



Photo credit Leo Bauby.

## ***Countdown to 500 most joyous part of Mr. Cub's career***

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Pure joy.

All the retrospectives put out immediately after Ernie Banks' death at 83 on January 23 focus on Mr. Cub's unbridled enthusiasm for life, mostly in the 43 years after he played his final game.

What about the joy fans in Chicago and beyond took in Banks the ballplayer? Scores of Cubs rooters and others simply picked up Banks' love of life by osmosis and ended up exulting in every career move – especially his pursuit of his 500th homer.

You'd have to be a Baby Boomer at the least to remember the hoopla and countdown to Banks reaching the vaunted measurement of career power prowess. Five-hundred homers was a spectacular sports achievement in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Only a couple of handfuls of big leaguers had reached the 500 mark by 1970: Babe Ruth, Willie Mays, Henry Aaron, Mickey Mantle, Ted Williams, Mel Ott, Jimmie Foxx and Eddie Mathews. Gifted sluggers like Lou Gehrig, Stan Musial, Hank Greenberg, Ralph Kiner and Duke Snider never got to 500. It was not easy to hit a home run, and statistics were not watered down by a slew of outside factors.

Ten years into his Hall of Fame career that began late in 1953, Banks was regarded as the Cubs' best-ever and acquired his Mr. Cub title. He was the most beloved Cub even though by the mid-1960s he typically ranked No. 3 in production in the team's slugging threesome that started with Billy Williams and continued with Ron Santo. In 1963, Banks slipped to No. 5 in the batting order behind Williams and Santo, and that's where he would work the remainder of his career.

But despite some bumps – an illness-marred year in '63 and a subpar season in 1966 when Leo Durocher kept looking in vain for Banks' replacement – Mr. Cub continued to climb the statistical ladder. By the start of a 1969 season for which most projected a contender at Wrigley Field, Banks had 474 homers. There was a feeling in the air one more good season would achieve the vaunted 500 mark as Banks proclaimed, "The Cubs will shine in '69." He was so popular that while most Cubs would exit the left-field corner to get to the players' parking lot, Banks had to go to the other side of Wrigley Field in right where his car would be waiting to avoid being mobbed.

### **Brickhouse, Lloyd excited conduits to Banks**

Banks' late-career feats would inexorably be tied to Jack Brickhouse's and Vince Lloyd's broadcast calls of his homers. Brickhouse put an extra oomph into his "Hey Hey" calls for Banks, often adding "Atta boy, Ernie," and as time went on in 1969, "You wonderful old man, you!" for

the slugger's 38 years. When Banks touched off '69 hysteria with homers in his first two at-bats on Opening Day of '69, Lloyd's trademark baritone really reached down into his diaphragm for additional enthusiasm. That style might not have played in Vin Scully's booth in Dodger Stadium, but it was perfect for WGN's Midwest audience.



**Ernie Banks' No. 14 was the first Cubs number ever retired at Wrigley Field. Photo credit [Will Bakker](#).**

Banks never got to 500 in '69. Like his other starting teammates, Banks never got much rest down the stretch by a Durocher who seemed frozen at the switch under pennant pressure. After dovetailing with Santo for the National League's RBI lead much of the first half, Banks, beset by overall age and bad knees, tailed off in the second half, finishing with 23 homers and a .253 average.

The countdown resumed in earnest in 1970, when Banks still hung onto his starting job at 39 while forecasting "the Cubs will be heavenly in '70." He collected No. 498 against the Astros and No. 499 against the Reds, both at Wrigley Field. He missed reaching 500 even earlier with a couple of triples he somehow legged out on those sore legs.

Finally, on a dark, dank Tuesday, May 12, with just 5,000 in attendance, Banks lined a Pat Jarvis fastball into the first row of the left-field bleachers for the magic homer. The video and Brickhouse's quick "Hey Hey...That's It! No. 500" call became the most replayed vintage clip of Chicago baseball history.

After the game, Banks recounted the homer for Brickhouse in the broadcast booth on the Tenth Inning Show with most of the writers in attendance cramming in around the two to snare quotes.

Minutes later, Banks clowned for newspaper photographers in the left-field corner, throwing the 500 ball up in the air as he leaped up to catch it. Short of the Cubs reaching the playoffs, the accomplishment was the most glamorous milestone a Cubs player could attain. No. 500 was the biggest news of the day in Chicago, reaching euphoric levels, as his death would be nearly 45 years later.

By the end of June, the ravages of his knees finally caught up to Banks. He left the lineup, never to return as a Cubs regular. He did not go far, though. After Brickhouse broadcast partner Lloyd Pettit quit WGN following the end of the Blackhawks season to move to Milwaukee, Banks did some fill-in work in the TV booth for home games. He already had a WGN association, anchoring the Sunday night sports on TV and taping a regular five-minute interview segment for radio.

### **No hype to end of his career**

Except for occasional interviews and his usual “Let’s play two” slogans, Banks kept a low profile while reserving the last spot on the roster through the end of 1971. I witnessed both his 511th homer, a pinch-hit shot off the Mets’ Tug McGraw on July 21, 1971 that barely made the seats, and his final game of his career on Sept.

26. Banks collected a single off Phillies lefty Ken Reynolds. He was not traveling to the final three games in Montreal. It was obvious he was going to retire, but the Cubs did not do anything special for their icon at Wrigley Field after having held an honorary day for Banks back in 1964. The only thing out of the ordinary is Banks started at first and batted cleanup.



**Joy always accompanied the site of Ernie Banks rounding third and heading home, here being congratulated by coach Rube Walker.**

His persona stayed in a lower gear the next few years as Banks served as Cubs first-base coach and roving minor-league hitting instructor. He became a footnote in the game in future years when he actually served as the first black to manage in the majors for an inning on May 8, 1973 in San Diego. Manager Whitey Lockman was ejected in the 11<sup>th</sup>, handing the lineup card to Banks. He guided the Cubs to a 3-2, 12-inning victory over the Padres. His actions did not get noticed since it was a night game on the West Coast, and Chicago beat writers made no special mention of the barrier busting.

The entire Banks timeline with the Cubs might not have happened if team management had handled Gene Baker properly. Excelling at shortstop for four seasons at the Los Angeles Angels of the Pacific Coast League starting in 1950, Davenport, Iowa native Baker was one of the first

African-Americans in the Cubs organization. However, he never got the call to the majors he deserved as the Cubs rode an erratic Roy Smalley, Sr. at shortstop. Owner Phil Wrigley even commented on Baker's need for more experience during spring training 1953, promising no definite callup. Wrigley was under increasing media pressure to integrate the Cubs. Had Baker gotten his justified promotion and took over at short, the Cubs might not have signed Banks.

But fate had other plans for Banks and Baker. Different stories circulate about which team "missed" on Banks. One had the cash-strapped Bill Veeck, struggling to hang onto the St. Louis Browns in 1953, hearing of Banks starring with the Kansas City Monarchs before any other team, but passing on his scouting information since he couldn't afford to sign him. The Yankees and White Sox also had scouted Banks. By not pulling the trigger, the Sox might have missed out on several pennants in the next decade. Billy Pierce and other 1950s and 1960s Sox veterans insist the team needed just one more run producer to close the handful of games between them and the Yankees. Banks could have been that man.

Instead, Cubs personnel chief Wid Matthews closed the deal on Banks with Monarchs owner Tom Baird as KC manager Buck O'Neil escorted the first of a long line of talent to Wrigley Field. In the next three decades, O'Neil-managed or scouted players like George Altman, Lou Johnson, Lou Brock, Oscar Gamble, Lee Smith and Joe Carter would make their big-league debuts as Cubs.

### **Robinson, Kiner, Sauer were mentors**

Banks did not lack for mentors breaking into the majors. He has long credited Jackie Robinson for welcoming him to the National League and cautioning him to listen carefully. That he did as Cubs sluggers Ralph Kiner and Hank Sauer gave him sage advice. The early Banks hardly resembled the glib, slogan-spewing personality of later. A 1955 radio interview of Banks by Cubs radio announcer Bert Wilson showed him virtually mumbling. Brickhouse recalled Banks' and Billy Williams' early verbal reticence and Banks' later WGN work in a 1997 interview on Diamond Gems:

<http://www.chicagobaseballmuseum.org/chicago-baseball-museum-media.php#Jack-Brickhouse>

With his quicksilver wrists flicking the ball into the left-field bleachers, Banks arguably became the game's best hitter between 1955 and 1960. His 248 homers during the span exceeded the production of both Mays and Aaron. Winning back-to-back NL MVP awards in 1958-59, Banks' MLB-leading 143 RBIs in 1959 may have been the most astounding career feat of them all. Only leadoff man Tony Taylor had at least an average year around Banks in the Cubs lineup, so he obviously made the most of any clutch opportunities. And where was his lineup protection? Banks certainly should have drawn Barry Bonds-levels of walks, but pitchers of the day continued to work into his wheelhouse.

Banks always dabbled in jobs or activities outside baseball, but never seemed to settle on one gig. In 1963, he ran for 8<sup>th</sup> Ward alderman in Chicago. But as a Republi-



**Ernie Banks was first through the pipeline of talent Buck O'Neil, pictured here, funneled to the Cubs. Photo credit [KC Congdon](#).**

can, he was doomed to failure despite his celebrity status. In 1969, Gov. Richard Ogilvie appointed Banks to the Chicago Transit Authority Board, paying him \$15,000 annually (which was also his standard fee for personal appearances). Later in the 1980s, he re-located to Los Angeles to work for a moving company.

I found Mr. Cub sitting at a desk in the middle of lobby of Chicago's Bank of Ravenswood, on Lawrence Avenue just east of Damen, two miles northwest of Wrigley Field in May 1980. Banks' new job was the subject of my first column for the *Lerner Newspapers*. Apparently, he was working as a bank management trainee, but had plenty of time on his hands. I played some of the vintage clips of his career on a cassette recorder. Banks eagerly listened, holding the recorder up to his ear while the business of the bank bustled around him. A few years later, I heard nothing about Banks working at the bank.

All the while, he also could not settle into a definite role with the Cubs even though Phil and Bill Wrigley guaranteed him lifetime employment of some kind with the team. Over the years, Banks couldn't easily say no to personal appearance requests, which got him into hot water with GM Dallas Green after Tribune Co. took over ownership in 1982. Green cut Banks' \$25,000 annual payout when complaints about the legend not showing up at appearance commitments began coming into the front office. Banks often had booked multiple appearances at the same time, meaning someone had to get sore about his absence. But the severance did not last long. Banks became the first Cub to have his number retired by the team in 1982.

### **Statue better late than never**

Eventually Banks became an overall baseball ambassador and returned to Wrigley Field regularly. This time, the Cubs goofed on the relationship. Tribune Co. Cubs overseer Jim Dowdle, proud of his bold decision to hire Harry Caray for his conservative company back in 1981, commissioned the first statue to be erected outside Wrigley Field. But the image was Caray, not Banks, erected near the corner of Sheffield and Addison at the start of 1999, a year after Caray's death. No way should Banks not be the subject of the first Wrigley Field statue. The huge error

was corrected in 2008 when the Mr. Cub statue was commissioned near the ballpark main entrance. Guest speaker Hank Aaron took note the statue was a decade overdue.



**Although strangely denying affinity for broadcaster Vince Lloyd (center), Ernie Banks joined Lloyd and Ron Santo (left) as staples of Wrigley Field life in the mid-20th century.**

While most commemorative accounts of Banks recall his warmth and interest in the people with whom he was speaking, he was very human. Like most of us, he had feet of clay. I always found him a bit light on his feet, more deft in lateral movement than in his playing prime, in trying to do interviews.

One puzzling time came in July 2003 when I asked for a couple of recorded comments of tribute about Vince Lloyd, who had just died at 86. Lloyd, Brickhouse, Phil Wrigley, clubhouse boss Yosh Kawano and sportswriter

James Enright were the five Cubs or media figures who were with Banks start to finish in his Cubs career, 1953 to 1971. Banks and I danced about for about an inning without result in the pressbox lunchroom at Wrigley Field before he was scheduled to sing in the seventh inning. “Just because someone has been with you a long time doesn’t mean they’re your friend,” he said about Lloyd, which made no sense given Lloyd’s warm personality. Finally, Banks agreed to say a few words just as Cubs marketing official Joe Rios arrived to escort him to the broadcast booths, cooling his heels while Banks talked with the clock ticking fast to his necessary departure.

In a way, that was a realistic view of what proved to be a multi-layered man, not the happy-go-lucky cheerleader for the Cubs. Five years earlier, in 1998, he had proven that persona when I asked him if his life would be complete without a Cubs World Series victory. Almost all his fans fret over Banks ranking as the most prolific player in history to never have played in the post-season. His answer, also played on Diamond Gems, was revealing:

<http://www.chicagobaseballmuseum.org/chicago-baseball-museum-media.php#ErnieBanks>

Around the same time, Sammy Sosa was in his 66- homer prime. Sosa was amassing home runs at such a rapid rate, and then broke all of Banks’ production records, that one train of thought suggested he could become the new Mr. Cub. Fortunately, that issue was never visited with Sosa disgracing himself.

In the end, there can be only one Mr. Cub, the designation retired permanently along with the number. No matter what side of his personality we witnessed, Ernie Banks gave us joy at just the right time of our lives.