

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Chicago was a listening ‘desert’ for Scully’s best work

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Vin Scully’s simulcast on Comcast Sports Net Chicago on Sunday, Aug. 28, was a treat for more than the obvious reasons.

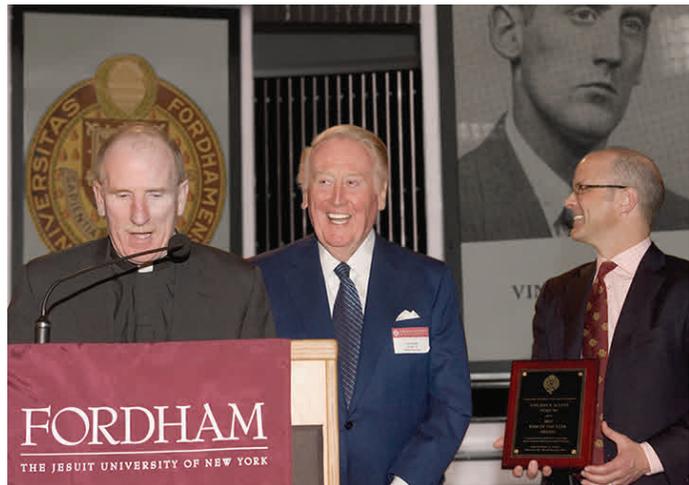
To be sure, seeing Scully do part of his final game involving a Chicago team was must-viewing, showing the old master, while a bit slowed in delivery at 88, still has his broadcast wordsmith and storytelling talents intact.

What most CSN Chicago viewers did not know is they never got nearly enough of Scully at his very best through much of his Ripken-esque 67 seasons behind the Dodgers mic. The Midwest was a kind of “Scully desert” for his 1950s through 1970s radio prime.

Recall how Scully had to explain to the CSN tune-ins why he was doing a radio play-by-play on TV? That was a Los Angeles tradition. As Scully was transferred to the more profitable audience on TV in the last few decades, his play-by-play regularly was simulcast on local radio. So he was never out of his element on a daily basis, using his unparalleled ad-libbing talents to paint the needed word picture to an audience lacking the picture in black and white or color.

Problem was, smack dab in the Midwest, we never really heard Scully doing the Dodgers nightly on radio either in Brooklyn or Los Angeles. Unlike the majority of big-league radio outlets, his stations on either coast could not be easily heard in Chicago.

In Brooklyn, Scully first teamed with Red Barber on WMGM (later WHN), a decent signal not strong enough to be heard in Chicago. His strongest outlet was formerly-clear channel KFI (AM 640), NBC’s longtime Los Angeles affiliate, from 1961 to 1972. Although KFI boomed 50,000 watts and future Cubs announcer Pat Hughes could easily



Honored by his alma mater Fordham University, Vin Scully (center) has experienced the ultimate long and winding road to his farewell season in 2016. Photo credit: [fordhamalumni](http://fordhamalumni.com).

pick it up as a youth in the San Francisco area, it was an ordeal to snare its nighttime skywave in Chicago.

Static instead of Scully on 640 AM

I tried for years as a youth to capture Scully's voice with a 16-transistor radio. Something shrouded by static came in on 640, but you could barely make it out. And never a ball game. I even waited 'til after midnight Sundays, when all Chicago AM stations except WGN signed off for "transmitter maintenance" (changing the tubes). Nothing recognizable on 640, still on the air in LA at 12:05 a.m. here due to the time difference.

Luckier than most, however, was longtime sportswriter-author, golf and hockey maven and broadcast historian Tim Cronin, pulling in Vinnie's dulcet tones late at night in semi-rural Worth in southwest Cook County. Cronin, also a DXer (a hobbyist who tunes in distant radio signals), had the equipment for the task.



In contrast to Vin Scully, Marty Brennaman and the Reds boomed in almost nightly in Chicago on super-powerful WLW.

"I could get KFI most every night beginning two hours after sunset with my six-band Realistic (Radio Shack) radio," Cronin said. "Turn it one way for KFI, rotate 90 degrees or so and CBM Havana would come in. So I could listen to Vin on Dodgers games in the summer and Ken 'Jiggs' McDonald on Kings games in the winter."

I finally got KFI – while driving around Phoenix at night during spring training assignments from 1995 to 2007. Even then, its signal did not compare to the blast-wave from KNBR (680) from San Francisco, further way than LA from the Valley of the Sun.

Scully's other LA radio outlets were lower-powered than KFI. So you could not add him to the otherwise embarrassment of announcing riches even a home radio could pull in at night in and around Chicago: always Bob Uecker with the Brewers on WTMJ, Harry Caray and then Jack Buck and Mike Shannon with the Cardinals on KMOX, Al Michaels and then Marty Brennaman and Joe Nuxhall with the Reds on WLW, Milo Hamilton with the Braves on WSB, Ernie Harwell with the Tigers on WJR, Herb Carneal and Halsey Hall with the Twins on WCCO, Bob Prince and then Milo Hamilton with the Pirates on KDKA, Tom Hamilton with the Indians on WTAM, Byrum Saam and then Harry Kalas with the Phillies on WCAU, and Eric Nadel with the Rangers on WBAP.

When the Rockies started in 1993, their games came through via KOA. That competed with the longest signal from WOAI in San Antonio. You could pick up an occasional Astros game from the latter outlet when the skywave was just right. And if you drove further out into the sticks, among the corn stalks where the founder of this museum owns a country cottage, you might pick up Mets and Yankees games at various times from

WABC and WCBS. These New York 50,000-watters' close proximity on the dial to Chicago's own radio boomers typically obscures their reception close to town.

What was lost were potential listeners to Scully's two most memorable radio calls.

Duplicated innumerable times since Sept. 9, 1965 was his ninth-inning poetry-in-motion description of Sandy Koufax's perfect game against the Cubs. That may have been the most lyrical single half-inning by an announcer in history.

Calling the time for posterity

I was fortunate to get Scully to sit still for a few minutes in Wrigley Field in taping an hour-long tribute to him on my syndicated "Diamond Gems" radio show in 1995. Scully recounted how he kept calling out the time – 9:45 p.m., 9:47 p.m., etc – as Koufax mowed down the Cubs. After Harvey Kuenn struck out to finish the perfecto, Scully made a final time call and placed the feat in "The City of the Angels." That was the ultimate courtesy. Every time any of his pitchers crafted a no-hitter, Scully took care to get his engineer to record the final three outs as a souvenir for the hurler. This time, he was so beyond any mortal announcer the Dodgers sold the top of the ninth recording as a souvenir at the ballpark starting in 1966.

But the only part of the Scully broadcast heard in Chicago was the Jerry Doggett interview with Koufax beginning just before midnight Central time. WGN crossed wires with KFI, with Vince Lloyd introducing the segment, to carry Koufax's comments to the Midwest and beyond. Fortunately, the Ring brothers in Galesburg taped the interview off 720 and we have a cleaned-up, as best as possible, version.

Nearly a decade later, on April 8, 1974, Scully again outclassed his competition in calling Henry Aaron's 715th homer. Reportedly, Milo Hamilton rehearsed how he'd handle the play by play on WSB. Curt Gowdy was at the NBC mic for the national TV broadcast. But Scully's version was the least circulated, aired on 5,000-watt KABC-Radio and the Dodgers' network. As soon as Aaron connected, Scully let the crowd roar for several minutes without comment. Then, when he put it all into perspective, the objective reporter kicked in. Scully told of the spectacle and, if the truth be known, the breakthrough of a "black man in the Deep South" getting deafening roars breaking the record of Babe Ruth, baseball's greatest icon.

To be sure, Chicago-area viewers watched Scully, via the more-word-parsimonious video medium, describe the 1959 Sox-Dodgers World Series, Fred Lynn's first-ever All-Star grand-slam homer at the 1983 MidSummer Classic at old Comiskey Park, the first official Wrigley Field night game on Aug. 9, 1988 and part of the NLCS between the Cubs and Giants in 1989. Oddly enough, Scully's assignment to the No. 1 NBC Game of the Week in 1984 allowed Bob Costas to roar his "Do you believe it?" call for Ryne Sandberg's homers off Bruce Sutter on the backup contest.

He called one other no-hitter involving a Chicago team. Working the lead NBC Saturday game in 1984, he described Tigers ace Jack Morris' hitless gem against the White Sox on April 7.

Scully's radio baseball calls easily heard in Chicago were limited to his CBS-Radio assignments calling the All-Star Game from 1977 to 1982 and the World Series from 1979 to 1982.

His durability and devotion to his craft was under-rated.

23 innings on the air in 2 cities in 1 day

He broadcast a Cubs-Cards Game of the Week on June 3, 1989 in St. Louis. The Cubs lost in 10. After the game, he flew to Houston to pick up the Dodgers for the Sunday game. However, the Saturday night contest went into extra innings. Instead of settling in at the hotel or going out on the town, Scully raced to the Astrodome. He broadcast the final 13 innings of a 22-inning game, the ultimate relief man. Already a superstar, Scully thought nothing of spelling his put-upon broadcast colleagues. He ended up calling 23 innings in two cities on the same day.

On his Sunday simulcast with CSN Chicago, Scully repeated his decades-old affinity for Wrigley Field. He's called memorable Dodgers games at Clark and Addison. Koufax established the ballpark strikeout record with 18 in 1962 that stood until Kerry Wood's 20 in 1998. Ken Holtzman took a no-hitter against Koufax into the ninth inning on Sept. 25, 1966, then hung on for a 2-1 victory. But on Aug. 17-18, 1982, his endurance ability kicked in locally. The Cubs and Dodgers spread a 21-inning game interrupted by darkness over two days. A close Eric Gregg call at home plate favoring the Dodgers still resonates.

Scully truly transcends baseball history. Who would have thought the junior announcer at New York's Polo Grounds for Bobby Thomson's "Shot Heard 'Round the World" on Oct. 3, 1951 would eventually rank above all in the broadcast pantheon?

Giants announcer Russ Hodges' call "The Giants Win the Pennant! The Giants Win the Pennant!" is the gold standard of excitement. Barber's Dodgers broadcast was unearthed several decades ago. Harwell did the video play-by-play on NBC on the first coast-to-coast live sports broadcast, then later handled the post-game radio show in the Giants' clubhouse. Caray's presence at the playoff game was established decades later. And there was the 23-year-old Scully, helping out.

All made the broadcasters' wing of the Hall of Fame. Six years later, in 1957, Scully's beloved Dodgers departed for the West Coast, and he sounded none too happy about it on the final radio broadcast of a Giants-Dodgers game in the Big Apple. Little could he realize like Caray coming to Wrigley Field, Scully's fame would be boosted far beyond his wildest dreams when LA fans listened to him en masse via transistor radios at both the LA Coliseum and Dodger Stadium. Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley's near-blackout of TV coverage provided an exclusive, and the most perfect, venue for Scully's talents.



By blacking out all but a handful of Dodgers road games on TV, team owner Walter O'Malley created the perfect broadcast medium to rivet fans' attention on Vin Scully's wordsmith talents.

That friendly Fordham-trained voice turned out to be one of the greatest soundtracks ever in baseball, even if it faded out at night before reaching all but a handful of determined DXers' radios in the Midwest.