

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## *Langford witness to the onset of peeking in the locker room*

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Good thing George Langford has made his last deadline. He wouldn't like the early-to-bed times for baseball stories in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I rang up Langford recently in starting research for a book I'm co-writing with Fergie Jenkins on the 1969 Cubs. Langford was beat writer for the Chicago Tribune, covering the Cubs amid the huge crowds cheering for the also-ran North Siders late in 1968 that bled directly into the mania of '69.

As was custom for Chicago newspapers at the time, Langford switched beats at the All-Star break in '69 with White Sox writer Dick Dozer. So he missed out on Leo Durocher's unexcused summer holiday at Camp Ojibwa, the sneaking suspicion Durocher was running his regulars into the ground and the shocking collapse in September – from the Cubs' end. Near the end of August, possessed of a much more liberal budget than today, the Tribune sent Langford to cover the oncharging New York Mets on the West Coast.

Langford is one of the few survivors from media covering the '69 Cubs. The last I heard, Chicago Daily News beat writer Ray Sons was still with us, having retired to Ft. Collins, Colo. Jack Rosenberg, 92, then the longtime WGN sports editor, is living in north suburban Lincolnwood.



**With no more tight night-game deadlines to meet or sports departments to supervise, George Langford, 78, enjoys life on the pier in Venice, Fla.**

More than a decade later, Langford was involved in another seminal event in Cubs history. For a minute, he lost his job as Tribune sports editor for the publishing of an uncensored sentence of manager Lee Elia's famous tirade against Wrigley Field fans.

Langford doesn't remember everything. But what he does recall is fascinating, and a chronicle of how we consumed sports from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century forward.

He arrived in Chicago during a sea change in how the media peeked into locker rooms. A Vanderbilt alum, Langford worked for the UPI wire service in St. Louis, Chicago and New York before landing at the Tribune in 1966. While in the Big Apple, he rubbed shoulders with "The Chipmunks," a group of irreverent younger baseball writers who did not subscribe to the quote-less conventions of coverage and semi-reverence for players and managers.

A bit of the "Chipmunks" rubbed off on Langford. He recalled accompanying Tribune sports editor George Strickler to a Bears game at Wrigley Field.

### **Packed like sardines in Bears locker room**

"I think he just wanted me to scrape the ice off the window in front of him," Langford recalled, laughing. Strickler would typically write just a play-by-play account of the game, which was necessary since home games were blacked out on local TV then. But Langford finally persuaded Strickler to let him go down into the cramped locker room down the left-field line. If the virtual janitor's closet was too small for 25 Cubs, imagine the space-defying situation for almost double the number of Bears.

"All you had to do is turn around and you're talking to someone," he said. But Langford came up with the locker-room story, and it netted tremendous reader reaction coverage gradually morphed into stories with quotes.

"I went to a Bears practice and interviewed (quarterback) Billy Wade. "Nobody did that. I was the only guy there. That story just really got good reaction. You didn't know Wade was this, didn't know Wade was that. What a treasure trove it was. The NFL was worse than the Kremlin (on openness)."

The late Red Mottlow, co-host for my Diamond Gems baseball radio show from 1998-2002, confirmed that sparse practice turnout. Mottlow, first radio reporter to interview Chicago athletes in locker rooms in the 1960s, recalled he once had Bears coach George Halas all to himself at practice.

Put on the Sox beat in 1968 when veteran Trib scribe Ed Prell took ill, Langford was able to connect with players without access restrictions or a mob of additional writers or broadcasters swarming the locker room. Again, Mottlow's 25-year-old recollections back this up. He remembered being the only radio reporter at Wrigley Field as Ken Holtzman racked up one no-hit inning after another on Aug. 19, 1969, until WBBM's Brad Palmer hurriedly arrived from downtown in the ninth inning.

Langford could develop one-on-one relationships with athletes. He even had Ernie Banks' ear, not an easy task with the more-complicated-than-met-the-eye Mr. Cub.

“We had access ‘til there was too many media,” Langford said. “Instead of three-four people in the locker room, now there were 20. Everything changed, with the players union and agents. There were more controls on people. I assume everything is done before the backdrop of a team logo now.”

A lot of media access is done as a group. One-on-one chats often are monitored by team handlers. For sure, there is no more cornering a manager in his office after batting practice, one’s notebook or recorder put aside for the off the cuff chat.

### **Writers allowed on team bus, plane**

“We had access that was so much a treasure,” Langford said. “We were on the team bus and airplane. The bus would come out to meet the plane on the tarmac. You had no excuses. You could get burned on a story. Everyone was enterprising.

Langford recalled being really taken to school by Jerome Holtzman, then his morning-paper beat competition with the Chicago Sun-Times. He called Holtzman his idol, and later hired him at the Tribune when he became sports editor. He always had to keep an eye on Holtzman’s whereabouts.



**Jerome Holtzman typically made the rounds to the umpires’ room pre-game. On this day in 1975, the arbiters lent Holtzman an umpire’s uniform to show how he’d make a call.**

“Jerome finally caught on with interviews,” Langford said of the member of the writers’ wing of the Hall of Fame, whose archives are in the possession of the Chicago Baseball Museum. Holtzman initially was resistant to the trend of getting quotes. Once in the swing of things, he did it better than anyone.

“Jerome would ask really stupid questions with 10 guys around,” Langford said of Holtzman’s misdirection play. “After they left, he’d circle back around and get his story.”

Holtzman’s daily circuits also included the scouts behind home plate and the umpiring crew pre-game. He’d use the information culled in his own words.

### **Elia said to print it, but Trib boss not so thrilled**

The politics Langford encountered at the ballpark, though, did not compare with those back at Tribune Tower. Elia used profanities every fourth word in blistering Cubs fans on April 29, 1983. One raving admonition to his small audience of writers and WLS sportscaster Les Grobstein was to “print it.” Langford’s desk people used this “pull quote” in the graphics package of the startling story:

“If those are the real Chicago fans, they can kiss my ass right downtown.”

In '83, "kiss my ass" was not typical language used even in a quote. Tribune editor Jim Squires was so mad he wanted to fire Langford and all staffers involved. But a subordinate calmed Squires down. Langford stayed on, eventually moving out of sports as the Tribune's "public editor."

But before he switched from the toy factory, Langford got an up-close-and-personal explanation why Bears fans are constantly frustrated with McCaskey family oversight.

"Mike McCaskey was the most arrogant man I've ever met," he said of the 1980s Bears president. "He's way down my list."

The recent Florida cold snap reminded Langford of home and good days past. But what he reads and watches on TV does not. With HD TV and replays and sideline interviews, we seem to have more access than before.

But we do not.