



Buzz for hockey, not for baseball, and it shows in TV ratings

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Ten opinions for the price of one:

1. The Cubs-Sox crosstown series has really fallen in esteem if the low-profile NBC Sports Network's Blackhawks-Red Wings Game 6 literally doubled the rating of the baseball telecasts on WGN (Ch. 9) and Comcast SportsNet *combined*.

But the Hawks had a banner year in interest and TV ratings that the lockout couldn't dent. And the buzz over the Cubs and Sox is at a historic low ebb. It's an old story – the last shall be first, the first shall be last.

Remember, the Hawks were an afterthought in the mid-2000s, while the Kerry Wood/Mark Prior Cubs were smoking hot for a couple of years, leading into the White Sox World Series in 2005. However, the Hawks are firmly committed to go for it all, with owner Rocky Wirtz insisting that his fans must never be taken for granted. Can you say the same thing for Chicago baseball fans, paying large-market ticket prices for often small-market performances?

When (or if) the Cubs and Sox are contenders again, the crosstown series will generate its old buzz again. Only the Bears and Packers can have the blood lust continuing when both rivals are down at the same time.

2. Nice to be able to wake up on a Sunday morning and attend a ballgame here, like the good ol' days.



Fans can still wake up the day of the game to get seats at U.S. Cellular Field. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Thomas Miller.

That's what my daughter, Laura, encountered when she and some buddies decided the same day to go to the White Sox-Marlins game at The Cell. They found great seats -- \$15? -- in the bleachers on a beautiful late spring day. Many had the same idea. Some 2,600 walk-up sales were reported. The outfield stands were jammed like few other times this year.

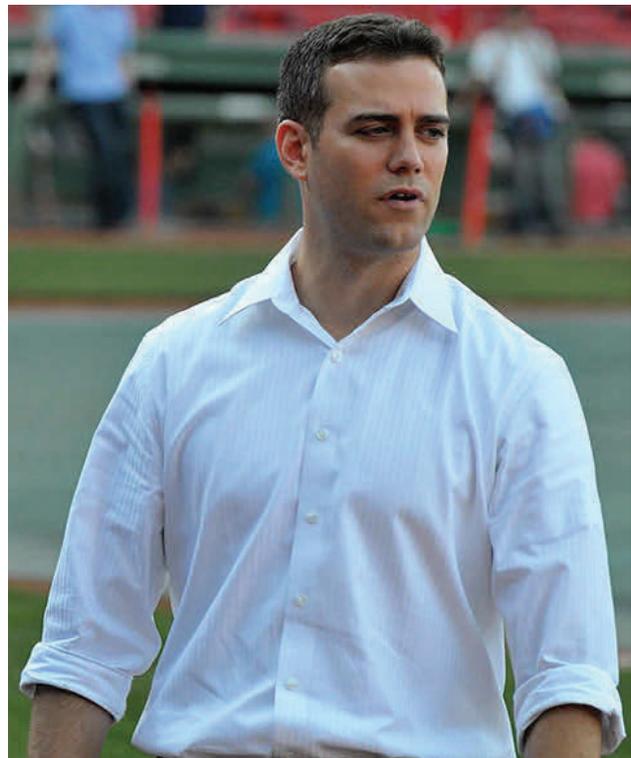
The other side of this coin is there were plenty of seats available, even on a day the Sox have made a point to offer upper-deck seats for as low as \$5 with parking \$10. Team cash flow is dependent on advance sales in the 21st Century. Struggling to reverse a seven-year attendance decline, the Sox need those assured crowds. I feel the franchise is paying the price for some disappointing seasons, the poor economy and over-pricing of seats through last year. Empty bleachers against the Yankees two seasons in a row shocked management into ticket price-slashing. But some long-term damage already has been done, and it will take some years of good feelings combined with lower prices to restore the fan patronage.

3. Holidays like Memorial Day, July 4 and Labor Day are no longer a big draw in baseball. That's why the likely smallest actual crowd in Cubs-Sox series history showed up for the first game on Memorial Day night.

In the mid-20th Century, most retailers were closed on the holidays. Today, they keep near-normal business hours. Way back when, ballclubs only had the beaches, forest preserves and some other recreational centers as competition. Now the teams have the mall and backyard barbecues as competition. Sort of like the formerly monopolistic Detroit automakers suddenly having Japanese and European rivals entering the market.

Some teams don't even want to be scheduled on holidays. I've seen them take Labor Day off, treating it like another Monday with no game. Time and culture marches on.

4. The Cubs and Sox are also searching for patient hitters who will work the count deep and draw walks. They'll have to keep looking, though, as they won't likely find them on their rosters nor be able to teach them how to hold the bat when the temptation is to take a rip.



Theo Epstein wants more patience from his lineup, but probably will have to acquire entirely new players to achieve such a goal. Photo credit [Scott Slingsby](#).

Consensus seems to be patient, on-base-percentage players are born, not made. You either have the motivation in you to work the count or you hit first and ask questions later. Jed Lowrie, a Theo Epstein draftee with the Red Sox who moved on, said he had the patient style in college.

So if the teams want their lineups to make opposing pitchers throw more pitches, they'll likely have to draft those archetypes and groom them.

5. Jeff Samardzija is the feel-good story of Chicago baseball this season. He was the worst of two worlds in 2009 – hit hard like a batting-practice pitcher and possessing poor control. But “Shark” proved you can work your way to prosperity on the mound.
6. I have a gut feeling Paul Konerko will walk away from the game proud if he doesn't have a season up to his standards with his Sox contract expiring after the season. The “King” has enough respect for himself as a player and those who'd pay him to not take somebody's money without respectable return. There's something to be said to departing with your reputation intact. And Konerko has one of the best reputations in baseball.
7. Here's hoping the Sox's Conor Gillaspie can make it down to Moore, Okla., this season to help with tornado cleanup and relief. He's willing. Gillaspie is a weather bug who understands the tragedy, living on the outskirts of Wichita, also in “Tornado Alley.” Just by their high profile, big leaguers can draw attention to both the rebuilding and the concepts of tornado safety.
8. I'm exciting about upcoming developments on the Chicago Baseball Museum finally getting its brick-and-mortar home. But a museum isn't just four walls. It's the people it commemorates and the people who visit to remember. The museum won't be headquarters-bound. The goal is to bring the museum's programs to the fans, wherever they are in the Midwest. Stay tuned.
9. I actually like the wit shown by new Cubs TV color analyst Jim Deshaies. I agree with Milo Hamilton that Deshaies' transition would be tougher without a Cubs background. But the ol' lefty is clever and perceptive enough to talk through that deficiency in background.



Jeff Samardzija is the city's new ace starter. Photo credit [Mike LaChance](#).

10. At the same time, Deshaies' partner Len Kasper has a subtle sharper edge in his play by play. He's no Harry Caray in slamming underperformers on his team. But there are interesting nuances to Kasper's delivery when the Cubs flub. Listen in, you'll hear it.