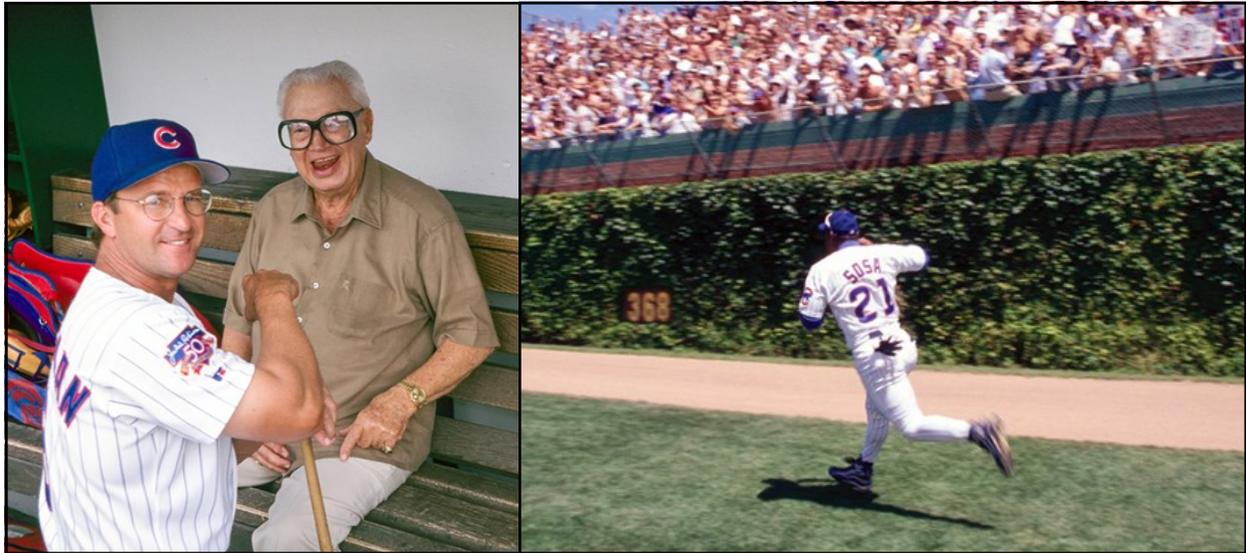


BASEBALL UNDER GLASS



The bread and circuses of Andie Giafaglione's stint as a Cubs photographer was led by Harry Caray, left with manager Jim Riggleman in Caray's final season in 1997, and Sammy Sosa (right) making his usual top-of-the-first sprint past the right-field bleachers fans.

Photographer brings more accessible, familial Wrigley Field era of the 1990s to life

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Before one interrogates Andie Giafaglione about the 15,000 photo images of Wrigley Field in and around the Second Clinton Administration, the curiosity swells about the title of her new program:

“Searching for the Pink Poodle: Life With the Cubs 1996-99.”

Hmmm. The Pink Poodle was the old, cozy press dining room on the second floor of the cramped front office prior to the opening of the present media eatery upstairs at the dawn of the Nineties. By the time Philadelphia native Giafaglione arrived at Wrigley Field as chief photographer Steve Green's assistant, in 1996, the Poodle had long been turned into a conference room.

Ghosts and fading memories were the only traces left of Leo Durocher's and George Halas' post-game repasts in the Poodle, and press conferences handing over the manager job from Charlie Grimm to Lou Boudreau and Ernie Banks' Hall of Fame induction.

“I was a student of the game,” Giafaglione said. “One of the phrases thrown around was, ‘Oh, that was left by the Pink Poodle.’ Finally I got stories about it.”



The past and future converged on Wrigley Field. At left is Jack Brickhouse emceeing a pre-game event, with all-time Cubs hero Andy Pafko and clubhouse caudillo Yosh Kawano watching. All three were together at Wrigley 50 years previously. Meanwhile, Kerry Wood, with a semi-cast on his recent Tommy John surgery-repaired right arm, watches batting practice in 1999. Wood went on to pitch the majority of seasons for the Cubs through 2012.

“Searching for the Pink Poodle” ended up a catchy title about looking for something that may not still exist. But the storyteller still must endure the quest. Giafaglione never captured a Cubs World Series on film during her time. But the narrative conveyed in her massive photo archive, winnowed down for public consumption, has a bit part to play in the glory that was November 2 (or was it early on the 3rd?), 2016.

Baseball fans on their way to and from Wrigley Field can easily access Giafaglione’s show. A representative sample of Giafaglione’s treasure trove of images that bring the pre-millennial Cubs Universe to life can be glimpsed in the entrance of the Budlong Woods Public Library, 5630 N. Lincoln Ave., on Chicago’s Far North Side through April 29. The likes of Sammy Sosa, Hall of Famer Billy Williams, Jack Brickhouse, Jim Bullinger with his son on Family Day and ordinary fans are featured.

More about Giafaglione and her Cubs collection can be accessed at www.okaygoodindustries.com.

The Pink Poodle era is long gone. And it’s almost a generation since Giafaglione ranged all over the ballpark, from the bleachers to the dugout, to visually chronicle life with the Cubs, live and in color. You would not recognize the ballpark environs today compared to her time period. The place has been transformed into a moneymaking machine, ready to corral post-championship dollars from the masses, and justifiably so, by a Ricketts family ownership that has a right to recoup revenue from its original nine-figure investment. The Cubs of the 1990s in contrast were an under-performing, under-developing, under-budgeted and understaffed operation not befitting its status as a nationally popular, major-market team, same as today.

Wild-card season sandwiched between spectacular losing

The dramatic 90-win wild-card year of 1998, fueled by Sammy Sosa’s home-run race with Mark McGwire and Kerry Wood’s “Kid K” whiff outings, was an outlier compared

to the seasons preceding and after. The 1996 Cubs, flitting around .500 most of the way, finished 2-14. Then, amid disaster projections of an early-season 1997 schedule filled with the Braves and beefed-up Marlins, began a franchise-worst 0-14. Not even the worst of the 1950s and early 1960s Cubs were a collective 2-28. Then, in 1999, a 32-23 start simply melted away like ice cream left out on a 100-degree day. The Cubs went on to lose 95 games, by far last in the NL Central, the low point being a team-record-bad 6-24 August. The pitching staff finished with a Rockies-level 5.27 ERA, allowing 10 or more runs in 25 games. Included were 19-12, 14-1 and 21-8 losses in succession July 1-3.

Still, the Poodle era and the atmosphere of 1996-99 were building blocks of what the Cubs enjoy today. Remember Anthony Rizzo's Grant Park statement that all past Cubs had a hand in the World Series title? We'll add all the fans, ballpark workers and the majority of reporters. None were lovable losers as per the same lazy media stereotype that pounded billy goat curses, black cats and later Steve Bartman into the collective Cubs consciousness. All were World Series-worthy with the exception of meddling Wrigley family and Tribune Co. executives along with too many of the top team baseball executives.

Giafaglione's photos capture a Cubs life that was looser and more accessible than today. Relationships with the well-paid (\$1 million was a nice salary) athletes were possible, and were actually lauded by a few team officials. But on the other side of 2000, things began to tighten up. Worried about stalkers and sensation-mongering media, players began keeping their distance. Some would not even confirm the River North neighborhood in which they lived in-season. Managers became available only via organized pre- and post-game press conferences that sometimes induced stage fright. Sweet Lou Piniella said he was taken out of his comfort zone speaking to the media clot at a table with all lights lasered onto him, instead of leaning back in an office chair in his long johns.

Manager Jim Riggleman met the media post-game at the bottom of the stairs leading to his office, a concession to its tiny square footage. Successor Don Baylor continued



Eternal sights at Wrigley Field. A real old-timer, sports columnist Bill Gleason (left), then 76, chomps on his cigar in the Cubs dugout in 1998. Gleason began the famed "Sportswriters" shows on radio and TV Meanwhile, the traditional father-and-son baseball relationship, with junior wielding a pre-digital camera (right), was alive and well, admitted for much more affordable prices, two decades ago.



Andie Giafaglione, then a young photographer and a woman in a man's world, was welcomed into the Cubs fold (left) by manager Jim Riggleman. Giafaglione (right) today with her photo exhibition at the Budlong Woods Public Library four miles northwest of Wrigley Field.

the practice in 2000. If one knew Riggleman well enough, a reporter could chat with the affable baseball lifer, at his invitation, in his office until 25 minutes before the first pitch. A media member also could chew the fat pre-game in the coaches' room with Billy Williams and Tony Muser. GM Ed Lynch would stick his head in and spot the reporter. Nothing was said. And when clubhouse dissent from prominent Cubs about lack of trade-deadline deals bubbled up in 1996, a reporter was granted quick access through front-office stalwart Arlene Gill to Lynch and team president Andy MacPhail, together in their office, for a response.

After Kerry Wood struck out 20 in one 1998 game, he was hemmed in by a media mob at his locker by the clubhouse entrance. During and after Sammy Sosa's home-run duel with Mark McGwire, he handled three waves of media – first TV, then radio and finally print – at his locker rather than via a press conference.

Players played pranks on reporters, heisting their microphones and notebooks. Mark Grace had no problem flipping the bird at Giafaglione as she clicked her shutter in the dugout. Mickey Morandini, who along with wife Peg became a Giafaglione favorite, also offered his own bird to an approaching ghost-writer of his weekly newspaper column. No one took offense. It was all traditional baseball byplay with an update. Women like Giafaglione, and sportswriters Carrie Muskat and Tony Ginnetti were readily accepted amid the boys club since they were regularly in attendance and knew the game cold. Supervising it all was media relations director Sharon Panno, the first woman in MLB history to hold down that job for an extended run (15 years).

Not too long ago, the Chicago Tribune's Paul Sullivan relayed a comment from a front-office veteran. Tribune Co., an often soulless corporation, ran the Cubs like a family. Now the Ricketts, a close family if there ever was one in baseball, runs the team like a corporation.

Working in 2 separate ownership eras

Giafaglione agrees with that assessment as "really well-put." After her stint as a photographer, she stationed herself in the organ loft with Gary Pressy to run the LED

scoreboard from 2003 to 2012, working two-plus years into the Ricketts Era. So she can accurately compare the eras first-hand.

Another way to sketch the up-and-often down Cubs of 1996-99 was big-time but accessible. “That’s a great way to describe the times,” Giafaglione said. Fan appeal was entrenched via the team’s WGN superstation flagship since 1979, and a Wrigley Field that drew not much under the 3 million-plus season standard of today. Some WGN telecasts did not switch from the over-the-air, free (to non-cable subscribers) to the old Fox Sports Chicago until 1999.

Meanwhile, fans who wandered into Bernie’s tavern, on the southwest corner of Clark and Waveland, could rub shoulders post-game with closer Rod Beck, a true man of the people, in 1998. I taped most of a “Diamond Gems” radio show with Beck at Bernie’s. Years later, trying a minor-league comeback, Beck lived in a camper and similarly entertained fans after games. Beck died at 38 in 2007, his ex-wife suspecting drugs having been the culprit. The good unfortunately do die young

Now a resident of the North Center neighborhood, two miles from the ballpark, Giafaglione knew she possessed a massive photo archive. “I had them in boxes and bags,” she said. Throughout the last five years, she began editing them down to a “manageable collection.”

As the Cubs soared toward their destiny in 2016, friend Joe Shanahan, who owned the Metro niteclub on Clark Street near the ballpark, began talking with Giafaglione about a photo presentation. Eventually, 35 images were displayed at the Gingerman tavern by the Metro. Space considerations winnowed the collection down to 10 for the Budlong Woods Library.

Like other veterans of the era, Giafaglione should still have a role with the Cubs. But the nature of the much-expanded team workforce, now headquartered in a big office building on the northwest side of Wrigley Field, has changed from the family-type days of 1996. Among other assignments, Giafaglione does design work and fine-arts photography.

In crafting her exhibit, Giafaglione keeps the freedom she enjoyed roaming Wrigley Field, winning friends and influencing people in an era that featured everything but a pennant. At this museum, we don’t hold anything back from our archives. There’s a logical encore or three for Giafaglione with the visual stories she could tell every time she clicked her shutter.



This photo was not part of Andie Giafaglione’s collection, but rightly illustrates the mindset and byplay of Wrigley Field life at the time the photographer has captured in her program. Grade schooler Laura Castle meets Harry Caray for the first time in the WGN booth in 1996. Children were not an uncommon sight at the pressbox level in the more relaxed atmosphere of the time.

WMAQ's Berman another dissenter on Cubs repeat

Recently, AM 670 The Score's Bruce Levine became an uncommon dissenter, suggesting the Cubs will not repeat as World Series champs. He predicts a loss in the NLCS against the San Francisco Giants with ex-Cub Jeff Samardzija a surprise relief hero.



Mike Berman

Bruce Levine

Now Levine has company in WMAQ-TV sportscaster Mike Berman, a suburban Northbrook native who recently returned to work in his home market.

“I know this won’t break any news, but the Cubs are more than capable of repeating,” Berman said. “In fact, with strong hitting, pitching defense, and the ‘goat’ off their back, they should repeat. But here’s the thing – repeating as World Series champions is really, really, really difficult.

“In Major League Baseball history, a team has won back-to-back titles only 14 times. Since 1979, it’s only happened twice: the Blue Jays (1992 and 1993) and the Yankees (three in a row from 1998-2000). Baseball has so many variables, so many opportunities for injury and the most taxing season of all the major sports. While I love the depth of their lineup, the wizardry of their defense and the talent in their rotation, I predict the Cubs will come up short of repeating as World Series champs.”