



## ***Sox benefited from ‘Illinois time’ in nailing stadium bill 25 years ago***

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All the scene needed was Jimmy Stewart as naïve but earnest legislator on the floor.

Then, again, the late, late night of June 30, 1988 in Springfield was probably more Preston Sturges, with a hint of Woody Allen, than hopeful, optimistic, flag-waving Frank Capra. Definitely, the last-minute push to secure funding for U.S. Cellular Field was straight out of a scriptwriter’s wildest dream.

To make the scene even stranger, with the business sword of Damocles hanging over Chicago’s head – the Sox’s threat to move to St. Petersburg – the rescue job’s point men were Cubs fans. The detail man was Bob Churchill, a Cubs season ticket holder who doubled as a Republican Illinois House floor leader. He directed Big Jim Thompson, also a Wrigley Field regular in his third term as governor, to corral the last few votes – literally on his knees -- as literally the clock ran out.

The vote, on “overtime” in the legislative session with the clock stopped, was the last of four to five times the Sox had one foot out the door from the South Side in a two-decade period starting in 1968.

In spite of the ongoing collapse of the 2013 season and declining attendance, there have been no worries about another move in the ensuing 25 years.



**Gov. Jim Thompson literally kneeled to each legislator he visited on the floor as he rounded up votes for the stadium bill.**

“The Downstate Democrats who hated this bill started a countdown – three minutes left, two minutes left,” said Churchill. “It was (Decatur representative) John Dunn, a big ringleader, who announced in a loud voice, ‘two minutes left.’”

“Meanwhile, up in the balcony, TV cameras were all over the place. There were the local channels, and Tampa Bay stations. You could hear them saying to each other, ‘We’re going to get your White Sox.’ It’s fairly quiet down on the floor.

“We’re one vote shy when Rep. Dunn starts his countdown of the last 60 seconds. Things got a little ‘fuzzy’ toward the end of this. The governor was working on the 60<sup>th</sup> (clinching) vote. He was far more convincing than I could have ever been. They were having a little chat.

“The (representative) is sitting in his big legislative chair. In the legislature, you really have to get close to talk to people. That’s why we all carry breath mints. You don’t want everyone to know your conversation. We had a guy on our side who was deaf, and he’d tell us what the speaker (Mike Madigan) was saying when he was whispering.”

### **‘Zero hour’ wasn’t quite that**

Thompson and the clinching vote simply could not conclude their business in real time at the scheduled bewitching hour of legislative adjournment – midnight July 1. No problem. This is Illinois, with its heavy Chicago political influence of the dead having the eternal right to vote and other shenanigans. So there was an “alternative” time clock.



**Bob Churchill was the legislative point man in rounding up votes, and was instrumental in buying a couple of extra minutes to nail down the crucial 60th vote.**

“The countdown is occurring and goes to zero,” Churchill said. “The downstate people are cheering wildly. The Tampa (TV) people are crowing to local people, ‘We got your Sox! We got your Sox!’ Guys from Chicago say, ‘Hold on, it’s not over yet.’ About a minute and a half later, the clock could have been wrong, this member stands up and says, ‘I vote aye.’”

“Well, (Democratic majority leader) Jim McPike’s in the chair. He very quickly says, ‘It’s 11:59, so-and-so votes aye, there’s 60 votes on the bill, I declare the bill passed, the House now stands adjourned.’ And, bang, he puts the gavel down and walks off the podium – before anyone could say or do anything.”

Sounds like the clock in the U.S.-Soviet gold-medal basketball game in the 1972 Munich Olympics, or any other strange zero-hour goings on in sports history. In reality,

it was the last era of bi-partisan cooperation, when Democrats and Republicans could agree to play a kind of stall-ball with the legislative clock.

“Rep. McPike and I were in eye contact. I’m sure if he would have thought we couldn’t get the 60<sup>th</sup> vote, he would have declared the bill lost. But I’m giving him the signal that I thought we were going to get the vote. He was giving me the signal, ‘Can’t you hurry this up a little bit?’ I’m saying whatever is cooking is going to take a moment to cook.

“The (House) clocks are not like by the second. So if the speaker is in the chair and if he declares it’s 11:59, it’s that time. The clocks have a minute hand and an hour hand. It’s 11:59 and a ‘few seconds.’ Crazy things happen like that. The history of that is they’ve done stuff like that many times in the past on deadline night. You never had anyone filing a lawsuit saying the timing wasn’t right.”

### **Lee Daniels had conflict of interest**

So how did Churchill, representing a legislative district 40 miles from 35<sup>th</sup> and Shields, end up teaming with Thompson to push through the bill?

“Whenever there was an issue of that magnitude, it rises to the top leader of your caucus,” he said. “That was Lee Daniels. I was second in charge. But he also was Jerry Reinsdorf’s lawyer, working for a law firm in Chicago. For him to work for part of anything in the bill, it was a conflict of interest. He didn’t tell me what to do. He said I’m going to recommend Jerry Reinsdorf talk to you.”

Reinsdorf had lobbied for a new stadium to replace crumbling old Comiskey Park for most of the seasons since he had headed a group that purchased the Sox from Bill Veeck in 1981. The condition of the ballpark became so acute Reinsdorf turned up the pressure, with St. Petersburg commencing the building of its own domed stadium in 1988.

Many fans who already did not like Reinsdorf, having changed the Sox image from the party-atmosphere of the Veeck area, assumed he tried to punch an express ticket to St. Petersburg in a cash grab. But anyone who knew Reinsdorf realized he had long memories of his beloved Brooklyn Dodgers being uprooted 3,000 miles to Los Angeles in 1958. St. Pete was a second, but necessary, choice in the quest to replace old Comiskey Park.

“Jerry Reinsdorf spent hours in my office,” Churchill said. “He’s a class guy. He told me how he had grown up and loved baseball. He starts quoting guys who played and their batting averages. I think, my gosh, this guy knows baseball more than anyone else than I know. “(Eddie) Einhorn came into my office, too. I said let me see what we can do. We



**Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf won over support with personal lobbying of legislators in the weeks leading up to the June 30, 1988 vote.**

spent months together strategizing, working with various members. Some people said they'd vote no and never change their mind. We had to cobble together 60 votes to pass the bill."

"The (public) mindset was not favorable for a stadium bill. People don't like government paying for something that really should be paid for by the owners, like what the Ricketts are going through right now. This is entertainment, not some essential government service like roads and schools.

### **Cardinals, Cubs fans didn't want stadium bill**

"There was that element of people in the legislature who wouldn't vote for it. Our biggest opponents came from south of I-80. They weren't White Sox fans. Many were Cardinals fans. The thought of their money going to build a stadium in Chicago for the Sox -- they were irate. We had to show that in putting the tax structure together, people coming into state as vacationers probably foot more of the bill than anyone else. That helped mitigate that argument. Still philosophically, they were opposed to it. It was tough to get Republican votes on this side of the aisle."

Many of the GOP members were Cubs fans. One was Linda Williamson, representing a Cook County district on the southeast edge of O'Hare Airport, including Leyden Township.

"My first reason, to be honest, it was a Cubs district (for voters' team preferences)," said Williamson, now semi-retired and living in Springfield. "They were all Cubs fans. My own philosophy, if we started giving tax dollars for organizations like this, what's to stop from giving it to Dick Duchossios (Arlington Park owner)? It was starting to set a bad picture."

If Williamson was set with her vote, others were amenable to a good sales job. An attorney and accountant by training, and real-estate mogul by experience, Reinsdorf seemed to develop a new career skill from the legislators he won over in the late spring and early summer of 1988.

"Jerry Reinsdorf went around and talked to a ton of people," Churchill said. "He's a nice guy, so when he sat down to talk to people they got the idea he was a nice guy. Here was the (Sox) chairman, he's coming in to talk to me. He was a great salesman and people liked him.

"A couple of years later, we had another owner of a sports team come in to try to get government funding for another stadium. He didn't get much attention. You can guess who (Michael McCaskey) that was. Jerry Reinsdorf was an honorable businessman. You're selling an honorable guy with a concept of keeping a major entertainment venue, a sports team, in your city. People thought, do we really want to lose this team? That's the approach we had to take with people."

## **Churchill confident of his count**

Even with loud, determined blocs of opposition, Churchill did not believe the Sox were headed south.

“I don’t think I was ever worried about it,” he said. “There’s an art form we called in the legislature – nose counter. I became a nose counter. When I talked to people, you get to know their districts, their kids, everyone about them. Hard-core yes, and no, and people in the middle you’re going to talk to. They have concerns, they worried about that it’s going to be like in their district. You learn all that stuff. Then you keep adding to your numbers. You get to the number you need to be.

“I knew it was going to be close, I knew it was going to be tough, I knew it was going to be last-minute. After you lived through deadline nights, you live for that day. My favorite day was deadline day because that’s when things loosened up and all sorts of stuff happened. People are little bit more amenable. No, I don’t like your bill – but I’ll help you on my bill if you help me on my bill.”

In the end, the very end, Churchill had to call in his closer, the 6-foot-6 Thompson, who once swayed juries in putting politicians in the slammer as U.S. attorney for the northern district of Illinois.

“The bill passed the Senate,” Churchill said. “I went to the front door, where I met Jim Thompson. It was pure business: here’s the first person you have to talk to. I led him to that person. Jim McPike, the majority leader, was in the chair. I took Thompson to an individual legislator, and he knelt down next to the guy. I remember Jim Edgar on the floor, and people went up to him. But I don’t ever remember a governor going and kneeling down next to somebody.

“We were several votes shy. That person would stand up and change his vote to aye. Or give McPike a big thumbs up. Then all of a sudden on the Democratic side, someone would change his vote to aye. I was going from the person who was the easiest one to get, to the harder one. That person would stand up and say I vote aye.”

Williamson witnessed Thompson’s ninth-inning work, and walked away an admirer of this technique despite her “nay” vote at the time. Decades later, she realized Thompson had done the right thing.

“It was 100 percent Gov. Thompson’s (credit),” Williamson said. “He worked hard. He did his information. In hindsight, it’s a beautiful stadium. It’s nice to have a city with two teams. At the time, the vote I had to use, it’s not your personal vote, it’s what the district wanted.”

And yet Williamson, like Churchill, will never forget the histrionics on the floor and in the gallery.

“John Dunn was screaming and banging shoes,” she said. “People were in the gallery with signs with white bedsheets saying ‘Sox Go Away.’ People singing ‘Na na na, hey hey, good-bye.’ They were wanting them to leave. It was chaos.”

Reinsdorf ended up fortunate Churchill wasn't a Sox-hating Cubs fan.

"I want all my Chicago teams to do well," Churchill said. "As a Cubs fan, there is a friendly rivalry with Sox fans. They say, 'We won a World Series, when have you won a World Series?' But they're very quiet this year.

"I'm very happy for people who are Sox fans. I'm happy for those of us who saved Sox for Chicago, when St. Petersburg was building a stadium.

### **Sox avoid the problems in St. Pete**

Interestingly, Major League Baseball has a major problem with the Tampa Bay Rays and their perennial mediocre attendance in the Tropicana Dome, one of the most panned ballparks in the game. The Rays haven't gotten any traction to get a replacement stadium in their area for the 23-year-old sterile indoor field.



"It's a direct result of trying to do the wrong thing in the wrong place," Churchill said. "Fortunately for Jerry and the Sox, we put the deal together here, or they would have been twisting in the wind down there."

**The Sox are lucky they did not move to St. Petersburg. The Rays have had trouble drawing at Tropicana Field, which draws no raves for its sterile, enclosed design. Photo credit [EaglesFanInTampa](#).**

Given U.S. Cellular Field's own attendance problems, the question is whether the stadium bill and the politics of the day also placed the Sox home in the wrong location.

Many Sox fans thought the ballpark should have been built in the South Loop.

"Part of the Wrigley Field experience is the area around it," said Churchill. "I'll walk in the area, stop in a store, buy something, do dinner and stop in a bar later. Where the Sox are, it's not an experience. The only people who go there go for the game.

"They might have found some place where they could have created a neighborhood. They would have been the base draw, let the bars open. It would have been so much better. The Sox are still dealing with old perceptions of (a bad) neighborhood. The way the South Loop developed, (a ballpark) might have started that (development) movement a little earlier."

Two years before he pushed for the stadium bill, Reinsdorf looked seriously at Addison in DuPage County, even buying a tract of land. But state Sen. James “Pate” Philip, headquartered in neighboring Wood Dale, blocked the effort, implying that urban terrors would visit the good people of DuPage Country if a stadium rose.



**U.S. Cellular Field opened in 1991 as new Comiskey Park, 2 1/2 years after the dramatic late-night legislative effort to secure its funding.**

backyard. Dick Duchossios talked about building up here after Arlington Park burned. I was willing to do another White Sox thing for him.”

Bottom line, Churchill, Thompson and a bunch of savvy legislators, ignoring the noise, did the “White Sox thing” at just the right time.

“As long as there was public transportation and adequate parking,” a suburban site would have worked, Churchill said. “That might have helped the Sox draw. The kids in that whole area would have grown up as Sox fans and you’d have another base of support other than the old-timers.

“Pate Philip? Heaven knows what happens in the head of Pate Philip. I don’t know why he would have done that. If it would have been me, I would have said, Yeah, come here, I would have loved to have a professional sports team in my