

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Hemmed-in fan base challenge for Sox promoters

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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U.S. Cellular Field is full of people good at their jobs in promotions, sales, marketing, community service and media relations.

They ought to get combat pay. The much-circulated “Baseball Nation” map http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/04/24/upshot/facebook-baseball-map.html?_r=0#7,40.991,-88.173, published April 24 by the *New York Times* shows how challenging their job is in filling U.S. Cellular Field.

The color-coded map of the United States breaks down baseball fans’ loyalties by team hues in both each zip code and county, based on Facebook likes. While hardly scientific, it does display trends of dominant and second-fiddle franchises in two-team markets.



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Ozzie Guillen said the Sox would have to win five World Series in a row to take Chicago away from the Cubs. Photo credit [Keith Allison](#).

And in the White Sox’s case, it backs up a long-known historical fact that the team’s fan base is smaller than that of the crosstown Cubs and is geographically hemmed in to just part of the Chicago metropolitan area. In effect, the Sox operate in a middle-to-small market within a Top 3 overall market. The South Siders cannot easily supplement their base of close-in fans with pilgrims from a four-state area with all those bus groups that are traditional at Wrigley Field.

Ozzie Guillen, ripped for flapping his gums long and inappropriately, spoke without a filter not long after the Sox’s 2005 World Series triumph. Picking up on the pulse of the market, Guillen said the Sox would have to win five consecutive Fall Classics to take Chicago away from the Cubs.

Clicking on different parts of the dark-grey coloring that represents the Sox stronghold, set down amid a

huge sea of Cubbie blue in the Midwest, adds to the chagrin of someone who pulls for the core of talented folks on 35th Street.

Sox ahead in 4 counties

In “Baseball Nation,” the Sox only have four counties in which they had the edge in fans’ Facebook likes – Will and Kankakee in Illinois, and Lake and (barely) Porter in Indiana. Cook County went 40 to 38 percent Cubs. DuPage County, where Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf wanted to re-locate in the 1980s, but was thwarted by petty politician Pate Philip, supported the Cubs 44-40 percent. Had the stadium been built in Addison, that number would have been radically reversed.

Even in many of those pro-Sox areas, the team only edged out the Cubs by a few percentage points, such as in Northwest Indiana. The South Side and south and southwest suburbs are the only locations where the pro-Sox numbers leap over the 50-percent line and have double-digits percentage leads over the Cubs.

“Baseball Nation” so impressed Elmhurst Historical Museum curator Lance Tawzer that he compiled a display based on its data for his Cubs vs. Sox “Chicago Civil Wars” exhibit that just opened.

But if you believe the “Baseball Nation” map is just statistical candy, there are several other present-day factors that show the drawing-area distress in which the Sox find themselves.

A recent Scarborough Research survey published by the *Chicago Tribune* http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-05-08/sports/ct-blackhawks-popularity-spt-0509-20140509_1_hockey-team-blackhawks-chairman-rocky-wirtz-the-blackhawks showed the Sox had dipped to 37 percent popularity, last among Chicago’s five main pro franchises, as the Blackhawks zoomed to No. 2 as the only team to gain fans.

Meanwhile, ESPNChicago.com typically does not send Sox beat writer Doug Padilla on the road with the team, while Cubs beat man Jesse Rogers regularly travels. The reason apparently is Sox coverage doesn’t generate as many on-line hits as the Cubs. Scott Powers, who preceded Padilla on the Sox beat, stayed home the entire 2012 season while the Sox clung to first in the AL Central, while Padilla, then stationed on the North Side, kept slogging on the Cubs’ 101-loss death march home and road.



William L. Veeck, Sr.'s use of radio at a time the Cubs rose as a baseball power in the late 1920s built up a Midwest-wide fan base.

Now, Powers is on the Blackhawks' beat. He did not go on the road regularly prior to the playoffs while Bulls beat man Nick Friedell traveled all the time. The Hawks did not generate the Bulls' level of hits, which was strange for a Stanley Cup champion compared to a team shorn of the appeal of injured Derrick Rose.

The Sox apparently can only derive their maximum penetration of their market-within-a-market in the year after the World Series, when they drew a record 2.9 million to The Cell, edging out the previous record set by new-ballpark curiosity seekers in The Cell's first season in 1991. Given the Guillen analysis, the sole playoff appearance in 2008 since the World Series triumph ill-timed with a down economy has been an absolute killer to attendance.

Midwest fan appeal issue dates back to Black Sox



Future commissioner Bud Selig was one of scores of Midwestern fans who followed the Cubs by radio, then made a pilgrimage to Wrigley Field.

In the end, just call this the after-effect of the Black Sox scandal that just keeps on giving. Bad timing simply has haunted the Sox ever since.

In the years after the gutting of the franchise when the talented 1919-20 Black Sox core was banned by Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the new medium of radio proliferated. The Sox were carried on the same number (and reach) of radio stations as the Cubs. The difference was the Cubs were an up-and-coming franchise under owner William Wrigley, Jr. and team president William L. Veeck, Sr. In addition to the fans coming via L and streetcar, the radio broadcasts of the late 1920s Cubs won over followers within a day's drive of Chicago. Veeck's crew catalogued the license plates of cars from Indiana, Wisconsin and Iowa parked around Wrigley Field. In contrast, the drooping Sox of Charles "Old Roman" Comiskey's final ownership seasons could not sell themselves to the far-flung faithful.

One of the regional converts to Cubs fandom, no doubt due to the radio coverage was future commissioner Bud Selig, growing up in Milwaukee. By the time he was a pre-teen, Selig was attending games at Wrigley Field via the old North Shore interurban electric train. He would eventually become a Braves fan when the franchise moved from Boston to Brewtown in 1953, and tried to buy the Sox to move them to Milwaukee in 1969. But Selig's first allegiance was to the North Siders.

When the Sox finally revived for their "Go-Go Era" in 1951, the re-energized fans of the South Side and nearby suburbs were enough to boost attendance over the 1 million mark each season. The South Side itself was huge, as geographically big and populous as the fifth- or sixth-largest American city. That part of the area was large enough by itself to support a big-league ballclub by the standards of the times. But when white flight from the area picked up rapidly starting in the mid-1960s, an important part of

the Sox fan base was scattered in a baseball diaspora. Only a portion continued further south into the outer reaches of Cook County. Those who migrated to the western or even northern suburbs altered their baseball patronage habits. Now they have trouble commuting to U.S. Cellular Field due to horrendous afternoon rush-hour reverse-commute traffic jams on the Kennedy and Eisenhower expressways.

The imbalances in the fan base began showing up in the video world four decades after radio set the tone.

The late Vince Lloyd, who broadcast both the Cubs and Sox for WGN-TV from 1950 to 1967, once remarked how he was astonished in the early 1960s that the Cubs ratings were higher than that of the Sox on WGN, which they shared for 20 seasons through 1967. The Cubs were a College of Coaches, 103-defeat joke while the Sox were annually competitive, if not a contender, under manager Al Lopez.

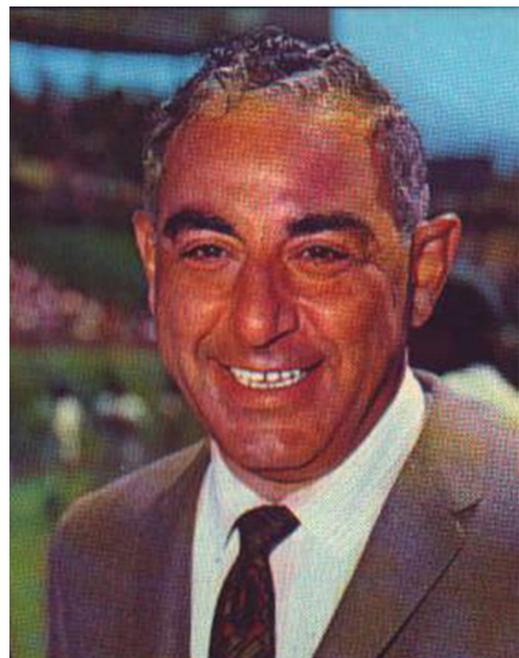
On April 6, `1967, the *Tribune* reported WGN-TV would begin a regional network to feed a modest number of Cubs telecasts to Midwest stations. The story added the stations had been clamoring for the Cubs games for years. No mention was made of a similar yearning for Sox telecasts from the outlying outlets. The regional exposure over the next decade in this largely pre-cable era only enhanced the Cubs' multi-state fan base.

Downstate favors Cubs, Cardinals

In the summer of 1977, CBS affiliates WCIA-TV and Champaign and WMBD-TV in Peoria surveyed all the downstate markets to determine fans' baseball preferences. The only city in which the Sox even showed up was Bloomington, closest of any of the markets to Chicago. In Peoria, Champaign, Decatur and Springfield, the fans were split between the Cubs and Cardinals 50-50 or 55-45 either way.

The Sox's ill-advised move off WGN to the UHF signal of WFLD-TV (Ch. 32) in 1968, WGN's distribution as a "superstation" a decade later and the double-whammy of the Sox switching to the subscription SportsVision in 1982 have been well-documented here and elsewhere. The accumulation of events has resulted in the market situation of today.

But maybe there's a golden opportunity at hand. The Cubs' image has plummeted to its lowest level since the end of the Wrigley family ownership in 1980-81 due to the forced crash of the big-league club to fuel Theo Epstein's increasingly-iffy rebuilding plan. A series of public-relations gaffes, including the odd lack of a mid-winter caravan in January to those downstate and Indiana Cubs-fan strongholds, has made matters even worse.



Vince Lloyd was surprised to see the losing Cubs out-rated the winning Sox on WGN-TV in the early 1960s.

With their core of appealing young position players led by slugging Jose Abreu and spunky Adam Eaton, who have proved to be big-league-ready, the Sox have a chance to steal some of those disaffected Cubs fans waiting for a rebuilding that might not kick in.

Here's the challenge: the young Sox have to win, and soon. Blackhawks president John McDonough has repeated the mantra all the way back to his well-remembered Cubs executive days: winning is the best marketing tool.

We'll never know what would have happened if the Sox had gone deep in the playoffs in 2006. The franchise has a good young nucleus without the baggage the Cubs are accumulating. Let's see if this combination works.