

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## ***Old, comfortable Midwest broadcast style fades further with Hawk's farewell tour***

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We will all be poorer as a result of Hawk Harrelson's fade into retirement from the White Sox broadcast booth.

We not only lose the Hawk's body and soul along with that Georgia-bred voice that served as an excitable bookend from dignified fellow Peachy products Red Barber and Ernie Harwell. Worse yet, we further loosen the grip on a baseball broadcast style that made us fans and media pundits in the first place.

Harrelson is among the last of his breed -- baseball voices who drip with personality, home-run calls, catch-phrases, homer-ism and, yes, corn (as in "can of corn"). Fellow senior citizens Marty Brennaman in Cincinnati and Bob Uecker in Milwaukee still hold forth, but for how long?

These distinctive voices, so identified with their teams and flagship stations, particularly flourished in the Midwest, where tolerance and even demand for outright rooting in the booth was far greater than on either coasts. That style struck young Brooklyn émigré Jerry Reinsdorf when he first hit town in the late 1950s to attend law school at Northwestern. Raised on Barber and Vin Scully, Reinsdorf could not believe the Chicago announcers were rabid fans behind the mic.

Ultimate fan/critic Harry Caray, of course, fled Reinsdorf's employ after just one season in 1981. He was replaced by Don Drysdale, who had a West Coast down-the-middle professionalism about him. Harrelson was his sidekick. Reinsdorf learned to let things be when Harrelson took over as No. 1 play-by-play voice. The only mistake in the process was elevating Harrelson to Sox GM and permitting him to fire Tony La Russa as manager. Reinsdorf fessed up to the blunder, Harrelson eventually returned to the Sox booth and a memorable broadcast era became embedded.



**Hawk Harrelson aptly represents the personality-driven, "homer" Midwest baseball broadcast style. Photo credit Dr. David Fletcher, CBM 2017**

Chicago's desire for a homey style in its broadcasters perhaps has been best expressed on these Chicago Baseball Museum pages (or bytes, whatever you call an on-line image). Our story on the late Vince Lloyd ("holy mackerel") and Good Kid Lou Boudreau ("no doubt about it") honored in WGN's Walk of Fame generated a record number of hits for an article on the site. In most cases long before an older kin takes a young fan to the ballpark, they get interested in baseball via its personality-oriented broadcasts.

Jack Brickhouse was Chicago's voice of baseball from the 1940s to the 1980s. Caray was the Sox's wild man in the booth prior to elevating himself to superstar status cross-town. He was basically Harry Caray Presenting Cubs Baseball. When my daughter Laura was just 2, she had taken in so many cartoon-character images of Caray on the games that when Steve Stone did his standup, she proclaimed, "That's a Harry Caray!"

Harrelson, or Hawk-a-roo, developed a similar cache. The emotions of watching a Sox game rose and fell with Harrelson's play-by-play, supplemented by storytelling. Hawk critics gathered like avian stalkers on wires in "The Birds." Too many catch-phrases, too many awkward silences when the Sox were floundering, too many old stories, and too much supposed conflict with fellow alpha-broadcaster Stone. But many of these jibes originated from pundits from whom baseball was not their childhood passion, or whom expected a blander, coastal version of Sox broadcasts.

### **Hawk's HR calls in tradition of Brickhouse, Caray, etc.**

We've proven to love our broadcasters because of their flaws, excesses and boosterism. When Hawk evoked body English with "Stretch! Stretch! (pause). You can put-t-t-t it on the board, YESSSS!," the narrative was no different from the home-run setups and calls of Brickhouse's "Back! Back! Back! What do you think? Hey! Hey! Weeeeee...", Caray's "It might be...it could be...it ISSS...A Home Run!" or Uecker's "Get up! Get up! Get outta here!"

Taking over the broadcasts with Tom "Wimpy" Paciorek in old Comiskey Park's final season in 1990, Harrelson was merely the final version of the distinctive announcer dating back to the dawn of baseball broadcasting in the early 1920s. He took over at a time when many baseball voices offered up a cookie-cutter approach and began to keep one eye on their team's broadcasting and marketing departments monitoring their every word for just the right team images.

So many voices bestowed nicknames on their favorite players, so what was wrong with Hawk's "Big Hurt" for Frank Thomas, "One Dog" for Lance Johnson or "The Deacon" for Warren Newson?

Who wouldn't want to exhort a dangerous opposing hitter to "grab some bench" when a Sox pitcher mastered him? Who wouldn't want to gnash one's teeth in frustration after an opponent's well-placed bloop hit, as Harrelson has mourned with his latest catchphrase "A Kansas City Special?" And who wouldn't want to express his frustration with



**Jason Benetti has gotten Hawk Harrelson's enthusiastic endorsement as his successor.**

a bad umpiring call or feel the all-too-human arbiters have it out for a Sox manager or team overall? Remember, the extensive replay of the last few years has proven the human factor of those umps, taken some of the time-consuming histrionics out of the game and actually calmed down the Hawk.

If you're a Sox fan of any seniority and have complaints about Hawk, then you're splitting hairs. If you go back to the end of the 1960s, the sonorous, diction-perfect Bob Elson drew fire for being decades behind the times. The radio presentation was deemed boring. Elson did not want to retire, but the Sox had to change and hired Caray, who helped revive the franchise in tandem with slugger Dick Allen. If you thought Elson was nap-inducing, then you can't criticize Harrelson for emotions all over the dial.

So many things about baseball change, but not necessarily for the better. In the Sox booth, though, Harrelson has enthusiastically endorsed south suburban native Jason Benetti as his successor. Benetti grew up mimicking the Hawk – but will not replicate him in the booth in tandem with Stone. He's his own man, smooth and inviting, and Harrelson expects nothing else. I thought Benetti was baseball broadcasting's rookie of the year when he made his debut last year. He does not need to be an alpha voice himself, and allows Stone with his ability and seniority to take over as much airtime as needed.

Long before Harrelson officially becomes a Sox ambassador, he well-represented the franchise, controversies and all. Enjoy his farewell tour through 2018. You won't see the likes of him again throughout the game as the new millennium moves out of its infancy.