

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## *New Cubs clubhouse luxurious, but old quarters entertaining in their own way*

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Good for the Cubs!

They've got their Taj Mahal of a clubhouse, decades delayed.

Spacious, spiffy, plush, deluxe, whatever accolades you want to toss at its architects. And they included a "party room" to boot. No one at 1060 W. Addison can ever use the clubhouse crutch about more failures to launch in May, July, September – and now, November.

The Chicago baseball media, also wanting more square footage to clot and gossip at one end, then re-assemble in another scrum by players, also got what they wanted. The scribes will now have room to roam – often too much of it. Players will be less available for interviews with plenty of private, off-limits redoubts compared to the former cramped spaces. If there was grass to kill in this locker room, it would die a thousand times under the feet of waiting media.

More important than the actual five-star digs is the temporary, but functioning batting cage between the locker room and dugout. The lack of a cage put the Cubs far behind all other teams. Players could not easily take swings near the dugout in-between at-bats, as is common elsewhere. They had to hit the ball into a net lowered from the ceiling of the old clubhouse.

I'd like one question answered: Why wasn't this wonderful home-away-from-home for players built two decades ago? Yes, you, Andy MacPhail. You, John Madigan. And, you, Dennis FitzSimons. Obviously, tight pockets, manic attention to profits and lack of vision were the culprits.

When first plans to expand the bleachers were unveiled in 2001 – a project completed in 2006 – I also asked a Cubs official about an underground clubhouse, as there was no



**Dave Kingman did not respond positively to a young writer's approach in the tiny left-field clubhouse in 1980.**

way to further expand under the cozy left-field stands. The reply was something about the water table so near to Lake Michigan being an issue. What changed in the ensuing years? Climate change? More likely an owner willing to open the financial spigot (albeit passing some of the costs along to the fans).

Tom Ricketts and Theo Epstein certainly know what they have improved from the previous clubhouse, itself an expansion back in 1984 and considered up-to-date from the era. And they no doubt have checked out the old, old locker room – more recently used by groundskeepers – down the left-field line. Those spaces are testimony to how much they have brought the Cubs into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, let alone the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But having the institutional memory from not growing up in Chicago, both Ricketts and Epstein do not know a lot of the back stories that gave the place its character.

In my first year covering the Cubs in 1980, I ventured into the left-field corner locker room, which was just a tad larger than the present tiny visitors' clubhouse. This literal Cubby-hole, opened in 1960, was in itself bigger than the traditional locker room reached by stairs on the second level behind third base where the ballpark security office more recently held forth.

### **Left-field corner quarters warmer than outdoors**

There were no actual lockers. Players hung their clothes in metal cages. When the minor-leaguers were called up in September, they had to dress in an adjacent small equipment room, attended to by clubhouse caudillo Yosh Kawano and assorted rodents. Ventilation was iffy. Steve Stone, who put on a Cubs jock from 1974-76, said on 90-degree days, the outdoor climate was more temperate than these cramped, stuffy confines. GM John Holland hadn't exactly busted P.K. Wrigley's budget for the players' comfort in setting up this space worthy of a high-school dressing room.

Like a small mammal furtively sticking its head up among pre-historic dinosaurs, I cautiously approached Dave Kingman at one end of the locker room in that lousy summer of '80. Several obsequious greetings netted a negative reaction from the media-phobic Kong. I backed up and got as far away as possible.

**In 1998, 20-year-old Kerry Wood dressed in this space. One afternoon he was trapped like in the black hole of Calcutta, every centimeter around him crowded with clamoring media, after he struck out 20 Astros. Remembering that suffocating moment, a half-decade later senior man Wood claimed the best locker in the place, at the exact opposite end and closest to the bathroom and showers.**

A year later celebration broke out in that little locker area. On April 29, 1981, the Cubs beat the Cardinals 6-1 in the first game of a doubleheader, snapping a 12-game losing streak that had dropped the record to 1-13. Players yelled and made merry. “Like a World Series?” I mused to manager Joey Amalfitano, surveying the scene. “Yeah,” Pal Joey smiled back.

Another two years later, Amalfitano successor Lee Elia spewed forth his famous bleep-bleep-bleep postgame rant, dutifully recorded by Les Grobstein, in the small manager’s office here. Grobstein takes care to remind everyone of the anniversary and his role in preserving the most profane incident in Cubs history each year. He still has the tape recorder on which the offending diatribe was laid down.

Before Tribune Co. began second-guessing and undermining his every move, Dallas Green built the successor 11,000 square-foot clubhouse behind the dugout. My best memory from its first season in 1984 was manager Jim Frey trying to bury the Cubs’ bad past. “Bleep 1969!” he exclaimed, stealing a favorite verb from Elia.



**Kerry Wood had the best and worst lockers in the just-retired clubhouse.**

### **‘Keep out’ does not stop Holtzman**

There were few places to hide. Even the off-limits small food room at one end of the clubhouse could be viewed by media. The “keep out” dictum did not stop Jerome Holtzman, the “dean” of Chicago baseball writers. Holtzman leaned across the door line of the food room, if not crossing it, in search of interview subjects. Who was going to question this baseball heavyweight?

Over the next quarter-century, player personalities and sideshows in these close quarters were plentiful enough to stock books.

Locker placements were crucial every which way. The *Chicago Tribune*’s Paul Sullivan referred to the locker closest to the stairway entrance as the “crazy locker.” More accurate would be the rookie’s locker. In 1998, 20-year-old Kerry Wood dressed in this space. One afternoon he was trapped like in the black hole of Calcutta, every centimeter around him crowded with clamoring media, after he struck out 20 Astros. Remembering that suffocating moment, a half-decade later senior man Wood claimed the best locker in the place, at the exact opposite end and closest to the bathroom and showers. Several times Woody ended chats with the good excuse the toilet was summoning him.

But before claiming the territory, Kid K had to wait for buddy Mark Grace to vacate the prime locker. Good thing Gracie was located here. He was as far away from Sammy Sosa as possible in the clubhouse. Publicly the popular first baseman was a Sosa backer. Privately, at that locker, he had few nice things to say about the slugger. The best thing about the small locker room was to pick up on its political currents.

When outright dissension broke out, the media was witness. Shouting erupted in the showers after one game in 1993. Reportedly, Willie Wilson and Dwight Smith had a dispute. At the other end of the clubhouse from where the media usually waited, manager Jim Lefebvre was spotted dashing from his office into the shower area to make peace.

### Fitting departure for Wilson

Wilson, out of character as a negative influence near the end of his career, set up a lounge chair by his locker. The recliner symbolized his attitude at the time. When Wilson was released during the 1994 season, sportscaster Bruce Levine gave him a proper good-bye as he walked out. "Don't let the door hit you on the way out," Levine said.

A family of recliner chairs near the food room end of the clubhouse in 2004 also denoted the breakdown of good attitudes on that underachieving team. With no designated player's lounge as a refuge, the Cubs set up the chairs for the players' comfort, blocking up the already tight quarters.

Media were told they could not stand in this area unless they were already conducting an interview. Waiting for Wood at his prime locker right by these chairs, I overheard LaTroy Hawkins tell me I had to move. I responded that Hawkins did not do double-duty as the media relations director. The chairs really backfired. Reliever Mike Remlinger injured a finger grabbing for a side of a chair. The furniture was gone for the 2005 season, along with that team's window of opportunity.

### Cubs stars' stuff on display as team shows off spacious new clubhouse



### Just-opened Wrigley facility impresses CBM founder

Dr. David J. Fletcher, president and founder of the Chicago Baseball Museum, participated in a special tour of the Cubs' new 30,000-square foot clubhouse on April 12. Fletcher was impressed at both the main locker area and the medical and training facilities. The clubhouse is the second-largest in the majors after Yankee Stadium's. Fletcher will write his review of the facility in upcoming days. The clubhouse is located underground below a former parking lot.

Media and players now enjoy a spacious interview room for pre- and post-game interviews. But when the Cubs needed an interview room as group chats for managers became the industry standard by 2001, the only option was a tiny cinder block-bordered room otherwise used by park operations officials to monitor weather down two dank, stygian corridors from the clubhouse.

A 1970-vintage air conditioner was sunk into the wall, adequately cooling the room when only a couple of people were present. Problem was, the A/C unit had to be turned off when an interview began. Temperatures rose quickly when the room was crowded with bodies and cameras. When the Cardinals' Darryl Kile died suddenly in 2002, bottled water was handed out to reporters sweating in the room as waves of players and team officials explained the tragedy in what Dusty Baker would call "the dungeon." The parsimonious MacPhail's departure as Cubs president in 2006 was required to expand this interview room into adjoining space and install A/C ducts.

Time and inevitable change march on. I am not working the luxurious new player quarters. And I doubt I'd develop the relationships possible in the old inadequate locker room.

There's something to be said for the camaraderie of shared suffering.



**Dusty Baker called the tiny interview room "the dungeon."**