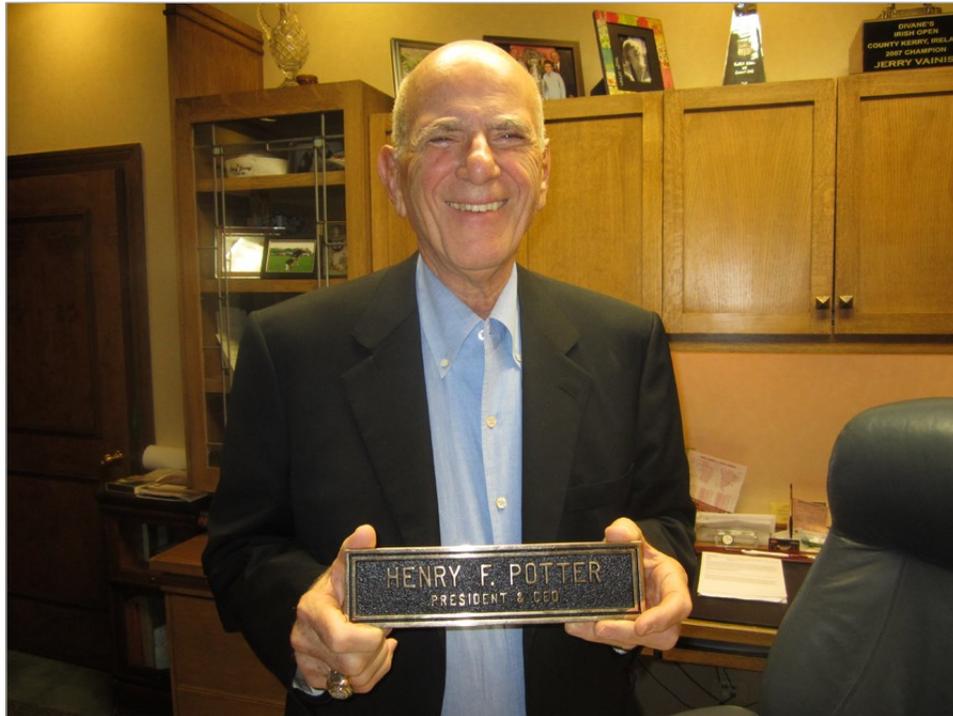


BASEBALL UNDER GLASS



Jerry Vainisi was no Henry Potter as a Bears GM or bank boss, but he knew of some people in sports who more fitted that comparison.

Top picks' mass success a lucky stroke, says Bears championship GM Vainisi

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Getting less publicity than it merited last summer was the fact five straight Cubs No. 1 draft picks from 2011 to 2015 were major contributors to a playoff-worthy team.

Four consecutive top choices, counting 2014 No. 1 man Kyle Schwarber's late-October arrival, were vital cogs in the 2016 championship team. Then 2015 first pick Ian Happ unexpectedly contributed 24 homers to the Cubs with only one year pro experience under his belt.

To put the feat into proper perspective, I visited a classic early 20th century bank building in downtown Forest Park, Ill., the other day. In the big office was Forest Park Bank owner and chairman Jerry Vainisi, who in another life was general manager of the 1985 Super Bowl XX Bears.

The most memorable Bears franchise in history had some nine No. 1 picks on the roster. The first three-peat Chicago Bulls of 1991-93 had a trio of No. 1 picks starting – Michael Jordan, Horace Grant and Scottie Pippen (actually a trade for the rights to one of the two Bulls 1987 top picks). When the Blackhawks won three Stanley Cups in six seasons from 2010 to 2015, they had top choices Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews leading the charge.

Let's just say Chicago sports have been very lucky with the sheer productivity of No. 1 picks sparking title teams. All the franchises have had more than their fair share of outright busts and injury-plagued players drafted highly dragging down their fortunes in their pre-championship decades.

Look at the spring of 2003 with the Cubs. Corey Patterson, No. 1 pick in 1998, hit .300 from the get-go in nailing down the center-field job. Kerry Wood, No. 1 in 1995, and Mark Prior, top pick in 2001, headed the rotation. But Patterson got hurt in mid-season. Wood and Prior began breaking down in 2004. More teeth-gnashing enveloped Wrigley Field for years to come.

"It's very uncommon," Vainisi said of the coming-together of multiple top picks as a humorous placard labeled "Henry Potter, Chairman" rested on the front of his desk. But knowing Vainisi's humanistic history, he was more like George Bailey.

"It takes a lot of luck and it took a lot of time," he said of his own Bears tenure. The string of successful No. 1 picks dated back to Walter Payton in 1975. "It takes you 10 years to get that group together.

"Now under John Fox, the Bears just don't have the talent. Name five guys that Green Bay has to worry about when they play them."

Momentum bleeds over into future

Don't believe the cliché of "one day at a time," or one season at a time. Vainisi believes positive momentum bleeds from one year into the next. He cited the strong finish of the 8-8 Bears in 1983. The famed 46 defense was Super Bowl-ready in 1984, but quarterback Jim McMahon was lost for the season in on Nov. 4, 1984 due to a lacerated kidney in a Soldier Field game against the Los Angeles Raiders.

"If we don't lose Jim, we're beating San Francisco (in the NFC title game)," Vainisi said.

Building teams primarily through free agency has proven to be a folly in sports. Teams must possess a home-grown base.

"Free agency to me is a kind of last resort," Vainisi said. "If you think that one guy will put you over the top, do it. But if he doesn't get you to the promised land, it's not a good investment."

I have a soft spot for Vainisi, and it's from common experiences. He grew up four blocks south of me on the same street – Artesian Avenue – near the Western-Devon and Western-Peterson areas of Chicago's far North Side. Interestingly, George Halas

lived in a bungalow a few blocks south of the Vainisi residence until the 1940s. My one-way trip to Clinton Elementary School was nearly five blocks, which then increased to one mile each way to Mather High School.

“It was one mile to St. Hilary’s,” Vainisi said of his on-foot commute to his grade school, also the alma mater of Bears owner Virginia McCaskey. No lunchtimes watching Uncle Johnny Coons’ kid show on then-WNBQ-TV. Bozo’s Circus was still years into the future.

Brother assembled the Lombardi Packers

Vainisi played youth sports for future Chicago Park District Superintendent Ed Kelly three blocks west at Green Briar Park. Much later he rubbed shoulders regularly with Kelly when the Bears played in Park District-operated Soldier Field. All along, he was a loyal, and frustrated, Cubs fan. Older brother Jack Vainisi was a wunderkind putting together the personnel of the Vince Lombardi Packers dynasty of the 1960s.

An accountant by training, Vainisi joined the Bears as treasurer in 1972. He assisted GM Jim Finks, architect of the 1985 Bears, with contracts and player personnel decisions until succeeding Finks in the late summer of 1983 as Halas’ final front-office appointment. Finks soon re-surfaced as president of the Cubs serving as a necessary buffer between voluble GM Dallas Green and Tribune Co. suits.

Those good, gray execs soon began meddling in personnel decisions and payroll. Green was forced out by late 1987, and the interference from 435 N. Michigan in Cubs operations became stifling – and disastrous with the botched Greg Maddux contract talks.

Vainisi had full authority to execute contracts early in Michael McCaskey’s Bears presidency. But starting in training camp 1984, football-neophyte McCaskey, a former college business professor, starting desiring to exercise ever-tighter control over personnel. Vainisi recalled scouting chief Bill Tobin, knowing which way the office politics wind was blowing, instructing McCaskey in Football 1001.

Getting more aloof as time marched on, McCaskey reversed a seemingly open-door policy he expressed to me earlier in ‘84 in a tour of George Halas’ Edgewater Beach Apartments’ residence and community meetings he staged to boost the Bears’ image.



At 39, Michael McCaskey seemed a breath of top management fresh air when he ran a community meeting to promote the Bears on May 11, 1984 at St. Gertrude's Church on Chicago's far North Side. But in ensuing years, the team president and scion of the Bears ruling family meddled far too much, and negatively, in personnel decisions.

“Even if he doesn’t intentionally try to play general manager, there’s decisions that person makes that they’re not prepared to make properly,” Vainisi said of top team execs moving out of their league. “They impact the player side of the baseball or football side.”

So why do business executives meddle in team operations for which they’d otherwise need many years of experience to master? Green recalled the Trib bosses getting a taste of running the Cubs, and lusting for much more. McCaskey did not even wait that long to tighten his grip.

Ego the downfall of out-of-league execs

“It ultimately boils down to ego and wanting to be *the* guy, and wanting the credit for everything,” Vainisi said. “Ultimately, it depends on how that person can control his ego, and how much they want to get involved.”

McCaskey perceived Vainisi and good friend/business partner Mike Ditka – a case of opposites attracting – as a rival power axis on the team that had to be broken up. Vainisi was fired soon after the Bears’ playoff flop against the Washington Redskins days into 1987.

One year after Super Bowl XX, McCaskey could never dream of firing Ditka. “I became the disposable player,” Vainisi said. “Mike had one more year on his contract. He said to keep Jerry for one more year and we’ll both leave at the same time.”

Vainisi cited the process of teaming with Finks to inform Halas about what they were going to do.

“His big thing was he didn’t want to go to the Tavern Club, sit with Sid Luckman and find out on the radio we had made a trade,” he said.

I often joked that for years it appeared the Cubs and Bears were operated by common (mis)management – the ultimate “man behind the curtain.” Eventually, Theo Epstein was hired as the Cubs’ czar of baseball, with full control of that side of the franchise minus any operational interference from chairman Tom Ricketts. The Commissioner’s Trophy in the team’s new office building is the end result of such a restructuring.

The Bears have not yet hired their Epstein, which is the problem. McCaskey’s younger brother, George, is now chairman, and perceived as the ultimate string-puller above young GM Ryan Pace. The day the smartest executive in the NFL is hired by the Bears, with the founding family limited to a kind of benign oversight, is the day the Bears return to the glory days Vainisi experienced.

So imagine a world where physicians were not bogged down with insurance issues, and all Chicago teams were always run by the best and brightest. That’d be a perfect world. There ain’t no such thing.