



## ***'Forgotten' Cubs 22-win lefty of '63 all right in business, baseball***

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**Dick Ellsworth as a Pearson Realty vice president in the early 2000s.**

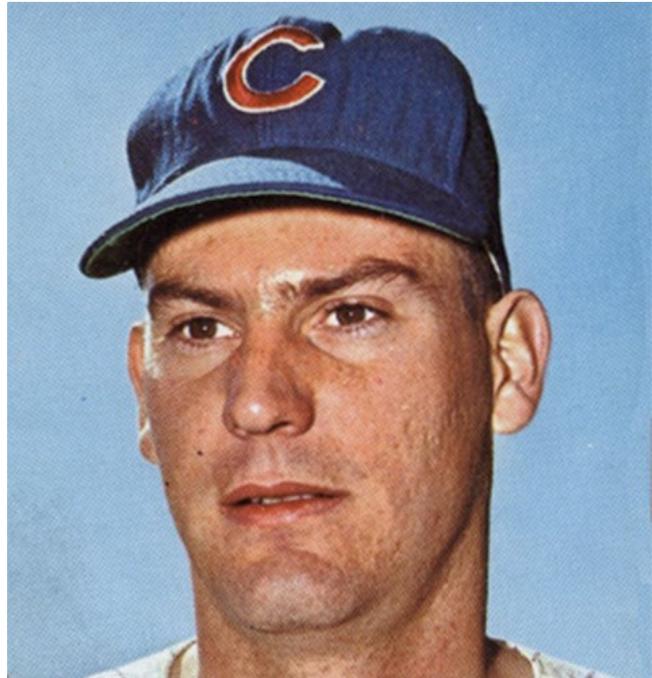
In Fresno, Calif., Dick Ellsworth's a long way in both distance and time from his dual former homes in Wrigley Field and north suburban Morton Grove.

The former Cubs pitcher, now 73, has worked 41 years for Pearson Realty, a venerable (started in 1919) Fresno firm that specializes in commercial and agricultural properties. But Ellsworth's senior vice presidency hasn't taken him totally away from baseball in California's central San Joaquin valley. Late in 2005, he was part of an investment group that purchased the Fresno Grizzlies, the Triple-A franchise of the San Francisco Giants. Grizzlies alumni have garnered World Series rings in 2010 and 2012, and the championship afterglow also has shined on Ellsworth's team, for whom he serves as a general partner.

Something, though, is missing in the above portfolio.

Fifty years ago this season, Ellsworth became the last Cubs left-hander to win 20 or more games. His 22-10 season was just one notch below 1963 NL Cy Young Award winner Sandy Koufax's in effectiveness – for good reason. Ellsworth's miniscule 2.11 ERA in '63 was the lowest for a Cubs starting pitcher since World War II. The only pitcher to take a run at the ERA mark was the ace of aces the Cubs let get away soon afterward as a free agent – Greg Maddux at 2.18 during his own Cy Young Award 20-win season in 1992.

Unfortunately, Ellsworth's feat has been overlooked when the Cubs have honored former players. Jon Lieber, the last Cubs 20-win pitcher, in 2001, attended the Cubs Convention in January. Rick Reuschel, a 20-game-winner in 1977, has been back to the Convention, although he's far more active in the Pirates Alumni Association in Pittsburgh, where "Big Daddy" now resides. The unassuming Maddux, who eschews autograph-swarming fan activities and most media contact, came back to the Cubs twice, first as a pitcher in 2004, then an assistant to then-GM Jim Hendry after he retired in 2009. Mark Prior did not win 20, but his memorable 18-6 season in 2003 and his promise unfulfilled afterward was enough to get him invited back to talk to Cubs minor leaguers at Northwestern last winter.



**Dick Ellsworth in his Cubs days in the mid-1960s.**

A half-century might as well be 200 years to many kids today. Yet the one good thing about baseball is the numbers are there in black and white, permanently tucked into the record book, and often in a past-is-prologue manner. Ellsworth proved a control-oriented lefty can win big in Wrigley Field, yet no southpaw has taken a serious run at 20 victories since. Ken Holtzman won 17 back to back in 1969-70. Tough Ted Lilly garnered 17 in 2008, but couldn't earn a playoff start in a big mistake by Lou Piniella.

### **Pre-1969 Cubs worthy of recognition**

The Chicago Baseball Museum urges the Cubs to look at bringing back for team events the likes of Ellsworth, whose big '63 performance earned him an All-Star berth the next season, and teammate George Altman, 80, the team's first regular African-American outfielder who slugged a pinch homer in the 1961 All-Star Game in San Francisco. Altman lives near St. Louis. Yet another of their teammates, Glen Hobbie, lives even closer halfway between St. Louis and Springfield. The ranks of pre-1969 Cubs achievers are starting to thin, but they deserve as much recognition as the tried-and-true names of the franchise's glamour teams.

In the case of Ellsworth, however, there would need to be a sense of rapprochement on the part of the Cubs.

Ellsworth loved coming back to Wrigley Field. He still remembers his amazement at watching a Kerry Wood "12-6" curveball he compared to Koufax's best from a seat behind the plate not long after Kid K's 20-strikeout game in 1998.

But about a decade previously, then-loyal alumnus Ellsworth was walking on the field before a game. Suddenly, a junior member of the Cubs staff who did not know Ellsworth's background ordered him off the field. Sore feelings began. An e-mail to the front office from this writer suggesting an invitation back into the fold did not evoke a response after Ellsworth was interviewed for the "Where Have All Our Cubs Gone?" book in 2004.

"I've had no contact (with the front office) since that experience," Ellsworth said. "And I haven't really had the desire to have any contact. As to whether or not my attitude would change with the Ricketts (family), I don't know. I wish them all the success in the world. I'm glad to see them pumping new blood into the organization. I've felt for some time that one of the issues with the Cubs began at the top.

"I'm impressed with what I hear and what I read about the organization at the present time. My feeling is they've got a good general manager (actually, baseball president Theo Epstein) in place, somebody who is not afraid of change, somebody who is not afraid to lead, somebody who is wanting to have a winning ballclub. He inherited some contracts that have been very difficult to deal with to make some personnel changes. I enjoy watching them on TV again. It looks like they're playing hard and they've got some good, young talent. In the next few years, the Cubs fans may have something really to talk about."

You could sense Ellsworth's eyebrows furrow over the long-distance wire when he was informed Alfonso Soriano threw cold water on talk he could be traded to the Giants last year. Soriano apparently did not like the cool weather that envelopes most games at AT&T Park.

### **The dream season evokes pride**

The present-day Cubs' tepid response to Ellsworth's mark in history is a marked contrast with the John Holland GM regime of the lefty's young manhood. Holland, always impatient on the trigger, called him up for one start at 18 soon after he was signed out of Fresno. Ellsworth joined the rotation for good in 1960. After a 9-20 season for the first 103-loss team in Cubs annals in 1962, Ellsworth turned his performance around for the following season. The decades since have not dimmed his pride in his 22-win achievement.



**The Cubs' Jeff Samardzija (center) draws praise from Dick Ellsworth for the movement on his 95 mph fastball.**

"I think anybody who puts on a Cubs uniform and is primarily a starting pitcher understands it's a hitters' ballpark," Ellsworth said. "If you're not a low-ball pitcher and have action on your fastball, you're in trouble in that ballpark. I've seen (Jeff Samardzija) pitch a couple of times on TV. I like what I see. He's got great movement on his fast-

ball. I'm astounded at the movement he does have because of the high velocity he throws at. He's got a great future. I hope he takes care of himself. He's fun to watch."

At 23 and possessed of a good fastball and wicked slider, Ellsworth seemed poised to join the ranks of the Koufax-Juan Marichal-Bob Gibson elite of the mid-1960s. But he never repeated his 20-win season despite good mid-season records of 10-6 in 1964 and 12-6 in 1965. In a procession of events that was prescient of Kerry Wood's problems 35 years later, the slider took too much out of Ellsworth's arm. He refused to rest when the left wing started to bark, and thus finished 14-18 in '64 and 14-15 in '65.

"I was hard-headed, I was stubborn, I wanted the ball every four days, even when I probably shouldn't have had the ball because of an awful lot of stiffness in my elbow," Ellsworth said.

"When I played, nobody knew of the cut fastball. Nobody really talked about that. That would have been a big help to me. I really felt that I needed a way to get inside on right-handed hitters. The slider was the only thing I knew. I had good success with it in '63. In '64 is when my arm troubles started in mid-season. For the next two or three years, I had issues. The second half of the year, it was difficult to get loose sometimes when my rotation (spot) came around.

"But had we known about the cut fastball at that time and I could have learned that pitch, it probably would have saved my elbow and given me the ability to get inside on right-handed hitters."

Ellsworth thus joined a long procession of Cubs pitchers of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century who were expected to carry the team into contention, but declined after initial success due to arm and back problems. Hobbie, Bob Anderson, Dick Drott and Moe Drabowsky preceded Ellsworth into the pain brigade. All-time Cubs announcer Jack Brickhouse often recalled the washed-out promise of these supposed golden arms.

Ellsworth declined all the way to 8-22 in 1966 under Leo Durocher, who kept him in the rotation and going late or all the way in games. He served up an astounding 321 hits in 269 innings in '66. That got him on the truck Durocher loved to back up. Ellsworth was dealt to the Phillies for right-hander Ray Culp.

### **Ellsworth, Culp end up rotation mates**

In turn, Durocher came to dislike the talented Culp and cut him loose after one season. Amazingly, both Ellsworth and Culp wound up as rotation mates on the Red Sox in 1968. Culp was 16-6, prior to back-to-back 17-win seasons in Boston. Ellsworth had a one-year revival at 16-7, luring right-handed hitters to break their bats leaning over the plate in an attempt to pull the ball over the Green Monster in left field. Meanwhile, the '68 Cubs coughed up some of their great progress of the previous breakthrough year under Durocher due to a decline in starting pitching in the otherwise famed "pitchers' season."

By 1971, Ellsworth was on his way out, and soon to be in the prosperous employ of Pearson Realty. The Ellsworth name did pop up 17 years later when son Steve, a right-hander, had a brief pitching career with the Red Sox.

The senior Ellsworth rooted on Steve as a proud father who promoted the commercial and agricultural development of the Fresno area at Pearson Realty, at which he started in 1971. The company survived the Great Recession in decent shape, in contrast to San Joaquin Valley cities like Stockton.



**Dick Ellsworth shows off Fresno Grizzlies apparel in the team locker room when his investment group bought the team in 2005.**

as a general partner with the Grizzlies late in 2005. Like buying and developing land, timing was everything. Bolstered by the kind of starting pitching Ellsworth knows all too well, the Giants won it all in 2010. The encore came unexpectedly two years later after a series of amazing postseason comebacks. Ellsworth also got to meet to other former Cubs in the Giants' employ: roving pitching instructor Lee Smith and VP of personnel Dick "Dirt" Tidrow.

### **George Kontos a Grizzlies alum**

One Giant who grew up a few miles from Ellsworth's former Morton Grove home was a Grizzlie pitcher. Lincolnwood's George Kontos was busy with his post-World Series off-season that took him back to Fresno.

"We're proud of the fact 17 of the fellas who were on the World Series ballclub last year passed through Fresno the last couple of years," Ellsworth said. "George was our guest

In spite of the challenges and obvious pressures, Ellsworth has no plans to retire eight years past Social Security age.

"We're an old, established firm with a majority of the market share," he said. "I've loved every minute of it. We (the valley) were hit hard. The majority of the suffrage was on the residential side of it. Fortunately, our company was not involved with residential sales. We are a commercial and agricultural company. We got hit a little bit. If we're not creating opportunities, we're solving problems. So we're busy all the time.

"It's a very interesting line of work, very stimulating. Every day is a different day. It is a people business."

Never losing his thirst for baseball, Ellsworth joined an ownership group

at our hot stove league dinner in early February. Then he moved on out to spring training.”

Ellsworth does not run team operations. But the same kind of person-to-person contacts that have helped in real estate also have benefited the Grizzlies.

“The relationships I’ve fostered over the years at City Hall and local government have come in handy,” he said. “In that regard, I’m a valuable asset to the organization.”

And in another regard, Dick Ellsworth would be a valuable asset to a Cubs organization that is emphasizing the future, but should never forget its past.



**Lincolnwood's George Kontos is one of the many Fresno Grizzlies alumni who have earned World Series rings with the Giants.**