

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Shift from WGN recalls old comfort zone for fans, station, Cubs

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Wowww! Let's go, batter up, we're taking the afternoon off....It's a beautiful day for a ballgame, for a ballgame today. The fans are out to get a ticket or two, from Walla Walla, Washington to Kalamazoo...

Everything changes – even the most comfy things that fit to a tee. Familiarity and memories of childhood soundtracks of summer is why we're all wrung out with the news the Cubs' radio rights have shifted to WBBM-Radio from their 57-season home 60 kc down the dial at WGN.

The news wasn't unexpected. WGN reopened its Cubs contract – not the other way around – before this season because it was losing its financial shirt, unable to recoup enough ad revenue to cover production costs when the baseball ratings had gone in the dumper. A move like this became inevitable – just the timing was in question – after Tribune Co. sold the Cubs to the cash-hungry Ricketts family, which is saddled with a heavy debt service mandated by corporate shark Sam Zell as the structure of the sale.

As long as Tribune Co. -- which acquired the embryonic WGN in 1924 -- had umbrella ownership of the Cubs and WGN TV-radio properties, change was going to be far off in the future. But all bets were off once the team and broadcasters diverged under



Lou Boudreau (top) and Jack Quinlan in WGN-Radio's first season with the Cubs radio rights in 1958.

separate corporate entities. Remember, Tribune Co. purchased the Cubs in 1981 primarily to keep the team on its stations, which had generated healthy annual profits from baseball thanks to below-market-rate rights fees granted by the Wrigley family.

Cataloguing the entire world of sports broadcasting in the 21st Century, the departure of a team from its decades-long blowtorch-signal home is hardly surprising. In this case, the Cubs radio rights simply moved to another 50,000-watt station whose impressive transmitter and towers are just a mile south in west-suburban Itasca from WGN's. The chase of maximum dollars amid a media market in total turmoil trumps any sense of tradition and sentimentality.

The Cardinals left KMOX in St. Louis, albeit to return when the team-owned station's signal was found wanting at night through part of its home market. The Tigers switched from WJR. The Twins departed WCCO. The Braves abandoned WSB ("Covers Dixie like the dew.") The Rangers moved from WBAP. Long ago, the Dodgers left KFI. In some markets, FM stations with much inferior signal reach have acquired baseball rights. Meanwhile, the teams' longtime AM powerhouse originators program all-talk formats that leave no room for daily long-form sports-rights interruptions.

In Chicago, station shifts for sports franchises sparked hardly a peep over the decades compared to the noise generated by WGN.

Sox back and forth between AM 670 and 1000

In all but four seasons since 1952, the Sox have shifted back and forth from WCFL and WMVP at 1000 to WMAQ and WSCR at 670. WBBM actually had the Sox in 1980-81. The Bears have gone from WIND to WGN (with the famed pairing of Jack Brickhouse and Irv Kupcinct) to WBBM, then back to WGN and finally returning to WBBM.

The Bulls have journeyed from WGN to WIND to WLUP/WMVP. Amid surges and dips in popularity, the formerly home-game-broadcast-phobic Blackhawks seemingly had a new station every few years, including time on FM in the 1960s when that medium sported low ratings. Even at the end of that decade, Hawks bossman Arthur Wirtz, paranoid about any free broadcast exposure cutting into his gate at old Chicago Stadium, banned the live airing of the first period on local radio. The broadcast opened with a highlight show. Longtime Chicago sportscasting stalwart Rich King, producing the games for WGN in 1969, said if the first period was scoreless, the engineer would have to rack up a great save or otherwise improvise to stock the program.

It's a beautiful day for a home run. But even a triple's OK...

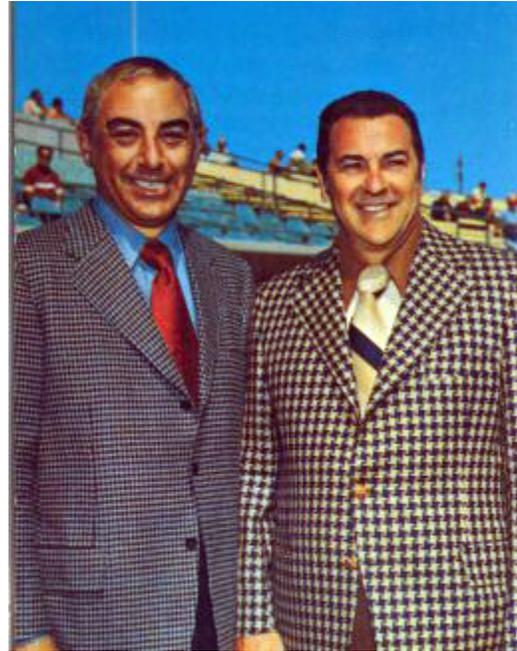
Through all these changes, WGN and the Cubs were far different. The station possesses an identification with the fans and team as strong as KMOX's and WLW's with the Reds. It's a Midwest thing, not really duplicated in other parts of the country.

Several generations grew up listening to what came off as a folksy presentation of games that began for a \$150,000 annual rights fee in 1958. At the time, Brickhouse told WGN chief Ward Quaal the broadcasts would lose money the first year, then make

a profit “forevermore.” Jack’s “forever” was close, but faded around 2011 amid the concurrent decline of both the Cubs and overall economy, and the changes roiling the radio business.

Midwestern fans in the 200-mile-wide daytime reach of WGN, and much further via ionosphere skip at night, desired their Cubs voices to be at once exciting and cheer for the boys in blue. They wanted “homers.” The listeners were rarely disappointed.

Original WGN play-by-play man Jack Quinlan was a superstar-in-the-making, perhaps the best-ever voice covering Chicago baseball, insisted Brickhouse and his station colleagues. Quinlan was teamed with our own Lou Boudreau, whose south suburban Harvey syntax often was found wanting. Yet few could analyze the game as spot -on as The Good Kid. Quinlan’s and Boudreau’s best-remembered bit was their giggle-fest while doing a live read to promote panty hose circa 1963. The pair broke up in hilarity as the women’s undergarments got oddly mentioned on a game broadcast simply as part of an overall ad buy from the old Wieboldt’s department store.



The all-time WGN-Radio Cubs team of Vince Lloyd (left) and Lou Boudreau.

Vince Lloyd then teamed with Boudreau after Quinlan was killed in a tragic car accident in 1965. Vince and Lou became even more popular than the previous pairing. Folksy indeed. Sometimes Vince would broadcast while munching on home-cooked vittles the fans had sent up to the booth. Boudreau’s “Durocher in the Dugout” pre-game show was must-listening to see what Leo The Lip might say, or whether the broadcast would even air after a profane outburst from the manager.

Fully krausened from God’s Country

Distinctive recorded Old Style ads (“Fully krausened from God’s Country”) dovetailed with live commercial reads by Lloyd, who scarcely found time for between-innings bathroom breaks as a result. The old baseball song remembered in this column signed on the broadcasts, while a Dixieland-type melody I called “the dancing beer bottle song” opened up Lloyd’s post-game Scoreboard show. WGN loved its theme melodies. In 1958 the post-game show was called “The Walgreen’s Musical Scoreboard.”

Milo Hamilton and Harry Caray – fortunately not at the same time, given Hamilton’s conflicts with Caray – succeeded Lloyd in 1982 as primary WGN voices. Fortunately, Lloyd still did home games through 1986. In a memorable 1984 clip, Caray and Lloyd are heard yelling in tandem for Ryne Sandberg’s two homers on his famous performance against Bruce Sutter when NBC did the Saturday-afternoon Wrigley Field telecast, shifting all the local announcers over to radio.

In true WGN tradition, dulcet-toned Pat Hughes kept the homey tradition intact paired with the emotional Ron Santo starting in 1996. Sly, wry and dry, Hughes set up Santo perfectly for some of the greatest-ever comic bits on a baseball broadcast. I nearly fell off my bicycle in laughter one Saturday afternoon. Faced with a blowout in Atlanta, Hughes went to his “B” game, asking Santo to name three-lettered animals like “ewe” and “gnu.”

The WGN appeal played off a confluence of positive events. The station was No. 1. in the Chicago market and beyond for decades. The mass audience enjoyed a soup-to-nuts format ranging from town-meeting chairman Wally Phillips in morning drive to Franklyn MacCormack (“How do I love thee?”) overnights with the Meister Brau Showcase six days a week. A heavy dash of Orion Samuelson’s farm news featured the 5:30 a.m. “It’s Milking Time” and an hour-long show at high noon.

The station’s reach was summed up by Dr. David Fletcher, president of the Chicago Baseball Museum. Fletcher grew up in Peoria in the 1960s before he had the luxury of access to daily Brickhouse telecasts via a move to Chicago’s western suburbs.

Limited baseball telecasts made WGN-Radio a lifeline

“The reach of baseball on TV was very limited then,” Fletcher said. “Peoria was torn between the Cubs/White Sox/and Cardinals. Because of the White Sox’s ’59 World Series appearance and very competitive teams, the Sox had much more market share due to the folksy Bob Elson and Milo Hamilton.

“But WGN got a lot of play with the downstate crowd because of its farm reports and day baseball. Jack Quinlan, until his tragic death, had a following. My parents, being from Cleveland and who lived and died with the 1948 Indians, loved Lou Boudreau (’48 AL MVP with the Indians).”

WGN-TV did not start feeding a limited schedule of Cubs games to Peoria and other Midwest cities until 1967, so its radio counterpart was the daytime baseball lifeline for Cubs fans in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa. Its low position

on the dial ensured greater daytime signal coverage, although I was disappointed trying to pick up WGN to hear a Cubs-Mets series in 1986 at a resort 20 miles north of Wisconsin Dells (“must be the iron in the ground,” the locals said then).



Rough-around-the-edges Ron Santo (left) and dulcet-toned Pat Hughes, pictured at Busch Stadium II in St. Louis, generated many smiles from listeners during their 15 seasons together on WGN.

With the games on WGN, the Cubs had an advantage in building up the regional fan base compared to the Sox. WCFL's AM signal further down the dial at 1000 did not carry as far during the day. At night, WGN was a non-directional clear channel with no other United States station airing on its frequency. In contrast, WCFL's 50,000-watt night-time signal was beamed directionally east to protect other stations also broadcasting on 1000. Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf recalled hearing the station while in college in Washington, D.C. But noted sports-photo collector Leo Bauby, growing up near DeKalb, could not hear the station and his favorite team after sunset just 50 miles west of the Downers Grove transmitter.

The ending of the Cubs-WGN era is yet another treasured link to innocent childhood days being severed, as is inevitable in life's cycle. We're fortunate to have had that relationship as long as we did with the trademark voices, music and commercials all converging in a delectable aural stew.

I wish Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts and business chief Crane Kenney, both wild about baseball as adults, had not grown up out of WGN daytime signal reach in Omaha and Massachusetts, respectively. If Ricketts and Kenney had experienced the same sentiment and that special radio symphony of baseball, perhaps we'd have had a different outcome on the post-2014 rights destination.

In the last few months of the WGN-Cubs era, the Chicago Baseball Museum will feature several samples of otherwise long-gone excerpts of the station's baseball presentation. That's the least we can do amid this sea change in the Chicago baseball timeline. We'll never forget a time, a station, a team and voices that were a part of the family.

We're going to cheer, and root and raise a hullabaloo at the ballgame, the wonderful ballgame, today....The Chicago Cubs are on the air.