



Threat to move just off-hand remark – but night-games limitations still tough Cubs problem

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Lost amid the hubbub over Tom Ricketts' off-hand remark about moving from Wrigley Field was the very scheduling issue that is more relevant to holding the Cubs back from championship aspirations than revenue from signs.

Ricketts will get most of his desired renovations. He'll tweak the final product after jawboning with the community and the Chicago government agencies, all of whom will have their hands out in the city's tried-and-true tradition. What Ricketts is not assured is getting the significant increase in night games that is enough to dampen down the negative effects on players' body clocks in switching from day contests at home to night games on the road.



Wrigley Field day games may be attractive to families and sun-worshippers, but they have been proven to drag down the Cubs in the second half of numerous seasons.
Photo credit [Wally Gobetz](#)

In the long laundry list of desired changes by the Cubs was an increase from 30 to 40 maximum night games, still just under half the home schedule. The proposal stated the Cubs would ask for six Friday games starting at 3:05 p.m., a game time left over from the 1980s, when the team was still barred from installing lights. Apparently, Friday night lights are still off-limits. The only night games allowed for weekends would be the ones requested from the networks for national telecasts, usually Sunday night ESPN games.

If I'm reading this right, in the new deal the Cubs could only play night games Monday through Thursday, with a handful of additional games on weekends (and of course postseason games would be allowed at night, as they have since lights were installed in 1988). The compression of the games into the four-day period creates the possibility of more havoc with players' body clocks. They could end up suffering from an even more abrupt kind of "shift work disorder," a physical and mental condition which is present in all businesses requiring workers to change their schedules regularly.



Dr. David Fletcher, president of the Chicago Baseball Museum, said "shift work disorder" symptoms will still be felt by Cubs players even with 10 more night games per season at home.

Dr. David Fletcher, president and founder of the Chicago Baseball Museum, said the Cubs likely have suffered from shift work disorder (SWD) in the decades since the team was the only big-league franchise playing all day games at home, then had to switch to a heavy night schedule on the road, over and over again over the six-month season.

"It's obvious that with the constant shifting of schedules, like a 9-to-5er going to 4-to-midnight and back again on a weekly basis, that at least some Cubs have suffered from Shift Work Disorder as the season progresses, over the past half-century," said Fletcher, a board certified occupational and environmental specialist at Rush University Medical Center.

"The increase of night games does help in some ways, but the number proposed still does not approximate the blocks of home night games and a consistent schedule all other teams enjoy. I wonder if the Cubs will still have trouble over an entire season until they're in the mid-50s range of night games. The constant shifting, even within homestands, will lead to more incidents of Shift Work Disorder, which will negatively affect multi-million-dollar players' ability to perform at the highest level for an entire season."

"Even with playing more night games, the Cubs are a competitive disadvantage to the rest of MLB because of the deleterious effect of shift work disorder."

The constant body-clock upheavals apparently showed up in continual second-half slumps, in some cases wrecking promising seasons in which a pennant or divisional title seemed in reach off first-half performances. The batting averages of Hall of Famers Ernie Banks, Billy Williams and Ron Santo showed big drops in the first few night games of road trips as the starts had to adjust both to a night schedule and artificial light after playing an all-day homestands. Williams said he typically went to bed by 10 p.m. at home. He was just coming to bat in the first innings during games on the West Coast when his body said it was time to retire for the night.

When the first schedule of 18 annual night games was imposed in 1989, the Cubs bunched the evening affairs on Mondays and some Tuesdays after coming off road trips. The idea was to give the players extra rest coming home, to avoid midnight Sunday arrivals from the West Coast, then a quick turnaround to a 1:30 p.m. game on Monday. The scheduling did give players a breather, but did not solve the body-clock shifting, as the Cubs had to go back to playing the remainder of their homestands during the day.

More night games, but more problems

From 2003 forward, 30 night games were permitted, but the issues of SWD likely were worsened. Now, the team had starting Wrigley Field game times all over the map – 7:05 p.m., 1:20 p.m., 12:05 or 3:05 p.m. on Saturdays, 6:05 p.m. on some Mondays. All other teams deal with TV-mandated odd starting times, but still have a base night-game schedule. Athletes are creatures of habit in the first place. They crave a consistent schedule. They did not get it as Cubs, and had the additional issue of trying to sleep and eat at varying times at home, then adjust to primarily night games on the road.

Players reported personal upheavals. Getting adjusted to the heavy home daytime schedule in 2002-03, Moises Alou said he'd still wake up around 8 a.m. on the road. In his first Cubs season in 2004, Derrek Lee said he could not fall asleep prior to day games until 1:30 a.m., having been used to playing at night in Miami and attuning his lifestyle accordingly.

The inability to play night games on Fridays in the package of new proposals still does not solve the problem of the Cubs coming off the end of a road trip with a Thursday night game, then flying home and playing on short rest the next afternoon at Wrigley Field. The surprise also is in the short memories of the Ricketts siblings, who fell in love with the Cubs watching from the bleachers in the 1980s. Those 3:05 p.m. starts generated late-innings shadows that made it hard for hitters to see the entire ball from pitchers. Turning on lights now when shadows creep forward with the clock has little effect to improve visibility, as the non-shaded areas of the ballpark are still in daylight at 5:30 or 6 p.m.



Plans for 40 night games at Wrigley Field may be 15 too short of allowing the Cubs to match the schedule of most other teams. Photo credit: [Gary Wong](#)

Inching up to 40 home night games may increase revenue from more prime-time broadcasts, but the overall problem remains. The Cubs still don't enjoy similar playing conditions to all other teams. That's the legacy of baseball-ignorant owner P.K. Wrigley, who banned lights after he failed to follow through on a plan to inaugurate night games in the early 1940s.

Sox have 55 night games at The Cell

The average night-game complement is 54 games per team. The White Sox were scheduled for 55 home night contests at U.S. Cellular Field. In cold Cleveland, the Indians had 57 on the docket. The Kansas City Royals featured 58. The Tampa Bay Rays had 59, with Sunday day games starting a little later at 1:40 p.m. Eastern Time than most other teams. Players attuned to the entertainers' night schedule usually don't have batting practice before Sunday games, so they're reporting later and not upsetting their body clocks.

If Ricketts and his management team feel the Cubs are at a revenue and competitive disadvantage with outdated, cramped facilities at Wrigley Field, they also must realize they have to play the same kind of schedule as all other opponents. That's the problem of committing to playing at Clark and Addison. A large chunk of the surrounding community will oppose 50-plus night games because of the crowd behavior and noise problems.

The real curse on the Cubs is the location. The team cannot freely play a schedule similar to all other teams due to the clout of Wrigleyville residents, all of whom moved to the area knowing the ballpark generated congestion and noise. They are constrained on renovating Wrigley Field in symmetrical fashion due to the confined footprint – especially along Addison Street – on which the ballpark property is now located.

Some of the renovations depicted in renderings the Cubs just released look fine. Overall, though, Ricketts appears to have gone a bit too far in overbuilding along Clark Street and attaching a new structure to the southeast corner of Wrigley Field. He'll need signs to generate revenue, although apparent plans for signs outside the ballpark suggest a move toward a mini-Times Square glitter gulch. Grafting the planned Jumbotron onto the left-field outfield wall appears out of place, both in size and viewpoint. The "cityscape" for which Wrigley Field is well-known – looking from the inside-out to the surrounding neighborhood -- would be cut down. Remember, ballpark builders in other cities considered Wrigley the model in building their stadiums and incorporating outside structures and scenery in the view. They wore a path to Wrigley to help design their projects.

The monster size of the Jumbotron appears out of proportion to Wrigley's modest confines, according to Al Yellon, editor of the popular BleedCubbieBlue.com blog. Yellon marked the 50th anniversary of his first game at Wrigley Field this summer, so his words should be taken into account. Seniority and institutional memory should account for something, although those qualities seem to be worthless to the present team management.

All of the projected \$300 million or \$500 million worth of doodads will be megabucks wasted, though, if the Cubs continue to have physical and mental upheavals in their schedule for which no other teams are saddled.

There are far more moving parts involved in guiding the Cubs to a championship than the Ricketts family ever realized when they agreed to buy from the shark-like Sam Zell.