



More Wrigley night games last of 3 legs Cubs must stand on to reach World Series

*By George Castle, CBM historian
(First of a three-part series)*

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The long, meddling arm of Phil Wrigley is reaching out from the distant past again to crimp the Cubs, this time interfering with baseball messiah Theo Epstein's effort to upgrade the franchise to 21st Century standards.

Baseball-ignorant owner/chewing gum magnate Wrigley is the leading culprit for the Cubs' century-long-and-change championship drought. He died in 1977 after 45 years in charge. He was a huge dropoff in competency running the team compared to William Wrigley, Jr., his generous, involved, World Series-lusting father. And the younger Wrigley suffered deeply when William L. Veeck, William Wrigley's hand-picked team president, died too young at 56 in 1933 after serving as baseball's top – and unsung -- management innovator. Veeck -- whose Hall of Fame-bound son Bill started his baseball career under Phil Wrigley – would have been a keen counselor and check on the more ridiculous ownership schemes concocted post-William Wrigley, Jr.

Worst of all was Phil Wrigley's refusal to install night games from the 1940s onward when that schedule became standard throughout Major League Baseball. Such a legacy is ingrained in the restrictive schedule of night contests at Wrigley Field that prevent the Cubs from operating on a schedule similar to all other opponents.

Wrigley did not revisit a late-1941 plan to install lights for the following season. He had stored steel for the towers underneath the stands. But when Pearl Harbor plunged the United States into World War II, Wrigley donated the materials to the war effort. A post-war attendance boom permanently deferred the push for lights.

Thus night baseball was not grandfathered in when the surrounding neighborhood began gentrifying in the late 1970s. The politically-aware, activist residents of what soon would be known as Wrigleyville used their clout to legislate against the installation of



Wrigley Field at night can look positively gorgeous. But the Cubs need more such scenes to smooth out the toughest schedule in baseball.

Photo credit: [Gary Wong](#)

lights by Tribune Co., Wrigley's successor as owner, starting in 1982. Five years later, the softening of that opposition, in no small thanks to political machinations at City Hall, led to the approval for 18 annual night games starting in 1988, then up to 30 in 2004.

Limited night ball a modest gain for players

The limited night games, concentrated on Mondays and Tuesdays, gave a little more rest to players coming off road trips ending on Sundays. No longer would the Cubs arrive near midnight from the West Coast, then have to quickly turn around to play a day game Monday afternoon. Meanwhile, the prime-time contests boosted Cubs TV ratings and cash flow for the burgeoning Wrigleyville nightlife scene.

But after 25 seasons of night games in 2012, problems continue with the inability to play close to the per-team 54 night-game average along with a ban on Friday night games. The restrictions still classify the Cubs as different from all other franchises. Limits on night games add an unnecessary distraction, if not an outright obstacle, for players in the brutal 162-game grind.

And that's a reprise of the decades-long results of contrarian Wrigley's hair-brained schemes, such as the College of Coaches, that made the Cubs different, sometimes oddball, rather than simply being run better than all other foes. Instead of gimmicks and misdirection, a team outplaying, out-general managing, out-developing and out-scouting the opposition is the only route to winning. Good fortune is then added as the finishing touch to capture a World Series.

Wrigley Field's playing schedule, part of a 10-year city ordinance that expires in 2014 – the 100th anniversary of the venerable ballpark – comprises a three-legged base on which the Cubs must stand in operating by present-day baseball organizational standards.

First leg is Epstein's ongoing massive improvement of a traditionally under-performing, under-manned baseball operations department that dated back to the Wrigley ownership days. The Cubs didn't have the front-office personnel, both in quality and quantity, to compete with the elite franchises.

Thrifty former Cubs president Andy MacPhail's professed style was "slow, steady, unspectacular." He said in 2005 that he'd rather be "one man too short than one man too heavy" in front-office staffing, resulting in the second-smallest front-office operation in the majors. Through 2011 and 2012, Epstein continued the modest head-count increases begun after MacPhail was ousted in 2006. The new regime divided pro and amateur scouting supervision among two men instead



Cubs baseball boss Theo Epstein's grand plans for rebuilding the Cubs could be crimped by the player-unfriendly, day game-heavy schedule.

of having Tim Wilken run both departments. Wilken, switched to the amateur-side before becoming an Epstein special assistant, said such a split of responsibilities was standard among most teams.

Wrigley renovation stalled in political quicksand

The next two legs are problematic. Owner Tom Ricketts' first proposal for funding to reconstruct Wrigley Field, dipping into amusement-tax increases over time, was DOA. Even though Mayor Rahm Emanuel is a Cubs fan who lives a little more than a mile northwest of Wrigley Field, he would have been a tough sell on any financing scheme that tries to tap into public funds or tax revenue.

In a shaky economic climate where basic services are being cut, sentiment runs against using tax dollars to help a sports franchise make even more money. If the Ricketts family had another \$300 million in the kitty to privately finance the project in the manner of other well-appointed sports moguls, the construction booms already would be working on the Friendly Confines. The family may have seriously underestimated the total costs involved when they purchased the Cubs from then-Tribune Co. chief Sam Zell.



Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts must tread carefully on advocating changes in the night-game issue given the political climate.

Photo credit: [Garrett Craig](#)

Making matters far worse, any small forward movement to obtain financing was scotched when Joe Ricketts, Tom Ricketts' father, was linked to a plan to sharply criticize President Obama as the 2012 election campaign got underway. Both the timing and relationships involved were terrible. Emanuel was one of Obama's top loyalists, having served as his White House chief of staff before resigning to run for mayor two years ago. "Frozen" would be an apt term for the Ricketts-Emanuel relationship.

At stake is not only modernizing the fan experience at Wrigley, but also updating facilities for the players to replace the antiquated, cramped locker and training rooms that rank far behind almost every other franchise. The Cubs lack an indoor batting cage accessible to the players during games, and thus have to hit off a tee into a mesh screen that drops from the ceiling in the cozy clubhouse. Some creative space shuffling in 2010 resulted in an expanded weight room and a players lounge, but far more is needed.

The night-game issue always looms in the background as the last leg. Ricketts dares not propose an increase in night games, a proverbial stick-in-the-hornet's-nest action potentially inflaming the issue while he fights the strong headwinds on the Wrigley rehabbing project.



If Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel is stalling progress on a funding formula for Wrigley Field renovations, he certainly would not be amenable to a increase in night games.

Photo credit: [Talk Radio News](#)

Making the schedule more player- and fan-friendly -- short of advocating a full night-game complement, is definitely on the Cubs' mind. Through the off-season, the team advocated a return to starting times for the 2013 season last seen in the 1980s and 1990s. The 1980s featured some 3:05 p.m. starts as a halfway measure with the lack of lights. The 1990s had Friday games starting at 2:20 p.m.

In a Nov. 15 meeting at the 19th District Police Auditorium two blocks east of Wrigley Field, Cubs official Jennifer Dedes-Nowake met residents to outline plans for later starting times. The team had also met with the major Wrigleyville community groups, according to the *Inside Booster* newspaper.

Cubs back later-afternoon game times

“We think a 3:05 p.m. starting time would make us more competitive, give our players a little more time to rest in the morning,” Dedes-Nowake, the Cubs' manager of community outreach, was quoted in *Inside Booster*. “They wouldn't have to be at the park so early when they've just flown back into town. Kids could get to the games after they got out of school and businessmen could stay a little later at work.”

Predictably, the modest gathering of residents in attendance to talk to Dedes-Nowake seemed opposed to later starting times, even though the neighborhood has thrived with businesses



The Cubs are advocating more 3 p.m. starts, which would feature additional games played in late-afternoon shadows as depicted here.

Photo credit: [Gary Elrod](#)

Earlier in 2012, Julian Green, the Cubs' vice president of community relations, said the team had no plans to ask for an overall increase in annual night games or flexibility on scheduling a couple of Friday nights when necessary to accommodate the Cubs traveling home from a Thursday night road game.

But at some juncture, the night-game issue will have to be addressed, certainly no later than the present ordinance's upcoming expiration date. Evidence has mounted through the decades that players' circadian rhythms – “body clocks” in simpler language – are adversely affected by the constant, near-weekly switching from a 9-to-5 schedule (now peppered with night-shift work) at home to a 4-to-midnight schedule on the road.

A sedentary office worker could wear out with such constant shifting of sleep and eating patterns. What about athletes, whose success is tied to a consistent routine, dealing with a repeated shifting in work and sleeping schedules on top of the tough travel for six months each year?

And now the 30 night games could further complicate the body-clock shifts. Originally projected to ease the transition coming off the road, the night games dovetailing with 51 days games creates a negative smorgasbord of home game times and further jarring of the circadian rhythm within home stands. Games now start at 12:05, 1:20, 3:05, 6:05

and 7:05 p.m.

And in a connection to the outdated Wrigley facilities, players cannot easily take early batting practice or perform extra work on other fundamentals before home day games. In contrast, the White Sox typically can hold early batting practice around 2:30 p.m. for a 7:05 p.m. game at U.S Cellular Field.

Second-half collapses exposed day-game problems

Repeated second-half Cubs collapses starting in 1969 focused attention on the night-game issue and resulting bedrugged players. The emphasis first was on the supposedly draining heat of day games, but soon shifted to the body-schedule upheavals. Countering day-game backers' touting of the positive effects of 9-to-5 shift on players' family lives, a succession of Cubs have told of the extra wear and tear of the limited night-game schedule.



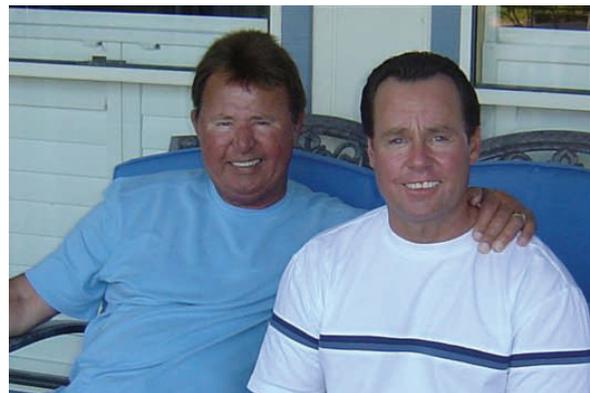
Ron Santo, shown early in his Cubs days, somehow carved out a Hall of Fame career despite playing with Type 1 diabetes through the all-day game schedule at Wrigley Field.

Perhaps the most extreme negative effect of the day-to-night shifting was on Hall of Famer Ron Santo. He was diagnosed with Type 1 “juvenile” diabetes at 18. Santo in retrospect pulled off a Cooperstown-worthy feat alone of amassing a great career without being able to accurately measure his blood sugar levels due to the lack of glucometers. But his oldest son, Ron, Jr., believed Santo paid a terrible price decades later due to the eccentric schedule.

“There were many, many days when he was tired or worn out because of his blood-sugar levels,” Ron Santo, Jr., said soon after his late father was elected to the Hall of Fame in Dec. 2011. “He still put those numbers up with (playing against) great pitching and great players.

“The time-z o n e changes, with all the day games, every time you left town you switched to night games. That physically is what caught up to him later in his life. That’s how all the physical problems he had later in life was due to – unbalanced regulation of his sugars during his playing days. By the time he was 60, it all caught up to him. Starting with his heart condition, then (amputation of) his two legs.”

Almost every other player did not face the physical challenges of Santo. But they nev-



The Santos, Ron Sr. (left) and Ron Jr. at Thanksgiving 2009. Ron Santo Jr. believes the constant switching from day games at Wrigley Field to night games on the road helped aggravate his father's Type 1 diabetes.

ertheless believed they would have more pep from more night games at Wrigley.

Just before he retired in May 2012, beloved Cub Kerry Wood endorsed a schedule change: “Love night games at Wrigley. Great energy -- I think our bodies hold up a little better. I would like to see more night games at home.”

Two-time former Cub Reed Johnson, traded away in July 2012, is a true thinking man’s player. Dedicated, he liked to get to Wrigley Field as early as 7:30 a.m. for day games to squeeze in extra work. But he’d sometimes be bleary-eyed, home and away.

“It wears on you, Johnson said. “If you’re a young player, you don’t really understand it, so you go out late and it can make it very difficult on you. It’s tough, when you start getting self in that schedule of waking up at 10 or 11 on road, but by that time, you should be on field (by the home schedule’s standards). When you jump back and forth, that’s the toughest thing.”

Epstein has said he will study the night-game issue. He’s keeping any further comments to himself. There won’t be any media leaks about his true intentions as were more prevalent in predecessor Jim Hendry’s regime.

“What Theo and Jed (GM Hoyer) and new baseball management has said, they’ve gone to the players to accept the challenge, turn this to a competitive advantage,” Cubs spokesman Green said earlier in 2012. “They’re asking players to adapt. They recognize it’s a challenge.”

Players must be tougher mentally, physically at Wrigley

Long before Epstein arrived, a stark realization was established that the ideal Cub had to be mentally, and probably physically, tougher than average given his home playing conditions, from the day games to the small locker room to the lack of the game-accessible batting cage to the fickle winds in open-air Wrigley.

“They’re starting to look for players who will go the extra mile to withstand the schedule,” said Johnson. “It does take a special group of people like we had in 2008 to overcome that.”

Problem is, that 97-win team in ’08 didn’t get the credit, as all other occasional Cubs playoff teams didn’t, for plowing through the team’s tough baseball calendar, day and night. Yet another spectacular postseason flop took the sheen off their regular-season accomplishments.

Included in the 2008 and 1998 postseason survival tests were the grueling, sleepless turnarounds from a Thursday night road game to a Friday afternoon Wrigley game. Regular-season Friday night games have been prohibited from the onset of night games on Aug. 8, 1988, as the skeptical Wrigleyville community feared too much drunken revelry at TGIF time. A decade ago, MacPhail said local “club owners” feared interference from capacity baseball crowds in their Friday night business, resulting in the ban on Friday prime-time baseball. Saturday-Sunday games were limited to a handful to be

used for network TV broadcasts, primarily ESPN's Sunday night series.

But the Friday night prohibition put the Cubs in a real bind when opponents, particularly in the Sunbelt, refused to schedule day games on getaway Thursdays to accommodate their visitors' quick turnarounds.

A major-league rule allowing a night game in one city, then a day game in another the next afternoon, permitted the turnarounds if the travel time spent in the air was two hours or less. No doubt that rule was bent several times. Closer teams in St. Louis, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh, each around an hour or a little more away, took advantage by scheduling Thursday night games against the road-tripping Cubs. Thursday day getaway games on the West Coast, ending after 6 p.m. Central time, were still a problems with the Cubs still arriving home around midnight.

The Cubs actually have dodged some bullets in these Thursday-to-Friday short turnarounds.

Most extreme example was on Thursday, July 30, 1998. The Cubs lost 4-0 to the Diamondbacks in a game that began at 6:36 p.m. Chicago time – technically classified as a day game in Phoenix as it began before 5 p.m. local time. Amazingly, after at least a 2 1/2-hour late-night flight home, the Cubs won the next two games against the Rockies at Wrigley, 9-1 (behind Kerry Wood) in a 2:20 p.m. Friday start and 3-2 in a 12:15 p.m. Saturday game. But both baseball and medical experts agree the team would feel the travel and sleep-deprived effects within two days.

On Thursday, June 19, 2008, a wild Carlos Marmol faced just four Rays batters in an inter-league game in St. Petersburg. Marmol coughed up a 3-1 seventh-inning lead as Cubs lost 8-3 in a in three-hour game ending after 9 p.m. Chicago time. Again, arriving after midnight, the Cubs had to face the emotional cauldron of the annual White Sox series, which they somehow swept three in a row. The Friday game was at 1:20 p.m.; Saturday was a 12:05 p.m. start.

Day-game advocates and skeptics who believe the mega-millionaire players should just toughen up will point to the success in these quick turnarounds in insisting more after-dark games aren't necessary. But Epstein, Ricketts and 44th Ward Ald. Tom Tunney -- through whom any night-game alteration must be negotiated -- might be surprised to find support for Friday night games to ease turnarounds – and even more night contests. The backing came from prominent business owners near the ballpark interviewed earlier in 2012. And one even suggested there could be more community support for night games than meets the eye.

We won't soon know if Tunney has thought about more than 30 night games. He did not respond to several messages for comment left with 44th Ward aldermanic-office aides.

Bar owners back some Friday night games

Interviews conducted earlier in 2012 discovered some Wrigleyville business support for

ballpark schedule changes. Steve Strauss, owner of the longtime Sluggers bar on Clark Street, and Jesse Boyle, proprietor of Red Ivy, both backed at least a few Friday night games to accommodate the Thursday getaway-night travel. Boyle suggested 6:05 p.m. starts. Both suggested some 3:05 p.m. Friday starts to complement a handful of Friday night games.

Strauss' and Boyle's ideas were the opposite of what MacPhail had recalled about business opposition to Friday-night play. Both barkeeps said they would do even better business with Friday late-afternoon or night games. Strauss added his Sluggers traffic would benefit much more from a full 54-night game schedule than the hybrid day-night calendar now offered.

"I would like to see a couple of (Friday) night games," Strauss said. "The 3:05's were phenomenal for us. 1:20 on Friday was not as good as 3:05. 12:05 for us is terrible."

Said Boyle: "In a Friday situation, it makes a lot of sense to have a 3:05 or even a 6:05 game. It would be an excellent idea. It helps drive business earlier. Traffic wouldn't be leaving during rush hour."

But Boyle stopped at endorsing Saturday night games, which Strauss also said would be positive for him.

"Saturday night would be a conflict," Boyle said. "The Cubs crowd that night is a different kind of animal. On Saturdays we have well-dressed group coming in, a much more refined crowd."

Boyle theorized the neighborhood might endorse a further increase in night games because of a better 21st Century awareness on how to handle crowds and traffic compared to more pre-2000 conflicts between the team and neighborhood.

"Throw a ball game in there, you won't see difference in crowd control," he said. "Things are better than back in the day. The community's infrastructure is much better equipped. We are much better trained on how to handle security. There's no open liquor on the street. It's much tighter, and the city is very strict on enforcement."

As the area's largest business, the Cubs are much more integrated in the flow of the community compared to the days when the voluble Dallas Green beat his chest demanding night games.

"Our relationship with the community has evolved since 2004," the Cubs' Julian Green said earlier in 2012. "We did more concerts, even at time when the community wasn't sure what concert would be like. I think what happens in any relationship as you grow and evolve, you gain more buy-in."

But even with the détente, if not alliance, between the Cubs and Wrigleyville, Strauss is skeptical about the view of the families who have settled in during the past 20 years, featuring a massive run-up in real-estate prices prior to the recent crash.

“When I moved here (in 1985), the whole (apartment) building was \$119,000,” he said. “Years later, an apartment on one floor was \$350,000. There’d be two BMW’s out in front. These families who have moved in feel they’re living in a little suburb, and you can only push them so far. You see lots of kids in baby buggies. I think there’d be pressure on Tunney for sure (to oppose) more than 30 night games. The pressure would be brutal.”

Strauss knows first-hand about an alderman’s influence. He tried to build another Sluggers near U.S. Cellular Field. But he claimed Ald. Jim Balcer (11th) tried to persuade him to locate a mile away on Halsted Street, which did the bar owner no good. The plan was dropped. When asked about the Sluggers proposal in the summer of 2012, Balcer said he did not remember.

Boyle offered up a scenario where the Cubs might have to stand on just two legs -- should Ricketts fail to gain financing to renovate Wrigley Field due to economic and political factors. More night games could be a consolation prize approved by the community.

“If he doesn’t get it, he can say, help us out and give us more night games,” he said. “Help us out and it doesn’t cost the state an arm or leg.

“My prediction? It’s a lot straighter pathway (to more night games) than 10 years ago.”

And, in turn, that could mean a straighter route to the long-delayed Cubs World Series with fresher, more wide-awake players.