



Prior hoists one to his new career in the front office

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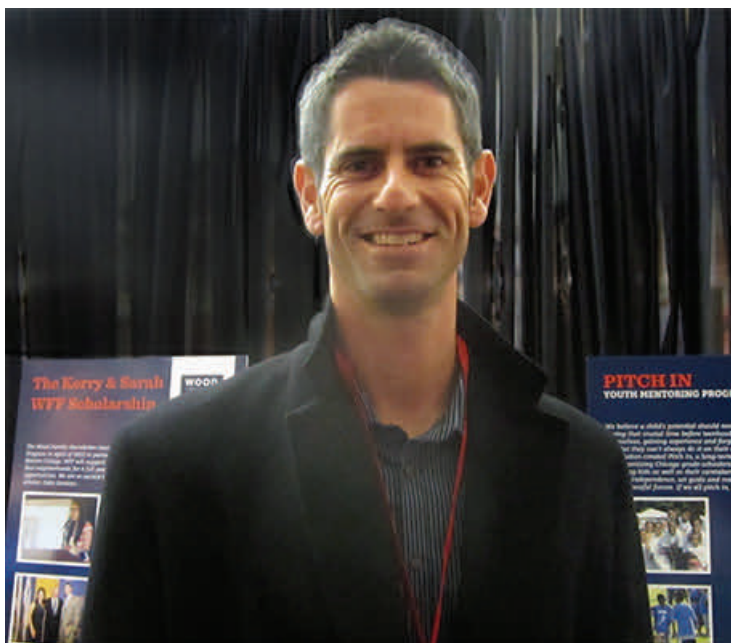
Once thought of as an absolute natural on the mound, Mark Prior also appeared to have had the same kind of talent at bartending and adeptly handling those he served.

He mixed the drinks, did not spill any, was attentive to everyone's needs and hardly wasted any motion. But, nah, forget being a natural in the libation league.

"No, not at all," said Prior. "I tried. I listened to my 'coach,' whomever was the resident bartender."

Prior didn't drop the ball during his celebrity bartending stint at buddy Kerry Wood's Winter Warm-up at Harry Caray's Tavern at Navy Pier. The third annual fund-raiser for fellow former Cubs phenom Wood's Family Foundation always packs 'em in, and this time the 6-foot-5 Prior was a center of attention. You do good things, albeit briefly, as a Cub, and they don't forget you. He probably signed more baseballs and posed for more photos than served drinks. The fans were generous. The tips Prior garnered went directly into the Family Foundation coffers.

Prior is starting a new chapter of his life. For the first time since the 1980s, he's not limbering up his arm and conditioning the rest of his body to start another season... And for the first time since 2007, he's not in "comeback" mode in which he'd be furiously working out in mid-winter. So Prior was able to attend the Warm-up to help Wood, to whom his fortunes were closely linked during the headiest time in Chicago baseball history. And he appeared at the Cubs Convention for the first time since his last season in the organization in '07.



Mark Prior was all smiles when he arrived for Kerry Wood's Winter Warm-up.



In his celebrity bartending stint at Kerry Wood's Winter Warm-up, Mark Prior alternated between serving drinks and signing autographs as fans mobbed him.

For an old friend, Prior gladly gave up the balmiest climate in the country in his native San Diego for two days of sub-freezing January weather in Chicago. He recalled that Wood began devoting his energies to community work when they were rotation members.

“He started looking into his community outreach,” Prior said. “He started going with the bowling tournament. He’s built it into something that’s done a lot of great things. He’s fortunate he was able to stay here, which helps him grow. He was able to build tradition with his foundation. He’s done a tremendous amount for Children’s (Memorial) Hospital.

“My hat’s off to him. There’s not too many people in my mind who are above him in what he’s done for the community he’s lived in.”

As soon as Prior arrived at Navy Pier, he made a beeline for Wood to catch up on old and new times. To be sure, Wood was all

ears at hearing the latest chapter in the life of one-time pitching prodigy Prior – assistant in the San Diego Padres baseball operations department.

Starting at the bottom with the Pods

After five years of abbreviated and aborted minor-league comeback attempts, Prior finally pulled the plug on his pitching career at 33 in December. He wasn’t inactive for long. Like a rookie going to Class A, he’s starting at the bottom, and willing to be patient to work his way back up on the front-office side.

“The last four or five years, I’ve been intrigued how the operation works,” he said. “Obviously my career path was inverted to most people’s. Most people started in the minors. By going back later in my career, I got a different perspective. I was always intrigued how things ran, (how executives) outfitted an organization, make moves. It was the right time, the right place.”

Despite his reputation, Prior did not have any inside pull to work with his hometown team.

“I had a couple of conversations with the Padres’ front office,” he said. “I didn’t know anybody specific. I ran into (general manager) Josh Byrnes at my daughter’s soccer game. That’s the only meeting I had. I’m glad and fortunate that they’re able to bring me on and give me an opportunity to learn and see how everything works.”

Prior reports to A.J. Hinch, the vice president of pro scouting. Hinch is a former Diamondbacks manager.

“It was an easy decision to bring Prior into our organization,” he said. “He has an obvious curiosity for how baseball operations works and he has already shown a feel for decision-making. While his primary focus will be pro scouting, our goal is to get him acclimated to every aspect of baseball operations.....from pro scouting to amateur scouting to player development to major league operations.

“He will be exposed to a lot behind the scenes and his curiosity should lead to great growth. He has a lot of experience to reflect on as he works, but his best attribute looks to be his overall consistent and balanced approach in all he does. He has a knack for seeing not only what players do when he watches them, but also how they do it.

Byrnes and Hinch saw how Prior had been imported by the Cubs to talk to their young prospects at a mid-winter workout camp at Northwestern University. The sum total of his experiences were seen as a big asset.

“We talk a lot about how to get players from the draft to the big leagues and the journey that includes,” Hinch said. “And Prior’s experience having lived it (both the upside of being high profile and dominating as well as the pitfalls of misfortune) should be a great asset for him to get comfortable in his career off the field.”

Coming back to the Midwest

Prior said he won’t be solely a stay-at-home trainee, watching high school and college games in southern California. He’ll be traveling back to the Midwest.

“I’ll be doing a little bit of everything,” he said. “I’ll do some pro coverage, some amateur coverage, be in the office a couple of times a week. I’ll be out here in (Class A Midwest League) Ft. Wayne...San Antonio, El Paso.”

Prior has a business degree from the University of Southern California. But baseball is in his blood.

“The game’s given me a lot,” he said. “It’s blessed my family, they’ve seen a lot of good things. I still have a real strong passion for the game and I want to be around it. It’s a great way for me. I’ll jump back in within a couple of months.”

He threw lightning bolts from his electric right arm his first two Cubs seasons in 2002-03. Prior was Wood with better control. He’d have amassed the Cubs single-game strikeout record, twice reaching 16, if only his chum hadn’t fanned 20 against the Astros back in 1998.



A.J. Hinch will help train Mark Prior in front office work. The Padres' scouting chief is his boss.

The No. 2 draft pick in the country in June 2001, Prior was mowing down hitters in the Cubs rotation less than a year later. And then he upped the performance, if that was possible, in 2003. He went 18-6 with a 2.43 ERA, striking out 245 and walking just 50 in 211 1/3 innings. Prior and Wood were easy cover boys for a mid-season *Sports Illustrated* issue.

Prior's 2.43 ERA was third lowest by a full-time Cubs starter since World War II. As a contrast, six-time 20-game winner Fergie Jenkins' lowest ERA was 2.63. When Rick Sutcliffe went 16-1 for the Cubs in 1984, he had a 2.69 ERA.

		IP	W-L	ERA
1963	Dick Ellsworth	290 2/3	22-10	2.11
1992	Greg Maddux	268	20-11	2.18
2003	Mark Prior	211 1/3	18-6	2.43
1969	Bill Hands	300	20-14	2.49
1963	Larry Jackson	275	14-18	2.55

Mark Prior ranks third in lowest ERA by a Cubs starter since World War II.

The only names ahead of Prior are Dick Ellsworth, now part-owner of the Triple-A Fresno Grizzlies, at 2.11 in 1963, and Greg Maddux at 2.18 in 1992.

"Anytime you're in the same sense with somebody like (Maddux), you're doing something pretty special," Prior said.

Prior was fortunate to have Maddux as a Cubs teammate from 2004-06, recalling his de facto assistant pitching coach's status was very subtle. When informed Maddux had called pitches for at least four other Cubs in his first Cy Young Award season in 1992, he said he would have allowed the master to perform that task for him if he had offered.

Injuries keep tarnishing a golden arm

After his unbelievable break-in seasons, nature steadily took its toll on Prior. Pitching, being one of the most unnatural movements in sports, has a high, and random, mortality rate. A Greg Maddux goes untouched except for the usual aches and pains over 23 seasons. Prior began breaking down in 2004. He was just 23. Attempts to rehab sometimes seemed off-key, such as his bullpen "towel drill" supervised by Cubs pitching coach Larry Rothschild. Prior last pitched in a big-league game, as a Cub, on Aug. 10, 2006 in Milwaukee, giving up five earned runs and four walks, striking out just one, in three innings.

But even after shoulder surgeries in 2007, ending his Cubs career, and 2008, Prior refused to give up. He was like a left-hander, seemingly with nine lives. Someone was always giving him a chance to come back.

He went from the Padres in 2009 to independent baseball in Orange County in 2010 to the Yankees (and working with Rothschild) in 2011 to the Red Sox in 2012, and finally the Reds last year until his release on June 28. He'd pitch some in the minors, for a moment getting his old strikeout stuff back, and then sliding back in command and control. Always, Prior cherished competition.

"I enjoy playing," he said. "The last couple of years with Pawtucket and Louisville, I had a lot of fun every day with the goal of getting back to the big leagues. It was a blast. My family enjoyed the time in Pawtucket (in the Red Sox system). I enjoyed competing, having a good time, being around the ballpark and being around the guys.

"I'll impart anything that I've gone through, good, bad and indifferent. Stuff the older guys when I came here to Chicago helped me with."

Prior's heard South Holland native Mark Mulder is trying a comeback with the Angels at 36, after last throwing a pitch in 2008, and even longer after being a part of a regular rotation, with the Cardinals in 2006. But there won't be a change of mind.

"I think I've exhausted that," he said. "I felt great (in 2012). I was throwing the ball really well, but I kind of plateaued. I struck out a lot, but I also walked a lot. (In 2013) I started off throwing the ball well. I had a little hiccup in Toledo. Then it just went one day. I really haven't been able to recover from that. I decided now was the right opportunity for me to kind of turn the chapter in my life and do other things."

Bursting on the scene more than a decade ago as the most hyped young pitcher in the majors, Prior was thought to possess near-perfect mechanics. Later, critics began picking apart his delivery to find apparently fatal flaws. To this day, neither he nor his medical handlers can pinpoint when and where his shoulder went bad.

No regrets for what could have been

"It's life," Prior said. "Life doesn't work out the way you want. The game has been great to me. It was a good run. I have no regrets. I've exhausted going out and throwing as much as I can trying to come back. I've come back from the surgeries. I got guys out at



Mark Prior (right) and Kerry Wood were Sports Illustrated cover boys together as the Cubs gained momentum during 2003.

a high level, but was never able to kind of get back on that pinnacle. That's OK. I've done everything I could."

The one advantage in a game that stresses players due to travel and separation from family is Prior's young brood won't have to go from San Diego to a spring training stop to another city annually. He has two daughters and one son, ages 7, 6 and 4. "We have a little softball and T-ball started," he said. His 6-year-old daughter is intriguing as a left-hander. Football is probably the only sport he'd make off-limits to his son.

No matter where he goes, to prep games near home, minor-league ballparks in the heartland or bars in Chicago, the conversation will always steer back to the 2003 Cubs season and its catastrophic denouement on Oct. 14 and 15 at Wrigley Field. In the uplifting highs and shattering lows, the interest the Dusty Baker-managed and Prior-led Cubs generated represents the apex of interest of any team in Chicago baseball history.

Sure enough, the best-received sports TV program of the past year was "5 Outs," the Comcast SportsNet Chicago 90-minute special on the '03 team. Among the big names interviewed was a recently-bearded Prior at the San Diego seashore. "5 Outs" has netted producers David Kaplan, Sarah Lauch and Ryan McGuffey the Jerome Holtzman Award from the Chicago Baseball Museum for contributions to history of the sport in this city. The CSN Chicago trio were scheduled to receive that award at the Pitch and Hit Club Banquet in Lombard on Jan. 26.

The reason for '03 Cubs' appeal

Now clean-shaven as per his Cubs prime, Prior has some clear thinking about why the '03 Cubs still provoke so much passion.

"I think it was a team that changed the lens that people view the Cubs through," he said. "It was a good team and it was a great run. I wish we would have gotten to the World Series and see what happened. It was a good team.

"I think we did some things that were unexpected. We did some things that excited everybody. I'm just proud I was a part of that team, and what we did and what we were able to bring to this city. I'm proud of what we did."



Mark Prior helped raise funds for the family foundation of buddy Kerry Wood and wife Sarah.

Prior was right in the middle of the craziest single event in Chicago baseball history – the Bartman Incident in Game 6 of the National League Championship Series against the Marlins with the Cubs leading 3-0 in the eighth, and five outs away from a World Series berth.

Initially pointing at the star-crossed Steve Bartman in hopes fan interference would be called, Prior went back to pitching moments later. The roof caved in via an eight-run inning. On a list of 10 goats for the fiasco, Bartman was probably No. 15.

“I would hope he’s happy, that he’s able to enjoy the game for what it is,” Prior said. “I would hope he has the ability to come out and watch a game if that’s what he desires to do. I hope he’s able to get out and do what he wants to do.”

Unless he’s prodded about the fateful inning in interviews, Prior said, “I really don’t think about it.” He thus has tremendous mental discipline about a shattering event even more impactful than that experienced by all-time White Sox ace Billy Pierce.

The great lefty admitted his mind often drifts back to the top of the ninth inning, facing batter Ed Fitz Gerald on June 27, 1958 at old Comiskey Park. He was one out from a perfect game against the Washington Senators. At that time it would have been the eighth perfect game in big league history and the first by a southpaw since 1880.

"He was a first-ball fastball hitter, so we threw him a curve," Pierce has said several times, recalling how the ball sliced down the right-field line just out of the reach of Sox first baseman Ray Boone. Eternally, Pierce wishes he had thrown Fitz Gerald a fastball.

Unlike Prior, Pierce did regain his composure and he fanned the next batter on three pitches for his 29th career shutout and his third one-hitter. Like Bartman, police and security officers had to escort Fitz Gerald out of the park and away from the 11,000 plus crowd that had been whipped into a frenzy by the nearperfecto.

In contrast, Prior has no regrets about his iconic role in the Bartman Game. He said he is more haunted by the pitch he delivered to Pudge Rodriguez that resulted in the first of eight runs. Rodriguez added fuel to the Marlins’ rally after Moises Alou could not catch the foul ball touched by Bartman.

Prior’s attitude is leave the regrets behind for the historians. Move on, because time stops for no one. And if his plan works out, he has more years of baseball ahead of him than in his rear-view mirror.

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