



Wrigley Field still has edge on Soldier Field in variety of sports, big events

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Tuesday, February 25th, 2014*

If Soldier Field was a living, breathing entity, its jealousy would be dampened a bit by the NHL Stadium Series outdoor game between the Blackhawks and Pittsburgh Penguins on Saturday, March 1.

The combo old-school colonnades-holding-an-inverted-flying-saucer structure certainly felt left out after the NHL held its Jan. 1, 2009 Winter Classic with the Hawks and Detroit Red Wings at Wrigley Field, and then staged subsequent outdoor games both on New Year's Day and beyond over the next five years at a bevy

of other historic stadiums. But if the truth be known, Soldier Field – 10 years younger than Wrigley Field -- simply can't catch the Friendly Confines in sheer number and variety of events, sports and otherwise, as the latter stadium celebrates its 100th birthday in April.

Hockey in front of 60,000 is only the third major American-based pro sport to be displayed at Soldier Field after its staple football and boxing. Baseball cannot fit in Soldier Field. Basketball would have to be on an outdoor court, and the only place that has ever been held was at Wrigley Field.

For such a small ballpark that did not have lights until 1988, Wrigley Field has been the busiest outdoor stadium in town where options are not all that plentiful. The sheer number of events – including ones staged with portable lights from the 1930s to 1950s – has been amazing to catalogue.



Workers were still trucking away snow from the fringes of Soldier Field when the outline for the outdoor hockey rink was laid down.

Just two men's baseball teams – the Federal League Whales and the Cubs – have called Wrigley Field home. But until recently, the ballpark had hosted more NFL games than any other stadium in history via the 50-year tenancy of the Chicago Bears (1921-70). All the while, Soldier Field was grossly under-utilized with the two Chicago NFL teams playing elsewhere. With its larger capacity mandated by the marketing-savvy NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle, Soldier Field snared the Bears for the 1971 season. Owner George Halas moved his temporary stands, which used to cover the permanent right-field bleachers at Wrigley, to Soldier Field's north end zone to pinch in the formerly faraway seats.

The relationship between the Cubs and the Bears was so close that owner P.K. Wrigley once said Halas was his favored purchaser if he ever decided to sell the Cubs. Wrigley said Halas would get first and last shot at buying the baseball team. Later, long after the Bears moved out, its Michael McCaskey-run management team was treated like celebrities by Tribune Co. management whenever they visited Wrigley Field. Old ties were hard to sever.

The presence of the Bears was good for Cubs employees. Park operations director Salty Saltwell had the coziest seat in the stadium on days when the temperatures dropped. In that era, the NFL blacked out home games in the originating TV market. But Saltwell was able to hook up to the closed-circuit video feed from the control truck to his office.



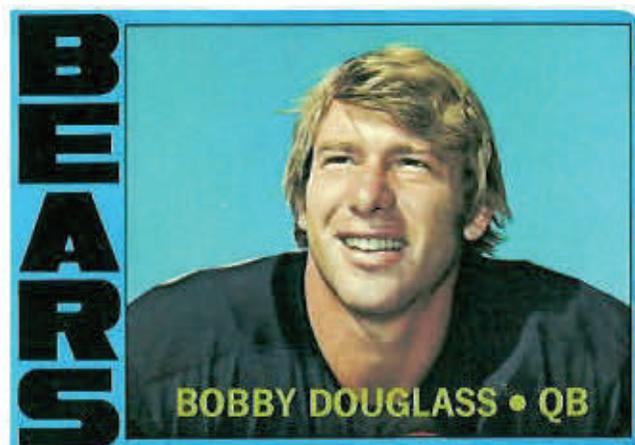
Wrigley Field as it looked near puck drop for the 2009 NHL Winter Classic.

1970 NBC Douglass clip on CSN Chicago

Comcast SportsNet Chicago came up with a rare video clip on its recent “Bears Classics” series profile of Gale Sayers and his six-touchdown game on Dec. 12, 1965 at Wrigley Field. To better illustrate the playing conditions, the regional network acquired a few seconds of old NBC tape – never seen live in blacked-out Chicago -- of Bobby Douglass throwing a long bomb for a touchdown into the shadows-encrusted corner of the north end zone in the second-to-last Bears game ever played at Clark and Addison, a 31-13 pasting of O.J. Simpson (his only game at Wrigley) and the Buffalo Bills on Nov. 22, 1970.

The Bears were the only pro team to win championships – eight -- at Wrigley Field. The last title was the bruising 14-10 victory over the New York Giants on Dec. 29, 1963. Shifted from his usual perch in the WGN-Radio booth, Jack Brickhouse split the NBC-TV national telecast announcing duties with Giants voice Chris Schenkel, while Jack Quinlan filled in for Brickhouse on radio. The Chicago Baseball Museum possesses a few minutes of audio of the Brickhouse-Schenkel production.

In its cramped confines came some interesting top-level conversations. After games, Halas always stopped at the old Pink Poodle lunchroom for some pops and post-mortem talk with media and other VIPs. You'd never get an owner to let his hair down like that today.



CSN Chicago tracked down an NBC clip of Bobby Douglass throwing a lefty bomb into the north end zone of Wrigley Field in the second-to-last Bears game at the ol' ballpark in 1970. Photo credit: [Football Card Gallery](#).

Biggest miracle of the Bears' occupancy of Wrigley Field was how 40-some plus-size players could fit into the tiny baseball home clubhouse down the left-field line. One day Dick Butkus poked at the false ceiling in the locker room. Down popped a deceased rat.

In the NFL's first season in 1920, Wrigley Field also hosted the Chicago Cardinals and Chicago Tigers while the Bears began life 180 miles south as the Staleys in Decatur.

College football also was on the Wrigley schedule. Illinois and Northwest dueled 87 years apart – in 1923 and 2010. Trying to fit the regulation field on an east-west direction proved inadequate for the latter game with no slack between the outside border of the east end zone and the right-field bleacher wall. So the Big Ten made a rules concession with both teams' offenses moving in one direction, east to west.

DePaul University also used Wrigley Field as a home field when it fielded a football team in the 1930s. High school teams played occasional games into the 1940s.

Football is so entrenched in Chicago's emotional bones that the game was played in every significant, traditional stadium in town.

Old Comiskey Park, of course, was the home of the Cardinals for the better part of four decades since their inception at the dawn of the NFL. Eventually forced out of town by a market-monopoly-seeking Halas, the Cardinals shifted their final Chicago season to Soldier Field under coach Pop Ivy in 1959. Interestingly, the Big Red played just four of the six home contests on the lakefront. The other two were staged at new Metropolitan Stadium in Bloomington, Minn. The Cardinals headed southwest, instead, for St. Louis in 1960 while the Twin Cities acquired the expansion Vikings in 1961.

Chicago Stadium did its turn, hosting one of the first indoor football contests when the Bears sought refuge from icy Wrigley Field. Adjusting to an 80-yard field on Dec. 18, 1932, the Bears blanked the Portsmouth Spartans 9-0.

Meanwhile, the old Chicago Sting soccer team outdid the Cardinals as the only local pro franchise to call Wrigley Field, Comiskey Park, Soldier Field and Chicago Stadium as home. Soldier Field also hosted the Chicago Spurs pro soccer team in 1967 with some games televised on WGN-TV (Ch. 9) with Lloyd Pettit at the mic, while the Chicago Mustangs soccer club encamped at Comiskey Park.

Kelly: Baseball in Soldier Field?

Longtime Chicago Park District chief Ed Kelly once proposed baseball could be played in Soldier Field when both the Cubs and Sox seemed in the market for new stadiums in the 1980s. But unless Kelly wanted a repeat of the goofy configuration of the Los Angeles Coliseum for the Dodgers' first four seasons in Tinseltown, the national pastime and Soldier Field were two ships passing in the night. Baseball and basketball were the two sports that forever will keep Wrigley Field ahead of Soldier Field in variety of offerings.

Reviving their memorable outdoor court from Berlin's Olympic Stadium in 1951, the Harlem Globetrotters set up shop over the infield at Wrigley for Saturday night, Aug. 21, 1954, after the Cubs had defeated the arch-rival Milwaukee Braves 5-2 earlier in the day before 18,000. With portable lights providing the illumination and 14,000 looking on, the 'Trotters duelled George Mikan's U.S. Stars.

Somehow the portable court didn't rough up the infield. Groundskeepers patched it up for the Sunday afternoon game, with 30,000 arriving to view the Braves and Hank Sauer Day amid the 12-6 Cubs loss.

Wrigley Field also hosted a series of wrestling exhibitions and boxing matches under portable lights in the 1930s and 1940s. None, however, had the glamour of the Gene



Harlem Globetrotters legend Goose Tatum performs the ultimate misdirection play on court. Tatum's last season with the 'Trotters was 1954, when the team played on a portable court at night on Wrigley Field. Photo credit: [Alun Jones](#).

Tunney-Jack Dempsey “long count” fight on Sept. 22, 1927 before 104,943 at Soldier Field. The biggest boxing event of the 1920s produced a \$2.6 million gate, simultaneously the first \$1 million and first \$2 million gate in entertainment history.

Soldier Field’s sheer capacity and U-shaped configuration gave it some other historic advantages over Wrigley Field. Austin beat Leo in the 1937 Prep Bowl before 120,000. And the one event that couldn’t be held at Wrigley Field – stock-car racing – held forth on some nights. WBBM-TV (Ch. 2) televised weekly races in 1953. Early NASCAR events were held in 1956 at Soldier Field.

Still, with the likes of Norge ski jumping, rodeos, political rallies and a burgeoning concert schedule, Wrigley Field will keep its edge on Soldier Field as Chicago’s most historic all-around stadium, enhanced as a movie location for classics like *A League of Their Own*. And the whistling north wind in April and May is as bitter as any “Bears Weather” gales of late autumn.

Plus, have you ever seen one vine grow in Soldier Field?