

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Einhorn ahead of his time, especially for Sox

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The recent death of White Sox vice chairman Eddie Einhorn at 80 reminds us old-timers of the day Einhorn, not chairman Jerry Reinsdorf, was seemingly both the face and voice of the South Siders.

Even though real-estate syndicator Reinsdorf, a master money man, was photographed accepting the keys to old Comiskey Park from Bill Veeck in early 1981, I recall TV impresario/promoter Einhorn did the majority of talking in the first half-decade or so after that transition.

Reinsdorf was more interview-friendly in those days, to be sure. Longtime sportscaster Chet Coppock once asked Reinsdorf to tape an interview for WMAQ-TV (Channel 5). Reinsdorf basically told Coppock, “When and where?” Yet it was Einhorn with that trademark New Jersey accent who verbalized how the pair of late 1950s Northwestern law-school chums were going to transform the Sox.

I recall simply walking into the owners’ box to the left of the old Comiskey Park pressbox in mid-game one weekday afternoon circa 1984 or 1985. There was no entry-barring security. If he wasn’t occupied, Einhorn would chat you up. Baseball was not on lockdown, physically or emotionally, in that era. As another example, I could walk from one end of the Cubs’ front office to the other at Wrigley Field, without being stopped, to deliver copy to the team publications department a few years after that Sox owner’s suite visit.

One subject matter on which you sought out Einhorn was TV. With Reinsdorf on board, he tried to effect a sea change in how baseball was presented on the small screen. Needed team revenue would be raised as fans now would be charged for Sox telecasts via the subscription SportsVision service set up in concert with the Bulls and Blackhawks.

Einhorn had the right concept of packaging multiple teams together in one video sports channel. That is the model of a present regional sports network like Comcast Sports Net Chicago, of which the Sox have 25 percent ownership. But Einhorn was a man way ahead of time in implementing the idea in the Chicago market.



Eddie Einhorn was the high-profile part of Sox ownership in the early 1980s.

"Eddie was a creative whirlwind whose ideas -- many of them far ahead of their time -- changed the landscape of sports, and sports on television, forever," Reinsdorf said in a statement upon Einhorn's death.

Like so many other sports executives and media members who did not grow up in Chicago, Einhorn neither had institutional memory nor his hand on the correct pulse of the marketplace.

In 1982, Chicagoans almost considered as their birthright the enjoyment of full schedules of Cubs and Sox games on free, over-the-air TV. WGN had dominated the market since signing on in April 1948. The Sox committed a critical mistake in leaving WGN, which they had comfortably shared for two decades with the Cubs, for UHF WFLD-TV in 1968. The team's profile declined with only a portion of the market equipped with UHF receivers at the time.

By the time UHF penetration was near-total a decade later, Sox fans enjoyed the majority of their games on WSNS-TV (Channel 44), with Harry Caray and Jimmy Piersall staging an unforgettable guerilla-theater-of-the-air show almost nightly.

Few bucks, bad timing for scrambler boxes

Given the age-old viewing habits, fans initially balked at paying nearly \$21 a month for decoder boxes to receive the scrambled SportsVision signal. They were not used to paying for TV, anyway. Large portions of the market, including Chicago itself, were not cabled in 1982.

The economic timing also was bad. The inflation-busting recession of the early 1980s, with unemployment even higher than the Great Recession's 10-percent peak in 2009, cut into consumers' purchasing power. Cash-strapped fans settled for remaining free telecasts on WFLD, which got the Sox's over-the-air rights after a brief return to WGN.

Einhorn and Reinsdorf also lost their No. 1 audience draw. Caray and Reinsdorf simply did not hit it off from the get-go. After working

the strike-fractured 1981 season under the new owners, Caray fled to the embracing arms of WGN and its full schedule of Cubs telecasts, now beamed nationally via



Einhorn lost audience attraction Harry Caray to Cubs broadcasts, where his profile skyrocketed with such showbiz trappings as President Ronald Reagan as a guest partner in 1988.

satellite. Downplaying his rift with the big boss, Caray stated he simply went where the baseball audience resided, avoiding the far smaller viewership on SportsVision. If anything, Caray and his seventh-inning singalongs exploded in popularity with this bigger bully pulpit.

The Sox recovered to a degree with their “Winning Ugly” AL West triumph in 1983. They won Chicago’s first baseball title in 24 years while also ranking as the city’s first franchise to draw 2 million. But long-term, their overall profile fell behind the Cubs, armed with Caray and a nationwide daytime audience on WGN.

Not until the turn of the millennium did Chicago baseball telecasts finally migrate in majority numbers to cable. Einhorn had the blueprint, but it was premature and needed both tweaking and more development time. If any lesson exists, it’s the necessity of a full knowledge of Chicago history and trends.

Nationally, Einhorn seemed to have a smoother long-term impact. He was a chief mover-and-shaker of baseball’s first billion-dollar network TV contract with CBS in 1990. More than the concept of free agency itself, the megabucks deal was the spur to skyrocketing player salaries and resulting ticket-price hikes. Owners spent the money on payroll as quickly as the rights fees flowed into their hands.

College basketball and the NCAA Tournament, arguably now as popular as televised baseball, was no big deal until Einhorn packaged games with his syndicated TVS network in the late 1960s. As an example of the far lower broadcast esteem of college basketball, Loyola’s 1963 NCAA title win, last in Illinois’ state history, was aired on tape-delay in Chicago on a Saturday night after the state high-school championship game. Five decades later, the consumer almost has too much live televised college basketball from which to choose.

By 1990, Einhorn yielded to Reinsdorf as the chief management spokesman for the Sox. And Reinsdorf himself was not as readily available as before. The controversy of the Sox’s threatened move to St. Petersburg as leverage to build U.S. Cellular Field apparently persuaded the chairman to take a lower media profile. Overall, Einhorn was not around the ballpark as much as Reinsdorf, who had settled in the Chicago area after law school.

But in my memory bank, I’ll always have those more informal days of the first Reagan Administration and one half of the “Sunshine Boys” waxing eloquently on baseball and broadcasting. Einhorn was a good man to know at a key time in the game’s history.