



Top 5 games of WGN-TV's 70 seasons of baseball will be talked about for all time

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Good thing WGN is touting its 70th season of televised baseball coverage.

It's about time Good Ol' Channel 9 shout it from the rooftops (but not the satellite anymore). The station, headquartered two miles west of Wrigley Field since 1961, often has let its anniversaries pass without any celebration. Carrying the Cubs straight through and the White Sox with some key interruptions since 1948, WGN may have the longest continuous relationship with baseball of any broadcast outlet in the country. I'm pretty sure of that. If not, please call me on an errant fact.



Vince Lloyd (left) and Jack Brickhouse were pre-Harry Caray mainstays on WGN's coverage of the Cubs and Sox.

WGN is woven solidly into the fabric of Chicago baseball. The cult of present-day Cubs fandom was largely developed through two waves: Baby Boom through Generation X kids running home from school in the Chicago area to watch the tail-end of games and nationwide via the former superstition carriage. In contrast, the White Sox lost part of what was once a competitive fan base due to the team prematurely switching to a UHF outlet before the Chicago market was significantly connected to the higher television signal frequencies.

There are WGN games we cannot forget. I could amass a list of a Top 20 and provoke argument. Beauty here is truly in the eye of the beholder. So we will go more in-depth in a Top 5 rating of historic telecasts, then give you a few facts and figures afterward:

- 1. Don Cardwell's no-hitter vs. the Cardinals, May 15, 1960.** The images of the oldest preserved sports videotape in Chicago history are the closest to a Wrigley Field engulfed in a old-time World Series celebration. Perhaps 8,000 stormed the field after Moose Moryn made his running, shoetop catch of Stretch Joe Cunningham's liner to left to end the no-no. 'Twas a near-miracle the coverage went off without a hitch, given the mob of celebrants interfering with the much more bulky technology of 1960.

A story exists behind the actual telecast and preservation of the tape. The game, Cardwell's first as a Cub after a trade from the Phillies, took place one month after WGN began its color telecasts of baseball. Camera operators had to build their upper bodies to swivel the new 300-pound RCA TK-41 cameras, especially with the "coverage cameras" following batted balls from hitter to fielder stationed in the upper deck behind third base. But even trickier with the conversion to color was a shading problem with balls being lost hit into the shadows late in games. Bill Lotzer, who directed the Cardwell telecast, recalled engineers concocted a hand crank to compensate for the quick video change in shading. The gizmo would come in handy given Moryn made his catch in the shadows at the end of the second game of a doubleheader.

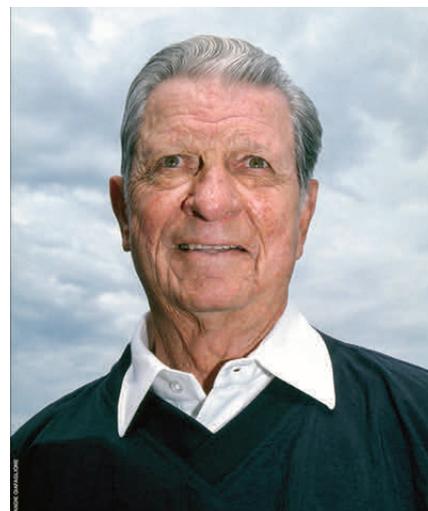
Vince Lloyd's excited play-by-play of pinch hitter Stan Musial striking out to end the eighth still gives you chills. Lotzer faithfully kept the center-fielder camera on the Cardwell-Cunningham shot until the latter sliced the ball to left. Punching up the high-third shot, Lotzer's camera guy did not let down showing the ball, Moryn and his glove inches above the grass converging.

Then it was up for grabs. Lloyd and then-assistant director Arne Harris (sans toupee), aided by a couple of Andy Frain ushers, held back hundreds of celebrants pressing forward to snare Cardwell for the post-game interview near the Cubs dugout. Cardwell begged to escape to the safety of the clubhouse. When Lloyd let him go, he found the happy crowd had snapped his mic cord.

Meanwhile, the camera operators continued to show a sea of fans all over the field, including a group trying to dig up the mound. Jack Brickhouse kept his cool, ad-libbing about the wild scene as sidekick Jack Rosenberg corralled NL president Warren Giles and Cubs GM John Holland as guests. Rosenberg later had presence of mind to set the half hour of Cardwell tape aside in his office from the general stock of tape, then a two-year-old WGN technology, to preserve it for all time. Normally, programs after their scheduled airings would be erased on the \$600 spools of tape, which would then be recycled for other shows.

Sox clinch the pennant in Cleveland, Sept. 22, 1959. Just like pulling off a color telecast, WGN scrambling to air an unscheduled road game was a big deal in the **2.** still-young medium. WGN did not air any road telecasts until Aug. 30, 1958, a Cubs game in St. Louis. Original TV listings called for the usual evening news and syndicated reruns for 7 p.m. on Sept. 22. When station executives could pinpoint a possible clincher for the first Sox pennant since 1919, they acted quickly.

Unfortunately, only audio recordings of Brickhouse's play by play and newsreel footage were preserved. See the Cardwell no-no. Longtime station sports exec Jack Jacobson confirmed games were taped for newscast highlights in '59 – but somehow the Sox clincher was not preserved (neither was any of WGN's carriage of NBC's World Series telecasts).



"Handy Andy" Pafko was Chicago baseball's best player in WGN's first season of telecasts in 1948 (Photo courtesy of Andie Giafagione.)



WGN's behemoth TK-41 color cameras, shown at old Comiskey Park, added another crucial dimension to baseball telecasts in 1960.

You can imagine the mounting tension of Chicago viewers as the tight game snaked toward its conclusion. Brickhouse went as guttural as his vocal cords permitted to call Luis Aparicio's double play on Vic Power's grounder: "The White Sox have won it! The White Sox have won it! The 40-year wait has now ended!" Brickhouse urged viewers to sound their noisemakers. Unfortunately, many non-viewers heard the loudest Chicago noisemakers of them all – civil defense sirens wailing to celebrate – and suspected a Soviet attack.

Brickhouse assured there "will be a dressing room show tonight," with Lou

Boudreau the lead interviewer as bulky cameras and cables crammed into the visitors' locker room. But his night's work wasn't done. In the wee hours, Brickhouse broadcast live on WGN-Radio from the Sox's prop plane heading back to Chicago, staying on the air and sticking his mic out the pilot's window catching the welcome-home roars from thousands as the plane taxied at Midway Airport. Obviously, that was a different time. Now the only broadcasts from planes are passengers being dragged out of their seats!

Cubs clinch NL East over Pirates in Pittsburgh, Sept. 24, 1984. WGN would take a Cubs clincher anywhere, anytime. The station finally got to televise the

3. nailing of the much-anticipated NL East title as the surprise powerhouse team reached its peak.

With the clincher a probability and Brickhouse off play by play for three seasons already, WGN and Tribune Co. were classy by putting Brickhouse in the booth with Harry Caray and Steve Stone. He was thus able to enjoy Rick Sutcliffe's strikeout of Joe Orsulak for the final out and the resulting fans/players celebration on the field.

But the best touch was the proverbial "dressing-room show," still seen on YouTube. A champagne-drenched, short-sleeved Brickhouse was put to work interviewing celebrants, including a joyous Dallas Green. Again, the world was a contrast from the look, but don't touch, clubhouse decorum of the 21st century. The camera's eye revealed a well-known media member or two taking swigs from the assembled champagne. Most ominous were the smiling presences of Trib execs Stan Cook and John Madigan, who would be key meddlers in future years in the undoing of this night's long-term positive after-effects.

Phillies 23, Cubs 22, May 17, 1979, Wrigley Field. Of course WGN's crew would be on duty for the second highest-scoring game in big-league history. And the

4. game kept giving – the telecast was the first-ever rerun in full on the station the following off-season.

The scoring orgy, more robust than many football games, made for great visuals. Phils starter Randy Lerch homered in the first; in the bottom of the inning, Cubs reliever Donnie Moore slashed a run-scoring triple. The Phils lead 21-6 in the fifth before the

Cubs stormed back to tie at 22 all in the eighth. Mike Schmidt, otherwise known as the God of Wrigley Field with his 50 career homers, decided it with a homer off a 3-2 Bruce Sutter pitch in the 10th. Three years earlier, another 10th-inning Schmidt homer, his fourth straight in the game, was the deciding clout in an 18-16 Phillies victory at Clark and Addison.

Credit has to be given not only to Brickhouse, but also Boudreau for keeping track of all the runs and hits. WGN worked its crew hard between 1976 and 1979. After Jim West left as Brickhouse's No. 2 man, the station did not replace him. Instead, Boudreau or Lloyd shifted over from radio for middle-inning relief of Brickhouse.

By the time the game was rerun, Milo Hamilton was hired as Brickhouse's No. 2 man and helped host the telecast.

Ken Holtzman no-hits the Braves 3-0 at Wrigley Field, Aug. 19, 1969. Brickhouse and Lloyd Pettit had to be on their toes for this **5.** gem. Holtzman hurled a rare no-no with not a single strikeout – 27 batted balls for outs.

The Cubs pulled off several great plays, most outstanding being Billy Williams backing into the vines in the left-field well to snare Henry Aaron's sure homer in the seventh. The Aaron clout, hardest-hit ball in his career by his own 2013 estimation, ran into a wall of wind after passing over a bleacher row or two before taking a left turn into Williams' glove. And after Aaron grounded to a nervous Glenn Beckert for the final out, the WGN crew once again had to fight the crowd to get their man. Another big mob stormed the field, but they still got Holtzman on the air as usual.

Along the way, WGN pioneered both technical achievements and the personality side of baseball that are now standard shots in baseball telecasts.

After necessity forced the station to put a camera in center field for a 1951 Little League game at Chicago's Thillens Stadium, WGN adopted the shot for big-league games. Worries about interference with the catcher's signs kept most other stations from using the center-field shot for almost a decade.

The colorizing of games, despite the initial technical problems, certainly personalized baseball. WLWT in Cincinnati was the first local station to ever air a game in color in 1959, but WGN soon after offered all 77 Cubs home games and more than 50 Sox home telecasts, all during the daytime. Those color images certainly brought another dimension to baseball-watching as consumers acquired their first tinted sets throughout the 1960s.



The WGN crew in the mid-1980s. Top row from left, Lou Boudreau, Harry Caray and Steve Stone. Bottom row from left, Arne Harris and Jack Rosenberg.

Multiple Emmy Award-winner Harris, who succeeded Lotzer in the WGN truck, really brought the personality of the ballpark home to the viewer with his “hat shots,” images of pretty females and kids. Blending those shots with Caray in 1982 made a big show even bigger.

Brickhouse’s Tenth Inning interviews of the biggest names in the game were not just filler. When the natural Republican from Peoria welcomed players of color and different national origin, like Minnie Minoso, to the post-game chatter, he portrayed them as real people and cut through prejudice and stereotypes.

And they don’t make commercials like they did in the mid-20th century. Hamms’ “From the Land of Sky Blue Waters” with its cartoon bear will reverberate lifelong for anyone who watched the commercials. Danley’s Garage Co. is forever remembered for its Leadoff Man sponsorship along with the pre-game show’s baseball-y, Americana opening theme: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J99koXCYOMU>. A live tiger strolling through a gas station to plug Oklahoma Oil preceded Lloyd’s live bumper promoting “surging power” for the hepped-up petrol.

Talk of a Cubs Network dominates the futurism of Cubs TV when present rights deals expire after 2019. But the betting line here is WGN reaches its 75th season doing baseball, as usual. You can’t keep quality and tradition down.



The post-game interview on the field after memorable games has been a WGN staple. Here Vince Lloyd (left) talks to Cubs pitcher Chuck Rainey, whose no-hitter was spoiled by the Reds’s Eddie Milner with two out in the ninth in 1983.