

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## ***New Chicago Sun-Times owner still committed to sports, but by how much?***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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Heaven help you if you're a baseball writer and you have worked for one top boss who doesn't understand sports, another who hates one Chicago baseball team because he roots for another, and a third who doesn't understand local fans' readership tastes because he's from out of town.

Yeah, I've toiled for all three – a bullfrog-like guy from a small Indiana town in the middle of nowhere, a petty politician who got himself appointed ambassador to Norway by Jimmy Carter and a job hopper from Lancaster, Pa.

Fortunately, now the commander of these words is a fella who once took three trains to Wrigley Field and old Comiskey Park from his whitebread western suburb and kept a scorecard from the strikeout-free Ken Holtzman no-hitter at 1060 W. Addison on Aug. 19, 1969.

In the same breath, those who like variety in sports coverage – particularly baseball – or actually work for the Chicago Sun-Times should be heartened by new CEO Edwin Eisendrath.

"I grew up a Cubs fan," Eisendrath, 59, admitted of his 43<sup>rd</sup> Ward roots in Lincoln Park. In nearly the same breath he added: "The Sun-Times does a better job with the White Sox than any other outlet."

Eisendrath and his ownership group, including a Chicago Federation of Labor that once ran longtime 1950s-1960s White Sox flagship WCFL-Radio (now ESPN-1000), saved the Sun-Times from extinction. Wrapparts, the previous ownership group founded by zigzagging tech entrepreneur Michael Ferro, apparently lost \$80 million propping up the long-struggling tabloid. They sold it to the Eisendrath group for \$1.



**Edwin Eisendrath at the Sun-Times' front door. He is a baseball fan, and claims he'll make an "investment" in news coverage.**

“Just a few weeks ago, its former owners were talking about shutting it down, which I think was cruel to the people who were working here,” Eisendrath said. “That is not in the conversation anymore and now we’re on a different path. “

Eisendrath was nice enough to engage in a wide-ranging, one-hour interview recently in a near-empty corner office in the Sun-Times’ underpopulated 10<sup>th</sup>-floor quarters across the street from the Merchandise Mart – and 11 floors above CSN Chicago’s studios and offices.

### **Old revenue model dead**

He talked about creating a new media revenue model that by necessity must replace the old, outmoded one. The days of 75 pages of Sunday help-wanted classified ads and gobs of full pages of display ads from Marshall Field’s, Carson’s, Wieboldt’s and Goldblatts are consigned to another century. The replacement model must be mobile-friendly, but it’s still questionable whether that blueprint would generate close to old print-level dollars that support large staffs of writers.

I particularly was interested in Eisendrath’s plans for sports coverage, centered around baseball. Had the Sun-Times ceased operating, its loss would have caused shock waves through Chicago teams that so far don’t seem to care they’ve suffered cuts in coverage as overall media has contracted. That is in contrast to Los Angeles, where the publicity-conscious Dodgers began vetting bloggers for access in 2009 when the Los Angeles Times stood as the only newspaper traveling with the team amid the Great Recession.

Chicago teams would have had just one newspaper, the Tribune, traveling on the road if the Sun-Times folded. And I have to wonder about the future of CSN Chicago’s writing staff, given what appears to be a tighter budget and recent layoffs, the cuts of general manager Phil Bedella and reporter-anchor Chris Boden, and the mandated reformatting of its news shows into the fast-paced, lower-cost “In The Loop.” In 2016, Fox Sports wiped out its regional sports networks’ writing staffs in the likes of Detroit, Phoenix and other markets. More recently, Fox nationally cut all its web site writers, replacing them with videos.

“I think sports is essential to the Sun-Times because it’s essential to Chicago,” said Eisendrath, a former Chicago alderman and Clinton Administration regional administrator for the Dept. of Housing and Urban Development.

“Somebody asked me, ‘Will you continue to cover sports?’ Why wouldn’t you?” said Eisendrath. “As long as Chicagoans love sports, we’re going to cover sports. I think the Sun-Times has good sports coverage.”

### **Washington Times dropped sports**

In a tightened media landscape, a big-city paper dropping sports is not unprecedented. The Washington Times, the capital’s second paper, eliminated its sports coverage among a huge retrenchment a few years back. But the move backfired and the Times restored much of the lost coverage.

Traditionally, the Tribune and Sun-Times sports departments have been in a headlock like two wrestlers, watching each other's moves and swiping their name or well-connected writers. When sportswriter Mike Kiley, a dead ringer for Daddy Warbucks, was dumped by his longtime Trib employer near Christmas in 1996, he called Sun-Times sports editor Bill Adee with the pitch, "I need a place to work." Hurried conferences at the Sun-Times produced movement in the budget to immediately hire Kiley. He was put on the Cubs beat for a 10-year run, earning renown (or infamy) as a Sammy Sosa favorite.

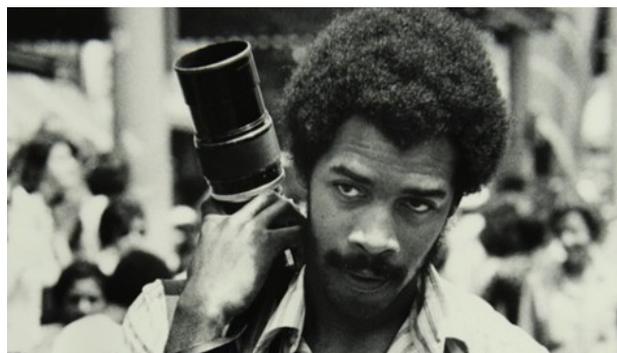
But Eisendrath said he won't react in knee-jerk fashion to whatever Ferro, who engineered a takeover of the Tribune's parent company and renamed it Tronc, does down the Chicago River.

"I don't need to worry about the Tribune," said Eisendrath, who has never met Ferro. "I don't care about what he's doing. He can do whatever he wants to. We're focusing on the people of Chicago. He lives in Los Angeles. I don't care."

Through many rounds of cutbacks, the Tribune knocked out most local college basketball coverage, and barely covers the Fire soccer and Sky WNBA teams. What once was an overstaffed department now uses stringers for games and events once covered by first-team staffers.

### **Sports travel escapes flurry of cuts**

Largely going unchanged was the team travel budget, including the most expensive of all – baseball. The Tribune might use stringers for an out-of-contention Sox West Coast road trip in the second half, but otherwise sends Colleen Kane or sometimes Paul Sullivan for almost all other away games. Covering the Cubs home and road in the last few seasons without interruption was a given. Despite its reeling finances and many waves of layoffs, including the entire photo staff, the Sun-Times felt it had to match the Tribune, road series for road series.



**Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer John H. White was axed with the rest of the Sun-Times photo staff, but the newspaper maintained its sports travel.**

In the 1960s-1970s prime of dean of baseball writers Jerome Holtzman – whose library the Chicago Baseball Museum maintains – the Tribune and Sun-Times each would cut travel late in the season for a non-contending baseball team. I personally witnessed Tribune writer Bob "Lefty" Logan cover a Cubs two-night doubleheader in San Diego at the end of Aug. 1974 off the sports department's TV, producing a dateline "San Diego, Special to the Tribune."

Here's the catch. Several years ago, the price of sending a writer on the road for the entire season was \$50,000. It likely has not lessened since. Meanwhile, Eisendrath and

Co. have set aside \$11.2 million to bolster the Sun-Times for a few years. Those bucks could go fast if the travel budget is maintained as in the past, and revenue does not shoot up.

Eisendrath would not say specifically whether the Sun-Times will continue matching the Tribune in travel commitments or move to a more creative, cost-effective way of covering baseball and other sports.

“We’ll make investments to cover the news,” he said. “MLB wants to do all that themselves (via Baseball Advanced Media). There’s still great stories to tell about baseball. I think we’ve had pretty great baseball coverage. I think we’re succeeding. We tell great stories.”

Meanwhile, the media cover Bears camp almost to the point of overkill. They will not cut back amid the burgeoning Mitch Trubinsky mania. Even with an ultra-popular defending world championship baseball team holding down first place in August, the discrepancy in coverage is eye-opening. Spring training never generates the coverage comparable to Bears camp. I get Trubinsky and the public’s clamoring for the ultimate fresh face at quarterback, but grinding over backup players or an offensive lineman?

“Eight pages of Bears (camp) and one (for each Chicago team) for baseball,” was the surprised observation of famed agent Steve Zucker, who made his name via representation of such NFL luminaries as Jim McMahon, Deion Sanders, Richard Dent and the late Dave Duerson. Zucker had started out as a St. Louis Cardinals fan as a kid in Chicago’s West Rogers Park neighborhood, then switched to the Cubs when WGN-TV began airing the games in 1948.

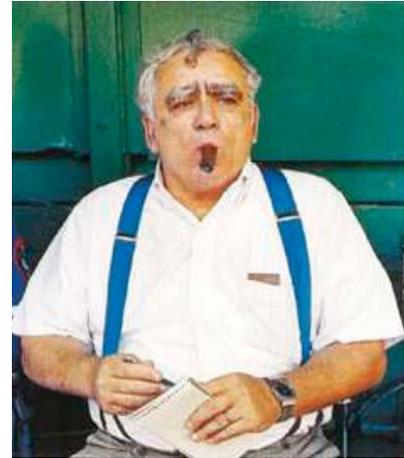
I knew the coverage was out of whack in 1993, when a first-place White Sox team played second fiddle in the on-air discourse of the then-infant Score all-sports station. Every last movement in Dave Wannstedt’s first camp as Bears coach was picked over clean in July at the expense of baseball.

### **NFL barges into baseball season**

Eisendrath is strangely not too accurate in weighing baseball vs. football. In addition to the camp coverage, the NFL draft barges squarely into the baseball season in May. Super Bowl coverage almost touches the start of spring training.

“Happily they don’t overlap very much,” he said. “To everything there is a season. People love the Bears. I don’t think it’s one or the other.”

Some pundits project newspaper operators simply want to dump print in the long run. Although Eisendrath still has an expensive long-term printing contract at the Tribune’s River North Freedom Center, he is still committed to a tabloid format that has been



**Baseball was king in coverage in the prime of Jerome Holtzman’s Sun-Times days. Holtzman is depicted later in his career with his trademark stogie.**

bleeding readers since then-new owner Rupert Murdoch down-marketed the Sun-Times in 1984.

“People in Chicago don’t have broadband access,” he said. “There are people who we have to serve with news. We’re making enormous inroads in the business models.”

The hybrid print/on-line/mobile combo is a necessity. Eisendrath has fingered a portion of the market that has fallen behind in the digital takeover, but still must be served.

“I get this from attorneys who still have big ads in the yellow pages,” said Chicago Baseball Museum president Dr. David Fletcher, “because many blue collar workers don’t have smart phones or internet. In my (medical) practice, *I see this!*”

Eisendrath himself started out as a confirmed newspaper reader. He said as a younger Sun-Times consumer, he’d start on the front page while brother John, a future TV producer, began on the back, sports page. He’ll likely put his two cents into every bit of innovation he OK’s.

“It’ll be 100 percent of my involvement,” he said. “Even when you fully delegate, you have to help people by asking them great questions, to help them think out of the silo they’re in. This is what great managers do.

“Innovate is the key. Sensibly. Not betting the whole farm on one thing or another. You’ll see it in the business.”

However Eisendrath innovates, the bottom line is keeping the Sun-Times and its assorted city coverage – including sports – in business. He’ll have his hands full given the marketplace trends. Nothing would be worse than having a one-newspaper town in a community as big as Chicago.

One less major outlet would mean more strictly choreographed views from the teams, and less competition for the stories behind the stories. We’ve seen that new-age web sites run by the largest national media companies are not assured for survival. The fan is not well-served when, say, one newspaper not under the competitive gun and a team/league-run web site are your only sources for news beyond the game play-by-play. Sounds bites on TV, radio and on-line provide heat, but not necessarily light.

In my experience, a sports fan as the top guy can only mean good things for those who make their living covering our teams. You would just feel more comfortable if Eisendrath had raised three times as much to cover the Sun-Times’ expenses as the \$11.2 million publicly announced. As ticket buyers well know, costs never go down.