 1/2 games.

Bernazard broke his leg, though, in Oakland on Sept. 12. Burns came up with a bad arm, which ended any hopes for a miracle the final three weeks. Hoyt would win 19

games, Burns went 13-5. On offense Baines had a breakout season with 105 RBIs. Luzinski had 102, and Kemp finished with 98.

(In the next part of our look back at the 1980s we'll examine the 1983 and 1985 seasons and why the Sox well went dry as far as being a annual contender in the American League).