



## ***First-guessing, honesty about player foibles necessary for Cubs TV analyst Deshaies***

*By George Castle, CBM historian*

The scouting report on Jim Deshaies is good.

He's a funny guy who can be self-deprecating. Nothing wrong with having a laugh about serving up a meatball for a homer in Wrigley Field in his salad days as a stylish Houston Astros lefty.

In turn, Deshaies, just hired as Bob Brenly's TV analyst successor, needs to study the scouting reports on all who preceded him. He'll need to be a quick study. It's the fastest way to win over an audience that will scrutinize a newcomer with no Cubs institutional memory.

The 52-year-old Deshaies is a technically competent and acclaimed baseball announcer, having teamed much of his last 16 years in the Houston Astros' booth with Bill Brown, a consummate pro.

He had plenty of grist from his career as the proverbial well-traveled lefty. An original Yankees product, Deshaies settled into a middle-of-the-rotation rhythm as an Astro in the 1980s with a peak of 15-10 and 2.91 ERA in 1989. In the back end of his career, he bounced from the Padres to the Giants to the Twins and to the Phillies. He finished with an 84-95 career mark, proving southpaws have nine lives. It will take him awhile to empty his vault of stories.

But his Cubs job requires a different level of performance, as the high standards are almost unlike anywhere in the game.

If Deshaies goes back one analyst removed, he'll arrive at the two tenures (1983-2000 and 2003-04) of Steve Stone, a kind of Rosetta stone by which all over Cubs analysts are measured. Deshaies certainly crossed paths with Stone his first decades in the Astros booth, anyway.

Stone had the unique talent of sketching out any kind of situation, especially manager options, as it unfolded. The skill was called "first-guessing," as opposed to the easily-accomplished second-guessing, which any bloke on a bar stool could practice. More often than not, Stone was right.

## **Stone the swami**

In fact, Stone at times went even further, turning swami. As Carlos Zambrano tried to spin a no-hitter against the Diamondbacks in Chase Field one Sunday afternoon in 2003, Stone warned against an infield chopper busting up the hitless gem. Sure enough, that turned out to be the first hit a couple of innings later.

Stone particularly stood out because his erudite presentation was in sharp contrast to Harry Caray's overpowering personality as the front man of the Cubs. Harry was just past his prime as a technically proficient announcer as he moved into his 70s early in his Cubs days. The broadcast morphed into "Harry Caray's on the air, and we have baseball, too!" Somebody had to stick to the game plan. Stone was a natural in explaining a game Caray also understood keenly, but needed a straight man to analyze between the schtick, the name-dropping and misidentifications (George Bell became "George Bush," and so on).

The booth hardly missed a beat when Stone and partner Chip Caray departed together after the chaos and collapse of the 2004 Cubs stretch-run. Brenly and Len Kasper meshed so well, so quickly that you didn't know Stone and Caray were gone.

Brenly actually was an improvement on Stone in many ways. A bit more earthy, the ex-catcher was never afraid to call out a player for his foibles. Alfonso Soriano's defense was the object of his verbal lash, and for good reason. Last season, when catcher Wellington Castillo did not dash all-out of the box, Brenly yelled "run...run...run!" And as the Cubs dipped to one of their many lows the past three seasons, the analyst was unafraid to brand the boys in blue a "dead-ass" team.

Notice he did not get personal, implying this player was a bad guy, that player ignored his kids or was a deadbeat at bill-paying time. Brenly focused strictly on the game and winning baseball. He did not belabor points or browbeat a player. He spoke honestly. Deshaies needs to emulate Brenly's refreshing candor.

## **Carter a guidepost in the wrong direction**

If Deshaies can live up to the best of Brenly and Stone, he'll be fine. And if he desires a primer on how not to do the job, he should get some Joe Carter tapes from 2001-02. Carter was out of his league in the chair during the two seasons Stone was absent, initially due to illness. Carter's hiring will forever give pause to WGN/Comcast SportsNet/team management about hiring a big name who is only a rookie in the booth.

Amazingly, Stone began a tradition of honest analysis in the TV booth from which a Cubs voice dare not retreat. Prior to his arrival with minimal broadcast experience, the second TV announcer was merely a three-inning relief man for Caray and all-time Cubs voice Jack Brickhouse while also serving as the "Leadoff Man" host. There was little supplementary analysis and too much cheerleading or shouting in the background from the announcer off the air. The play-by-play voice also had to work analysis into his game. It was good for the times, but a 21<sup>st</sup> Century audience demands two announcers who complement each other.

Lou Boudreau's 25-year full-time tenure, starting in 1958, alongside first the golden-voiced Jack Quinlan, then the baritone-blessed Vince Lloyd and finally Caray and Milo Hamilton was the only consistent example of a competent analyst on WGN-Radio.

### **Listen to what 'Good Kid' meant, not what he said**

Boudreau's voice never left his blue-collar roots in south suburban Harvey. "Smit" sufficed for Mike Schmidt. And there was verbal confusion when Madlock faced Matlack. But the Good Kid knew the game cold. He played to a Midwestern audience, and homey was the byword in his days with Quinlan and Lloyd, the latter pairing simply known as "Vince and Lou." If you heard Lloyd chomping on a treat among the steady stream of vittles delivered to the booth, well, that's how different the standards were in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Boudreau began his Cubs broadcasting day hosting the "Durocher in the Dugout" managers' show, featuring the barbs and foul mouth of Leo "The Lip" Durocher. Fortunately, the Good Kid never lost his sanity with his old shortstop's quick hands helpful in pulling the mic away when a profanity spewed from Durocher. Lloyd and Boudreau knew all about Durocher's imperiousness, and other drawbacks among management and players. They went to the brink of criticism on the air, but dared not go as far as Brenly. These were more conservative times, airing a conservative team and drawing paychecks from a conservative broadcasting company. Vince and Lou did the best they could under the strictures, and have never been forgotten.

Three years after Boudreau's final broadcast, Ron Santo's arrival in the booth is remembered for his personality that restored him to the top of Cubs love, but not his prowess analyzing baseball. And that's all the audience expected of Santo – to be "Grandpa Cub," the No. 1 fan, the lovable "This Old Cub," not a technically proficient analyst. He and Pat Hughes had the same strong chemistry as Vince and Lou. Santo is finally enshrined in Cooperstown – albeit one year too late to do him any emotional good – partly as a result of his radio exposure.

Given all these names, Deshais doesn't have really tough acts to follow – not if he's honest with himself and lets the flow of the game allow him to alternate bouquets, brickbats and humor. Just be natural on the air, like his own self-defining statement of being part of a gathering of fans in a living room. Don't hold yourself back to please an imaginary censor back at the station or in the front office.

It's a style that's foolproof in the Cubs broadcast booth.