



## ***White Sox's New Trier High connection gets stronger with Charlie Tilson, Mike Huff***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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The White Sox's historical New Trier High School connection just got a little stronger.

His status as the team's center fielder coming out of camp delayed due to a stress reaction in his right foot, Wilmette native Charlie Tilson has made friends with a fellow alum of the legendary north suburban school, traditionally rated as one of the best academically in the country.



**Charlie Tilson (left) already has been in contact with fellow New Trier alum Mike Huff (right), working at a Bulls/Sox Academy clinic with ex-sluggler Jim Thome.**

Former Sox outfielder Mike Huff, vice president of baseball/fastpitch, and bunting and baserunning instructor at the west suburban Lisle-based BullsSox Academy, was New Trier's representative on the 1993 AL West champion Sox. Since Tilson came into the Sox organization last summer via a trade from the Cardinals, the fellow former Trevians have had "a couple of great conversations." Then they stayed in touch via e-mail.

"Stay true to yourself," was Huff's main counsel to Tilson, slowed in Glendale due to a foot injury. If Tilson does win the center-field job, and needs some familiar pick-me-up from Huff, the latter will consider asking the permission of GM Rick Hahn and manager Ricky Renteria for supplement the advice the kid gets from Sox coaches.

"I know they'd be 100 percent behind that," said Huff.

He already projected the New Trier connection can be a good conversation starting point if Hahn had to talk to Tilson, as is the right of any GM in player relations. Winnetka native Hahn is part of that connection, graduating from his hometown high school.

"Charlie will be able to say to Rick, this coach, this teacher (as a common point of reference)," Huff said.

## Trebian product part of all-lefty Sox Big Four

Hahn got out of New Trier some years after lefty Ross Baumgarten, a Glencoe product, who numbered among a Big Four of Sox starting southpaws with Steve Trout, Ken Kravec and Tex Wortham in Tony La Russa's debut as manager in 1979. The lefties won 53 of the Sox's 73 victories.

The New Trier Sox connection is interesting as it belies the team's old roots on the South Side. You'd figure New Trier would tap into a Cubs linkage with the Evanston L's longtime terminal in Wilmette, and just a half-hour trip by the Purple and Red lines to Wrigley Field. Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts and sibling board member Todd Ricketts,



**Mike Huff was the Chicago-area connection on the 1993 AL West champ Sox.**

the incoming deputy secretary of commerce, are long-time Wilmette residents. A platoon of former Cubs executives, such as Andy MacPhail, Jim Dowdle and Stan Cook, lived in Winnetka, Wilmette and Kenilworth.

Besides Hahn on the executive side, only Howard Pizer, Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf's longtime right-hand man, could match the Cubs executive suite for New Trier Township residency. Reinsdorf himself used to live just beyond the township border, in Highland Park.

Huff, 53, now lives in Ron Santo's old neighborhood in the Valley Lo section of northwest Glenview. But he had the good fortune of spending much of his competitive career close to home. After New Trier, he attended Northwestern before being drafted by the Dodgers.

Along with Gary native Ron Kittle, a Sox ambassador, Huff can give direction to the likes of Tilson and 2016 No. 1 pick Zack Burdi of Downers Grove about the extra challenges, if any, of playing in one's home market.

So far, right-hander Burdi has had nothing but positives long before he throws his first pitch at the big-league level.

"It's been awesome the last eight months," Burdi said recently. "Everyone has been cheering me on. A lot of people at Sox Fest were contacting me, happy for me, to see what the future holds in Chicago."

## Support of family, friends a big boost

Both Huff and Kittle believe only the player can make it a burden playing at home.

"For me, I always liked having family and friends in the stands," Huff said. "There were enough negative things in all levels. I always felt more at ease when I had support around me. When I got traded to the Sox (from Cleveland), I'd hear 'Go New Trier,' 'Go Northwestern.' They'd raise a thumb. It gave me comfort.

“Having support was big, knowing people in Winnetka who could keep me grounded. When I played here, I would visit Children’s Memorial Hospital, where my sister was treated after contracting leukemia. I would get there and see guys like Jack McDowell and Robin Ventura talking to kids. I’d ask, ‘What the hell are you guys doing here?’ But they wanted to support (the hospital) on their time.”

Kittle said his motivation in playing just over the state line from his northwest Indiana haunts was enabling his father to see him play every day. He certainly pleased his old man in 1983, winning the American League Rookie of the Year award with a 35-homer season and a rooftop clout at old Comiskey Park.

“One of the biggest factors is you never want to let your dad down,” said Kittle, who runs his “BatBench” wood-carving operation out of the southwest suburbs when he’s not doing a Sox appearance.

“That’s the guy that raised you. You want to make him proud. I didn’t talk much baseball after I went home from a game. But you start the next day when your dad asked, ‘What you going to do today?’ Jerome Holtzman gave my dad a Hall of Fame scorebook, which he used.”

The Sox promoted Kittle’s native-son status.

“It’s great to get more support,” he said. “I was fortunate enough to have Ron Kittle Days. They’d load the buses, and I’d see them on the way home.”

The ultimate positive homecoming, of course, was pulled off by LeBron James, who made up for his earlier defection to Miami by crafting an NBA title for his Cleveland Cavaliers. But on the flip side, not everyone finds they can really come home again.

### **Sometimes you can’t go home again**

Part of the Cubs’ long championship drought were two spectacular flops by ballyhooed free agents who grew up in the Chicago area.

Dave Kingman, who spent his teen-age years in Mt. Prospect, ranked as the Cubs’ first free agent in 1978. He slugged 28 homers in an injury-shortened first season, then thrilled a near-record season attendance in ‘79 with a 48-homer outburst.

But off the field, Kingman was off-putting to media and generated negative publicity. Columnist Mike Royko, who played his favorite team for laughs, ripped Kingman as “Ding Dong.” More injuries and media confrontations ensued in 1980, when an injured Kingman skipped his T-shirt day at Wrigley Field to ride a jet-ski in a promotion near Navy Pier. He was traded to the Mets before the 1981 season, but not before opening a short-lived ice cream parlor, “Kingman’s Landing,” two miles west of Wrigley Field. A sign over the men’s room read “pressroom.”



**Zack Burdi’s status as a Downers Grove product has evoked much off-season reaction. Photo Credit: Dr. David Fletcher CBM.**

In late 2000, the Cubs signed catcher Todd Hundley from the Dodgers, believing they supplemented Sammy Sosa with even more power. The switch-hitter already set the record of 41 homers for a catcher while playing for the Mets, his original team. Son of 1969 catcher favorite Randy Hundley, the younger version was born on May 27 on that fateful '69 season, later attending Fremd High School in northwest suburban Palatine.

Behind the scenes, though, wife Tiffany Hundley opposed her husband playing in the same city where taskmaster Randy lived. She preferred he sign as far away as possible, with the Giants. The marriage broke up while Hundley donned his father's old No. 9 uniform, boo birds dogged the homeboy and Hundley slogged through two offensively disastrous seasons. Cubs manager Don Baylor said, oddly, he had to watch Hundley for signs of dehydration while catching. That led to speculation how a big-league catcher, accustomed to the stresses and strains of the position, had to be monitored for such a condition.

No Sox has ever had as tough a homecoming as Kingman and Hundley. But to ensure the usual distractions are kept to a minimum in handling family and friends, Huff and Kittle had simple advice.

"You have to be accustomed to say no to people," Huff said. "You say to family and friends I can get you tickets, but I might not be able to get (exactly) what you want. You have to give me some notice. Maybe there are some games where I can say yes, but some I have to say no. You can't ask for 12 tickets for tomorrow."

### **Can't burn candle at both ends**

Kittle said family and friends must understand the player's No. 1 priority during the season is his job, not socializing.

"Sometimes they took it personally that you can't spend more time with them," he said. "You get to the ballpark at 1 p.m., so there's not much idle time."

One of the luckier home-grown, homebody Sox thrived staying in Chicago. Growing up in South Holland, Steve Trout knew about the Sox as a kid hanging around father Dizzy Trout, who did speaking appearances. He was traded to the Cubs after the 1983 season, becoming a key contributor to the landmark 1984 team with a 13-7 record. Caught up in a Tribune Co. payroll dump midway through the 1987 season, Trout's career went straight downhill with the Yankees and Mariners.



**Gary native Ron Kittle (left) with former teammate Carlton Fisk at a recent SoxFest. Kittle said family and friends must realize a homeboy player's socializing time is cut down dramatically during the season.**

In a largely favorable hindsight way, the Sox spared themselves aggravation letting go a future 31-game winner. As the 1963 season began, they elected to keep right-hander

Bruce Howard instead of native South Sider Denny McLain, 19, who had spent one year in the Sox farm system.

Marrying Lou Boudreau's daughter Sharon, McLain went on to fame and some fortune in Detroit with his monster 1968 season, but ended up defying management, breaking tons of rules and eventually serving an MLB suspension. Later he was a grifter who served two prison sentences. Given the Sox's tumultuous, sometimes shaky hold on the city in McLain's playing years, they did not need that kind of distraction.

Unlike McLain, Tilson's and Burdi's ambitions are limited to the playing field. They will not lack for support if and when their time comes to try to guarantee playing time at Guaranteed Rate Field.