



‘Sox Fans On Deck’ loyal through thick... and now thin

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Friday, July 19, 2013*

They’ve met at least monthly for 25 years now, exulting in success, crabby and feisty on the downsides, but always faithful to their White Sox.

They know how to handle a crisis, for sure. “Sox Fans On Deck” came together to rally the troops when the team threatened a move to St. Petersburg, Fla., in 1988 if the bill creating U.S. Cellular Field did not pass the Illinois legislature.

So, nearly eight years after a lot of their lifelong angst was relieved by an 11-1 run through the postseason and a World Series title, the loyalists in this enduring group are not short of opinions on how to handle another hiccup in Sox history. This time, they are brimming with analysis on how their favorites came to be with the worst record at the All-Star break since 1989.

As they munched on pizza and pasta at their regular meeting at a Northwest Side joint, “Sox Fans On Deck” founder John Pontikes experienced a case of déjà vu when discussing the problems of 2013.

“I’m trying to figure out if this is a repeat of 1968 or 1970,” Pontikes said. “In 1968, it was a veteran team that was supposed to compete, but it completely fell apart. The pitching staff fell apart due to injuries. It didn’t hit. It was a boring team. I was 13 at the time. ‘68 led to ‘69, and apathy came about. The reason I compare to 1970 it was the worst year they ever had. I was at a game where the announced attendance was 2,000. There weren’t more than 200 people in the park.”



Tom Murphy (far right), the present Sox Fans On Deck president, is joined by the founders of the organization back in 1988 (from left): Dean Geroulis, John Pontikes, Rich Lindberg and George Skuros.

As Pontikes was joined by his three co-founders and other members who have joined up in the decades since, several bits of consensus came about.

They believe U.S. Cellular Field is in the wrong location – too far south at 35th Street – and attendance suffers as a result. They want management to do more to attract young fans. And they believe Gordon Beckham is for real, just like Joe Crede turned out to be, and can be a mainstay going forward.

“No question (high ticket prices) is something that struck the fan base,” Pontikes said. “It was something they were not used to. I don’t consider the product entertaining at all. I think they’ve been playing boring baseball for a year now – from the All-Star break last year until now. They were an aging team that fell apart at the same time.”

Pontikes favors a radical solution prior to the July 31 non-waiver trade deadline.

Trade Chris Sale?



Hank Trenkle has been a Sox fan since the first "Go-Go" year of 1951.

“I’d trade Chris Sale and make a blockbuster deal,” he said. “You need everyday ballplayers for him. Tommy John for Richie Allen (in Dec. 1971) for an example. It will get you headlines.”

Hank Trenkle of Park Ridge considers himself the “gray-haired fan here” even among the decades-long veterans of Sox Fans On Deck. Trenkle has been a loyalist since the first “Go-Go” season of 1951. He doesn’t believe the pitching staff led by Sales should be broken up.

“I don’t see the dire situation everyone else sees,” Trenkle said. “We have a good pitching staff. We need some players who can hit the baseball.”

But there’s a caveat. Trenkle said the Sox lack players who spark fan interest.

“I just think the fan base is bored,” he said. “There’s nobody out there we can identify with. When I was growing up in the Fifties, we had Nellie Fox, Minnie Minoso, Billy Pierce, Luis Aparicio. Nobody’s exciting. Somebody we can really identify with who’s been around awhile (he said Paul Konerko is on his downside). They’re like family. I don’t care to see any of these players, especially these old players on the downslide. I’d go to see young players make mistakes and play bad baseball (while learning on the job).”

Although Trenkle praised Reinsdorf for doing a “terrific thing” to lower ticket prices, the consensus of the group was that U.S. Cellular Field is at least two miles further south for the fans’ good. And even if it had been closer to downtown, the traffic access from the northwest and west still would have been tough for weeknight games.

“The location of this ballpark is a complete detriment,” said Bob Strunk, a retired assistant Cook County public defender who used to be a left-field “Sox Supporter” in old Comiskey Park.

‘Traffic clog’ on way to The Cell

“It’s a total traffic clog to get in there. I remember when I was sitting in left field, 30 games a year. Everybody was there on a Friday night. It was a lot easier in the ‘70s and ‘80s. Now the Kennedy Expressway is a complete disaster. The location of that ballpark is killing that team.”

Pontikes’ preferred site would have been over railroad tracks at Roosevelt Road just south of downtown.

“If this ballpark had been built there, the Chicago Cubs would not be Chicago’s team today,” he said. “The White Sox would be Chicago team. That’s how important that decision was.”

A near-downtown stadium would have attracted the corporate crowd, Strunk said.

“Now you’ve got your downtown fan base,” he said. “They’re going to jump into (brief ride in a) cab, and they’re still not going to 35th Street.”



Norm Dreyer has dual team loyalties, as his telltale hat shows.

The Cell’s present location is not only tough to reach from the northern suburbs through the expressway nightmares, but also far away from a fan base that migrated from the South Side to the southwest and west suburbs in the latter third of the 20th Century. Reinsdorf had the right idea to propose west-suburban Addison as a new stadium location in the mid-1980s, but was thwarted by local political opposition.

No matter what the stadium location, Sox official historian Rich Lindberg, another co-founder, said the numbers of loyalists has diminished, a partial reason for declining attendance.

“I think the fan base is shrinking,” Lindberg said. “I think there are fewer Sox fans than there were 30 years ago.”

Attraction is winning team, not stadium

Size of fan base and stadium location take a back seat to winning, according to Northwest Side fan Norm Dreyer, who has dual loyalties. Dreyer showed up wearing a Cardinals hat.

He pointed out tickets cannot be had for Blackhawks games anymore, especially after the second Stanley Cup championship in four years.

“There is nothing to do around the United Center,” Dreyer said. “You go to dinner downtown or bused from two miles away.”

Lindberg claims the Sox should have settled around a 2.5 million annual attendance, after skyrocketing to 2.9 million in 2006, the year after the World Series triumph.

“Had they been perennial contenders, it would have made a dramatic difference,” said Des Plaines’ Dean Geroulis, another co-founder. “Look at other franchises. St. Louis is consistently up there. Our guys, they won a ring, now we go south.”

No matter what the issue and emotions involved, get a group of Sox loyalists together and the rivalry – real and imagined – with the Cubs comes up.

George Skuros, the fourth group co-founder present, takes the high road like Reinsdorf did in a magnanimous gesture in the Minute Maid Park infield an hour after the World Series was won. Then, the chairman tried to bridge the fan divide in a “can’t we all just get along?” appeal.

He loves both Sox, Cubs

“I’m unique because I love the Cubs, too – like a son and a daughter, each in their own way,” Skuros said. “The ’69 Cubs cards I have are up on my wall as well as the ’64 White Sox.”

Pontikes said there was an end game, at least for him, in the Cubs rivalry.

“The rivalry goes back 100 years,” he said. “Fans have the rivalry. 2005 ended my obsession with the Cubs. They were the more popular team. It’s fan pride. Once it was over, it should be over. Our generation saw the Sox win the World Series. Our generation and our parents’ generation did not see the Cubs win the World Series.”

Block-by-block pride in a near-vanished Chicago of close-knit communities fueled the fans’ rivalry.

“The first thing when a kid moved into the neighborhood, you asked him, ‘Cubs fan or Sox fan?’ You identified with a guy,” said Trenkle.

The old media favoritism issue

Lindberg has made a second career cataloging alleged media favoritism for the Cubs, despite the stark fact Chicago is the only one of a quartet of two-team markets where one team played all its home games during the day, while the other had many 8 p.m. game times. The Cubs' daytime-only schedule was far easier on morning newspaper deadlines and film-development times to get clips on the 6 p.m. news.

“There’s a lot of resentment Sox fans have over Cubs media favoritism,” Lindberg said. “Go back to 1969 – Rick Talley hated the White Sox. He was literally a rah-rah cheerleader writing about the Cubs each day. Jay Mariotti in the Nineties targeted the Sox maliciously with his ranted venom about Reinsdorf.”



Frank Chambers is animated as he debates Dreyer about the latter's feelings over the Cubs.

And yet Sox fans can’t even agree with each other about the rivalry. Dreyer had a loud and spirited debate with Frank Chambers, a longtime TV camera operator, over Dreyer’s view of the Cubs. The latter said he did not dislike the team until Harry Caray defected from the Sox to join superstation WGN and Cubs broadcasts. Dreyer believed Caray’s crosstown switch was just short of mortal sin.

“All you care about is the Cubs losing,” Chambers yelled at Dreyer. “I grew up in a Cubs town, within walking distance of Wrigley Field, and yet I am a Sox fan. I’ve never given a (bleep) about the Cubs. I’d come home and get pissed off because the Cubs are still playing and the Three Stooges would not be on (WGN).”

Said Dreyer: “I grew up on the Northwest Side, so I lived around Cubs fans. I don’t mind the Cubs so much, but I mind their fans.”

Other “Sox Fans on Deck” members present included George Fischer of Lake Zurich, Ron Caminiti (second cousin to the late third baseman Ken Caminiti) and Al Discianno of Palatine, Karen Franke of Mundelein, Bob Kletnick of Elmwood Park and Chicago residents Terrye Cortesi and John Nachay. Tom Murphy, safely a North Sider living in Rogers Park, is the current group president.