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Exhibiting love for the game

A proposed museum would honor Chicago's many contributions to the national pastime

By Dave van Dyck
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The Web page says: "Coming soon to this site ... and to the City of Chicago."

Founder, director, baseball fan/romanticist Dr. David Fletcher says: "I believe it can be the next Navy Pier for Chicago. ... I believe we can give Cooperstown a run for their money."

Overly ambitious, grandiose plans?

Or will a Chicago Baseball Museum soon be a reality?

Is Fletcher just an apparition appearing out of a mist-shrouded cornfield with an enthusiastic build-it-and-they-will-come dream? Or will Chicago become the first city to honor its rich tradition in the nation's pastime with a baseball-only building?

"It's more than just the dream stage," says Fletcher, a native of Glen Ellyn, a Downstate occupational-medicine specialist and someone with a lifelong infatuation with baseball.

Actually, Fletcher is entering the money-raising stage, having studied potential sites, done feasibility and architectural studies and rounded up an advisory board that includes Illinois politicians and members of the Cubs and White Sox organizations.

Of course, the first question any decent North or South Side fan would ask is: Where will the Chicago Baseball Museum be housed?

Because the middle of Madison Street is taken up by traffic, Fletcher is looking at sites in the River North area, including the old Chicago traffic building on LaSalle Street, just north of the river. Obviously, slightly more Cubs North than Sox South.

"You wouldn't believe the comments I get about that," Fletcher said.

The proposed museum would include more than Cubs and White Sox memorabilia. The 60,000 to 70,000 square feet would also commemorate the Chicago-rich beginning and history of the Negro League, P.K. Wrigley's founding of women's baseball during World War II and include a section on the uniquely Chicago sport of 16-inch softball.

"It's not a hall of fame," Fletcher said. "It's a baseball museum. It's about the fans' romance with the game. It's a fan-based museum ... an entertaining place for kids with hi-tech (interactive displays) and simulated batting. We also want to have a research library, archives and perhaps get into publishing."

Again, big plans. And you know what big plans take. Big money.

"We have to show we have the financial capital for a 10-year lease," Fletcher said. "We have a very sophisticated financial plan."

Right now, the plan includes knocking on doors of corporations and requests for private donations for the not-for-profit foundation project. The Web site is chicagobaseballmuseum.org.

"If we can get \$5 [million], \$6 million in three to six months, we can sign a lease and be operational in six months," said Fletcher, who figures it ultimately will cost twice that amount to have a working museum.

He hopes to be open the museum in mid-2006 to, as he puts it, "commemorate the 100th anniversary of the last [and only all-Chicago] subway series."

Eventually, Fletcher expects the museum to be self-sustaining financially. His passionate hope is for 300,000 visitors annually. He said the Chicago Historical Society draws 150,000, the Field Museum 1.36 million.

But critics claim the location--hardly "touristy"--could squash attendance. They would rather have seen it housed at Navy Pier or nearby along Grand Avenue, or somewhere closer to Michigan Avenue.

Fletcher said he checked into Navy Pier but that "this site has a lot more potential. We feel our place is more accessible and will be a destination site [by itself]," although it will not be far from the soon-to-be-opened Museum of Broadcast Communications.

Fletcher has plenty of work to do to take his plans from concept to reality. Besides raising money, he needs to get a full-time Chicago-based operation going while meeting with officials from the Cubs and Sox. Both teams have lent their names to the cause and eagerly endorse the concept, but haven't jumped completely on board until there are combined discussions on more specific plans.

So just who is Dr. David Fletcher and why is he trying to do this?

Well, he's 50 years old, a Cal graduate and 1979 graduate of Rush Medical College, an expert in the occupational health field as co-founder of Decatur-based Safeworks and director of occupational medicine at the University of Illinois in Urbana. He also has restored more than 200 Downstate acres into a modern-day Walden Pond.

In 1998, he was married at what was once home plate of old Comiskey Park, with hero Bill Melton as a witness. He is a member of The Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) and has spent tens of thousands of dollars to clear Buck Weaver's name in the Black Sox scandal--without success.

"I've got a passion for the game," he said. "I love the wholesome quality of the game and how it bonds the generations.

"I'm unique. I love both the Cubs and White Sox. It allows me to be balanced. I grew up in the suburbs listening to Jack Brickhouse [calling the Cubs] during the day and listening to the Sox at night."

Now he has spent an estimated \$50,000 of his money betting the Chicago Baseball Museum is more than just a dream.

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