

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Rich King stylin' to the very end at WGN

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Friday, May 27, 2016*

Rich King is saving the best for last.

Not necessarily his WGN-TV sportscasts, which will end June 15, but his now male-model, Hollywood-level hair.

One of Chicago sports media's true good guys now has every strand practically in place on the 9 O'Clock News. He's really stylin' thanks to wife April King, whose business is hair at her salon A.J. King in Highland, Indiana.

"My hair's been looking great," he said. "Before (April) I was on my own."

The hair also seemingly had a mind of its own and needing taming, like that of the president of this museum, who also relied on a good woman to restore military-style discipline to his own tonsorial appearance.

Too bad King won't keep fooling his audience about his age due to his fine locks for years to come. He's a young-looking 69, but knows when to take a permanent break with gas still left in the tank. The sports world is radically different – and not necessarily better – than when King began in the business as a WGN intern in 1968, before gaining prominence at WBBM-Radio later in the 1970s.

King won't endlessly carp about the negatives and aggravations of 21st century sports coverage, in and outside his office. That's not his style.

I used to tease him, "Rip 'em, Rich," because he did not start out each day breathing fire. He preferred the straight-on approach, the facts boosted by whatever human interest was the best angle of the story. But too often, overzealous handlers and verbally overcautious athletes prevent that style from being practiced.

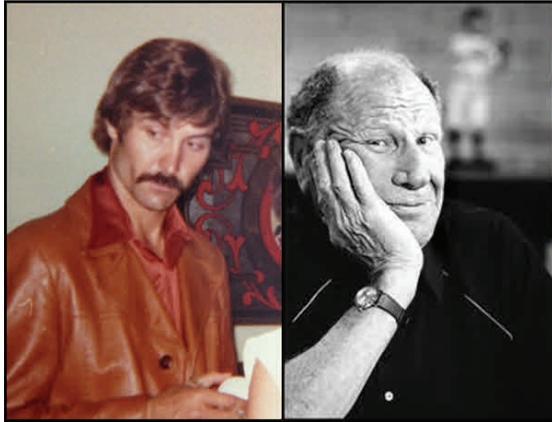
King's retirement on Billy Williams' birthday and the 52nd anniversary of the Lou Brock trade is a good time to take stock of a great run. You can talk all night of the saints and sinners of sports he has encountered as White Sox radio broadcaster teaming with Har-



Rich King has met a whole lot of saints and sinners on the sports beat over four decades.

ry Caray, ringmaster of the old weekend morning “Sportsline” on WBBM-Radio and 25 years of sports anchoring on WGN-TV.

The late 1970s through the early 1990s can be labeled as the golden age of accessibility. All you need to know about the challenges of getting anything new and fresh from the big names in a defensive, corporate-oriented sports landscape today can be summed up by this King remark:



Opposites did not attract: Dave Kingman (left) was a mean dude to Rich King, while Bill Veeck (right) was a great spinner of yarns.

“Walter Payton and Michael Jordan, you could talk to them off the record some,” he said.

I certainly can confirm the Jordan experience. When the NBA trade deadline passed in 1991 without any Bulls deals, Jordan remarked, “That figures,” yet another swipe at GM Jerry Krause, with whom Jordan disagreed.

King rattles off other big names in Chicago annals who were cooperative: Tony La Russa and Jerry Reinsdorf. Yes, The Chairman regularly gives interviews to King, but hardly any others in the market. Also Dallas Green and Jim Finks. Those two were linked on the

Cubs in 1984, when short-term team president Finks was a good buffer between blustering baseball man Green and the North Shore suit crowd in Tribune Co.’s executive suite.

The 1980 Sox were bottom feeders, but their executives made up for the day-by-day drumbeat of defeats.

“Bill Veeck was an encyclopedia of information,” King said. “Very articulate, very down to earth. He spun a great yarn.

“Roland Hemond and I are good buddies. A real outgoing guy, very friendly. One of the best.”

Bad dudes on the 1970s Cubs

The toughest guys? They all seemed to alight on the late 1970s Cubs.

“Dave Kingman was a mean guy,” King said. “He would tell you vicious things. He didn’t understand writers took stuff off the radio. He thought I was giving stuff to the papers. He said, ‘I’m done with you.’

“(Manager) Herman Franks was tough. Even veteran writers like Dave Nightingale were afraid of Franks. Often there was a five-minute lull before anyone asked him a question after the game.

“And Bobby Murcer was kind of rough for awhile.”

I established semi-diplomatic relations with Barry Bonds before he really inflated at the turn of the millennium. Perhaps King, on the clock at WGN, couldn't spend time “working” Bonds. “He was no bargain, and he'd snarl at you,” King said.

But far more often than not, King got his man for the interview. “Sportsline” was a pioneer in big-name guests reaching a targeted sports-nut audience on weekend mornings via WBBM's highly-rated signal. King could get Bowie Kuhn and a whole slew of names.

“Just report the facts,” he said. “I never went out of the way to criticize a guy. Most guys understand that. I always stuck to the sports end of it.”

King also worked in an era when asking a manager or coach post-game strategy or personnel questions was not dangerous, as some beat writers and team handlers seem to consider today.

“Any question about strategy or personnel is a legit question,” he said.

He had the run of Halas Hall in the 1970s. King was the only radio reporter making it up to Lake Forest daily for Bears practice. He'd chat away with head coach Jack Pardee in his office.

Of course, the “good ol' days” weren't always that. King worked long enough to cover three Blackhawks championships. But prior to the Rocky Wirtz era, he had a long wait under the worst Chicago ownership this side of P.K. Wrigley.

1969 Hawks bar part of games – on radio

One of King's first assignments as a 22-year-old producer at WGN-Radio was producing Hawks home games. The radio station aired the Chicago Stadium contests while WGN-TV broadcast all road games. The catch was owner Arthur Wirtz, starting a family paranoia about home broadcasts cutting into the season-ticket base, forbade the first period from being broadcast even on radio.

Thus the WGN broadcasts did not begin until 8:15 p.m. for a game that typically started at 7:30. If the first period was scoreless, King had to sift a big save or related play to include in the opening highlights recap.

Still, the broadcast personalities with whom King dealt can scarcely be duplicated today. Caray, Jack Brickhouse, all-night WGN host Franklyn MacCormack -- for whom King wrote news copy -- and WGN baritone voice Carl (Stormy) Greyson were “giants of the industry...Those guys were full of life, They lived a good life.”

Jack Rosenberg is still living the good life, having celebrated his 90th birthday May 21. As WGN sports editor, Rosey midwived many careers, including King's

“When I was an intern in 1968 at WGN, it was a three-month deal,” he said. “I was desperate to hang on. Rosey set up job producing the Hawks and doing news copy.”

They don't make 'em like Rosey anymore. Or like King. He was a native Chicago who never left and worked his entire career here.

WGN's longtime motto, "Chicago's Very Own," definitely applies to the guy with the perfect haircut.