



Seventies openers featured as much fan action in and out of the stands as on the field

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Chicago Opening Days, as always, are the annual symbols of re-birth in spring, of every team occupying first place right off the bat, of absolute relief from the rigors of winter, particularly after the wild season just concluding.

The “lid-lifter,” in mid-20th century baseball slang, now means relatively dignified crowds paying big dollars with seats purchased weeks, if not months, in advance. Often the typical team fan clientele is not present on Opening Day as the corporate crowd and fair-weather fans take over. The very nature of the crowd is different with Opening Day seats typically not sold on the day of the game.

Four decades ago, the situation was radically different. In the 1970s, both the Cubs and White Sox sold grandstands and bleacher tickets on Opening Day. The system was first-come, first-served, and it promoted overnight lines of fans camping out, with others swelling the lines before dawn. The games were the highlights of “playing hooky” for high-school students all over the Chicago area, while older fans claimed illness or family funerals to ditch the workplace.

The different makeup of the crowds and the long waiting times for the gates to open led to increased drinking and rowdy behavior. Thus “Disco Demolition Night” in 1979 at old Comiskey Park wasn’t the only time when fans ran riot at Chicago ballfields. The entire



An Andy Frain usher in a more genteel time bars the way to Wrigley Field for William Sianis and his mascot billy goat in 1945. The Frain ushers had a much rougher time with fans pouring onto the field 25 years later.

decade of the 1970s featured openers when the stands, spilling over onto the field, featured as much action as the games themselves.

The Chicago trend was only the local version of fans storming ballparks all over the majors. Through the 1970s, rooters typically celebrated en masse on the field for pennant and World Series clinchers, no-hitters and crucial late-season events. Gabby Hartnett was mobbed near home plate completing his circuit trot for his “Homer in the Gloamin’” in Wrigley Field in 1938.

The practice seemed to end, with a thud, when the Phillies clinched the 1980 World Series at Veterans Stadium. Police horses quickly surrounded the field at the final out. Despite a championship drought and massive collapses stretching back most of the 20th century, the victory-starved Phillies fans stayed in their seats. And ever since, teams have been stringent about keeping the fans – who have taken the hint – off the field.

Cubs-Phillies home opener, Tuesday, April 14, 1970

This first home game of the '70 season, after the Cubs had opened 1-3 on the road, was the culmination of a series of fan intrusions onto the field. And the ground rules of Wrigley Field changed. Within weeks, the bleacher basket was installed that prevented fans from lowering themselves onto the warning track and made for dozens of “cheap” homers for decades to come.

The tenor of the times came to a head after Ken Holtzman got the final out after giving up four runs in the ninth inning in the 5-4 Cubs victory. Anti-Vietnam War demonstrations had become increasingly violent in the past two years. The 1969 “Weathermen” riot in Chicago’s Loop that left Chicago politician Richard Elrod paralyzed. Campus bombings had begun. And only a month later, four Kent State students were killed in clashes with National Guardsmen amid protests over the U.S. invasion of Cambodia.

Adding to the stress of the times was the saga of the just-crippled Apollo 13 moon mission. On the day of the Cubs-Phillies opener, the electrical failure afflicting the mission had prompted the crew to scrub the lunar landing and make improvised, emergency measures. The astronauts had yet to circle the moon to begin their hazardous journey home. Their survival at this juncture was far from assured.

“I don’t know what was wrong with the opening day fans,” Cubs general manager John Holland said afterward. “I don’t know what came over them. They all seemed to have something on their minds.”

'69 pre-game shows podcast

The “Durocher in the Dugout” and “Leadoff Man” radio pre-game shows before the famed 1969 Cubs season opener at Wrigley Field are featured as a podcast on the “Diamond Gems Flashback.”

Go to <http://www.chicagobaseballmuseum.org/chicago-baseball-museum-media.php#Leo-Durocher-1969> or “Vintage Radio Highlights” on the Chicago Baseball Museum’s home page.

What Holland didn't know after hundreds of fans stormed the field after the game was a group of anti-war demonstrators was in the house who had protested downtown earlier in the day, then apparently had a yen to watch baseball. The demonstrators reverted to their tactics afterward to jump onto the field, and scores of hooky-players then followed to engage in pitched battles with Andy Frain ushers and Burns private security officers. Chicago police typically did not station themselves inside the city's ballparks unless specifically summoned by team management.

The slow-thinking Holland should have had better foresight, based on the events of 1969. The Cubs' amazing season, which ended in heartache due to the September collapse to the Miracle Mets, provoked a number of fan incursions onto the field.

With no barrier in the bleachers, many fans – whipped up by the frenzy of the yellow-helmeted Left Field Bleacher Bums – stormed the field after ninth-inning rallies. Scores of fans flooded the field after Holtzman no-hit the Atlanta Braves on Aug. 19, 1969. Then, after the Cubs scored consolation victory over the Mets in the final game of the season on Oct. 2, 1969, hundreds of fans ran onto the field with a smoke bomb going off.

Before the 1970 opener, however, the fans gave off the image of peace and love. With 50 officers eventually handling crowd control and traffic outside Wrigley Field before, during and after the game, Sgt. Jack Toner said the 10,000 fans waiting at 9:30 a.m. were “a very enthusiastic crowd. I guess they must be anticipating a big season. They were all friendly, too.”

Added Burns Security Capt. Gary Davis: “It's a very young crowd and very friendly... there was a little pushing and shoving as they tried to get to the ticket windows, but nothing serious.”

The Andy Frain ushers came out in force with a record Opening Day 225 on duty. Chief Mike Frain might have had a premonition of trouble with this analysis: “I can't understand it. I've never seen so many kids out of school for an Opening Day.”

Some fights in the stands erupted during the game, attended by Gov. Richard Ogilvie (booed for his institution of the first state income tax) and Mayor Richard J. Daley (cheered). Attendance was announced as 36,316 – 4,000 less than the memorable 1969 opener -- with some seats in shaded areas empty. Then, be it the four-run Phils rally, a entire days' worth of drinking or the participation of the anti-war group, the crowd's mood dramatically turned after the final out.

Andy Frains glared up at bleacher fans, who hurled objects and verbal abuse at the ushers. Suddenly, a 17-year-old Hoffman Estates youth identified by *Chicago Sun-Times* reporter Tom Fitzpatrick as John Steffen fell 12 feet onto his back onto the warning track from the bleachers.

Hundreds of fans, described by *Sun-Times* beat writer Edgar Munzel as “wild-eyed,” burst onto the field from the first- and third-base lines. Not all Cubs got away in time. Three people tried to drag Cubs second baseman Glenn Beckert to the ground. He got away, dodging a punch in the process.

Fitzpatrick reported that one usher began kicking Steffen while he lay on the ground. Three other Frains tried to wrestle their comrade off Steffen. Soon Steffen was taken away on a stretcher.

Another usher took off his blue dress jacket and took what *Chicago Tribune* sports editor Cooper Rollow described as a “John L. Sullivan” stance, daring all comers to take him on. Other Frains “(give) as good as they receive,” according to Fitzpatrick. Usher Rich Klonowski, 17, was taken to the clubhouse for treatment after being sucker-punched in the face.

Soon after the field was finally cleared, Holland called for Chicago police to provide protection inside Wrigley Field. The atmosphere calmed over the opening homestand that ran through April 26. But Holland and park operations director E.R. (Salty) Saltwell found a permanent solution for the next homestand beginning May 7. Getting the idea from Busch Stadium in St. Louis, the Cubs installed the basket around the top of the bleachers and a pointed top of the bleacher wall in place of the flat surface that permitted fans to strut on it and lower themselves onto the field.

The new installation was fortunate not to impact immediate Cubs history. On May 12, Ernie Banks belted his long-awaited 500th homer off the Braves’ Pat Jarvis. The blast was a low line drive into the first row that bounced back onto the field. A little lower, and the milestone might have been enmeshed in controversy.

Apparently, the new barrier prompted a change in fan behavior. Only a few attendees amid the smallish crowds for the Burt Hooton and Milt Pappas no-hitters in 1972 came into the infield to celebrate. No mass surges of fans ever rumbled onto the field. One incident after a game in 1976 featured a handful of fans punching away at Burns men in deep right field, but the pitched battles of 1970 were consigned to history.

White Sox-Angels season opener, April 5, 1974

Due to different prompts, the national mood was just as sour in '74 as it was four years previously for the riot-marred Cubs opener.

President Richard M. Nixon botched Watergate by covering it up, and he was beginning to pay the price. Former top aide Dwight Chapin became the first of “all the president’s men” to be convicted of his involvement in the scandal on April 5. The economy was turning down with inflation up due to the just-concluded OPEC oil boycott that sent gas prices soaring and car sales plummeting.



Robert Opel streaks behind David Niven at the 1974 Academy Awards. The event may have inspired streakers at the Sox opener just five days afterward.

As a distraction from the misery, the more sexually-open Seventies manifested itself with the fad of “streaking,” starting on college campuses and spreading to public venues. Men and some women would run naked for relatively short distances for shock value. Chicago sportscaster Bruce Levine, then operating a sub sandwich shop near Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, was amazed as a gender-mixed group of nude streakers sat down to chow down in his eatery.

The height of streaking, prompting copycats, came on Sunday, April 2, during the Academy Awards telecast. Streaker Robert Opel, in an action possibly prompted by show producer Jack Haley, Jr., dashed behind tuxedo-clad speaker David Niven. Unabashed, Opel flashed a two-fingered victory sign, prompting Niven’s memorable response:

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, that was almost bound to happen... But isn't it fascinating to think that probably the only laugh that man will ever get in his life is by stripping off and showing his shortcomings?”

Opal’s dash no doubt spurred a few ticket-holders to dress down instead of bundling up five days later in 37-degree temperatures for the Sox-Angels opener at old Comiskey Park.

Legal drinking at younger ages was now a factor. The mid-1970s featured a change in the law that permitted 19-year-olds to drink.

But now, the Friday night fights that sometimes marred 35th and Shields were advanced six hours earlier for the 1 p.m. game. Various brawls among the 30,041 broke out all over the ballpark, with the worst taking place in the left-field upper deck. Yet the fisticuffs took second place in visual theatrics to skin and private parts on display.

Most outrageous was a male streaker, wearing only a Sox helmet, who jumped onto the field in the left-field corner and pranced around.

“Free and naked as a bird, he leaped about in an improvised ballet, a potential Nijinsky,” wrote *Sun-Times* beat writer Jerome Holtzman, who timed the exhibition at 57 seconds.



Jerome Holtzman penned a memorable *Chicago Sun-Times* description of a male streaker in the left-field corner at the 1974 Sox opener.

While several other men stripped in their seats, a woman paraded topless in the left-field upper deck. *Tribune* columnist David Condon tried her help her legal problems afterward at the nearby district police station.

“Lt. Donald Keane, watch commander at Deering, refused an offer to parole the young lady into my custody,” Condon penned. “For all I care, the guys are still in the slammer – but it would have been a corporal work of mercy to bail out the miss.”

Harry Caray, broadcasting the game with Bill Mercer on WMAQ-Radio, went bonkers describing the passing sights, which included exhibitionist Ann Marie’s complete semi-circuit from right to left fields in the box-seat concourse. The well-endowed Marie also had made scenes at Bears games in Soldier Field.

“A little activity in the stands here,” proclaimed Caray on the air. “Whoa...ho, ho, ho. There’s a gal...the measurements must be 85. The entire crowd of 30,000 being distracted. Boy, you can describe her as ‘Hol-l-ly Cow!’ Even the players are out of the dugout looking at this gal...Time is called. Here’s a fan jumping out of the stands and he is not as amply endowed as the woman who was walking by...They want him to get off the field, it’s a cold day. Now he’s going to helped off by his buddies in the left-field stands...”

“You can’t beat fun at the old ballpark. This gal is taking off her jacket now. That’s unbelievable. Nobody can be that big. This crowd, they got their back turned to the ball-field... Listen to the crowd, everybody’s on their feet! Hol-l-l-y Cow!”

Just as quickly as the streaking fad burst on the scene, it faded. No streakers returned to Comiskey Park the rest of the season. The place became numbingly boring with mediocre baseball.

Even the one positive from the 8-2 loss to Nolan Ryan at the opener quickly faded. Cubs import Ron Santo, who forced the trade to the South Side due to the new “Santo Clause” 5-and-10 rule, was cheered in the introductions. Santo’s final big-league season quickly went south. For the rest of his life, he declined to talk about 1974 and his season in red pinstripes.

Cubs-Pirates home opener, Friday, April 14, 1978

This first game, delayed two days, was absolute proof that winter and baseball don’t mix.

A nine-plus-inch surprise spring snowstorm hammered the Chicago area on April 1-2. Continued cold weather prevented quick melting. The snow was still too deep to be cleared off in time for the originally-scheduled April 8 season opener at Wrigley Field.

Thus the game was pushed back two days. Huge snow mounds were still piled outside Wrigley Field with temperatures barely reaching 37 degrees. The re-scheduled game and poor conditions kept the crowd down to 19,239. Still, some bad apples found their

way into the ballpark. Cubs right fielder Jerry Morales was target of objects, including ice balls, thrown by several bad souls.

The Cubs must've felt doubly battered. Cubs killers Willie Stargell (two homers), Richie Hebner and Manny Sanguillen all went downtown off a poor Cubs pitching staff in the 8-4 victory. Neither cold nor snow stopped the Pittsburgh Lumber Company against the Cubs, one of their favorite patsies.

Cubs-Pirates season opener, Friday, April 14, 1978

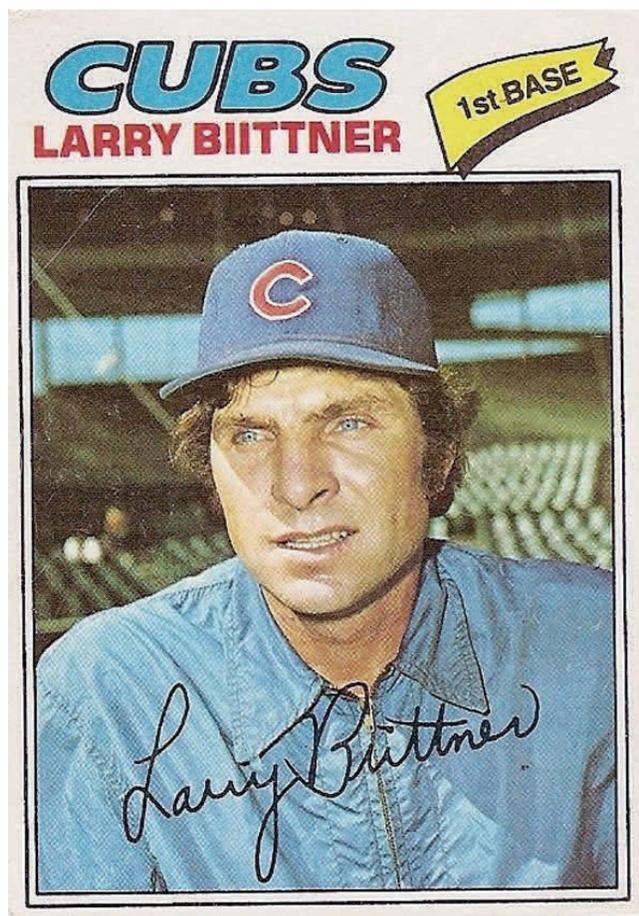
The age-old allure of playing hooky plus the after-effects of the daily pre-game standing ovations for a 1977 Cubs team that held first place through early August lured a record Opening Day mob of 45,777 for the seventh game of the season. That was the largest Wrigley Field crowd since 47,101 had shown up for Jackie Robinson's Chicago debut on May 18, 1947.

As in 1970, the giant throng began arriving early. By 6:30 a.m. some 3,000 people waited in two block-long lines – one each snaking along Waveland and Sheffield avenues – for the bleachers to open. Wary of trouble if they waited any longer, Cubs management flung open the bleachers ticket windows at 8 a.m., surely a record early opening time. Pushing and shoving ensued near the front of the line.

Ninety minutes later, the bleachers were filled. With four hours until gametime, the mob had to invent its own fun. Food fights began in which vittles were tossed from left to right fields and back again across the blocked-off bleachers. Several fans tumbled into the empty area.

With 8,000 paying customers lacking seats, viewing posts were improvised. Fans stood behind the seating areas, sat in aisles or perched on laps. Amazingly, with all the humanity and beer being consumed for eight to 10 hours, no fans ended up on the field.

The marathon day threatened to go into extra innings. But Larry Biittner mercifully put an end to the proceedings with a ninth-inning walk-off homer against the Buccos' Jim Bibby.



Larry Biittner's walkoff homer in the 1978 Cubs opener was well-timed to finally relieve pressure on a Wrigley Field overflowing with its biggest crowd since 1947.

Afterward, *Tribune* columnist John Husar described the enormous piles of jackets and other apparel the bleacher fans had left behind while in line. The scene seemed shameful given how many poor people lacked good clothing along with other necessities.

Realizing they had dodged a bullet with such a massive crowd staying off the field, the Cubs never again sold day-of-game tickets for Opening Day.