



Wrigley reverses original 1941 plan for lights, but crimps Cubs in the process

*By George Castle, CBM historian
(Second of a three-part series)*

[Read Part One](#)

[Read Part Three](#)

Are the most difficult conditions in which to break a 104-year championship drought worth the sunshiny image of Wrigley Field and its enduring appeal?

On one hand, Wrigley Field possesses a singular cache as a day-game paradise and top-five Chicago tourist attraction mixing baseball, beer and babes serenaded daily in the seventh inning.

“There’s nothing like being at Wrigley Field,” said Steve Strauss, owner of the nearby Sluggers bar, earlier in 2012. “This day-game thing, it’s a party, it’s a happening. The atmosphere is so festive.”

On the other hand, Wrigley Field offers perhaps the toughest playing conditions in the majors with restrictions on the total number of night games, positioning the Cubs as radically different from every other team. The still heavily-day-game routine is made worse with antiquated facilities that have always been a drag on the host team’s game preparation.

The combination of the schedule and cramped quarters will throw a perceptible roadblock into Cubs president Theo Epstein’s plans to lift his team to elite status. Epstein has financial resources and fan loyalty surpassed by few other teams. Yet same daytime-heavy schedule throws his players’ sleeping, eating and game-preparation habits into upheaval on a weekly basis throughout the season.

The backstory of Epstein’s quandary goes back more than 70 years.

Longtime owner Phil Wrigley crafted an artificial decision – done on his usual whim – to not keep in step with the rest of baseball by installing lights for night games by the late 1940s. In the long run, Wrigley inadvertently achieved his goal of making Wrigley Field an attraction not dependent on a winning team. He wanted fans to enjoy a “picnic” at the ballpark.



Philip K. Wrigley, 1917

The reality was even better than Wrigley envisioned. The mid-1980s forward produced an often-raucous party where Wrigley Field – and not necessarily its team -- is a destination for Chicagoans and out-of-town visitors alike.

The eccentric, contrarian Wrigley rightly projected he couldn't win every year, but even his baseball savvy-lacking soul never figured his team would not win well into the 21st Century. Wrigley's goal for the ballpark he lovingly maintained in tribute to his father, William Wrigley, Jr., began to be achieved about seven years after his 1977 death. But he already had laid the groundwork for both sides of the night-game question decades earlier when he reversed his original 1941 plan to install lights.

Night baseball grew out of advances in technology and baseball owners' gambit to boost badly sagging attendance during the Great Depression. Cincinnati's Crosley Field was the ground-breaker in 1935 after lights had been successfully employed at the game's lower levels. The cash-poor White Sox erected their permanent light towers at old Comiskey Park, throwing the switch on Aug. 14, 1939 against the St. Louis Browns.

1941 lights plan followed Cubs attendance declines

Eyeing the trend, Wrigley opted to install lights for the 1942 season. Depression-dampened Cubs attendance, having enjoyed a brief revival in the comeback 1938 pennant season, began sliding again going into the Forties. So the plan for night games was a cause-and-effect action by the owner.

But when Pearl Harbor prompted the United States' entry into World War II, Wrigley patriotically donated the steel he had stored under the ballpark stands for the war effort. He still eyed lights, though, applying to the War Department not long afterward to light up Wrigley Field with wooden standards. He was rejected.

Wrigley's interest in the appeal of evening games was proved on Friday, June 25, 1943. The ballpark's start time, without lights, was set at 6 p.m. just past the summer solstice. The Cubs and Cardinals somehow squeezed out enough residual daylight to finish a 6-0 Chicago victory by about 8:20 p.m.

The attendance on the hot night was 6,620. The gate was no rousing endorsement of the game time, but the Cubs' 22-36 record coming in was likely more of a factor. The Cubs' fortunes had been in steep decline since Gabby Hartnett's "homer in the gloamin'" in 1938. Wrigley's eccentric meddling and poor front-office moves took their toll, all detailed in a big mid-1943 *Saturday Evening Post* article by Stanley Frank.

Many fans not already in uniform were tied up with three-shift war-plant work. Their mindset was still attuned to taking advantage of the traditional 2-for-1 deals of Sunday doubleheaders, when team's typically drew the lion's share of each homestand's attendance. The Sunday doubleheader two days later between the Cubs and Cardinals drew a standing-room-only throng of more than 37,000.

If the modest crowd for the only regular-season Friday night game in Wrigley Field history put doubts in the owner's mind about lights, they likely grew when the Cubs won a

surprise pennant in 1945. The sagging attendance jumped nearly 400,000 to climb over 1 million – then a comfortable team benchmark for profitably.

With the veterans home and near-normalcy restored, the Wrigley Field gate jumped over 1.3 million for a third-place team in 1946. Attendance then climbed another 23,000 to 1,364,039 – second highest in team history – for the collapsing 69-85 sixth-place Cubs in 1947. A precursor to future ballpark appeal not linked to wins and losses came in 1948 when 1,237,792 paid to watch the last-place 64-90 Cubs. Meanwhile, the 1948 season represented the end of all-daytime schedules elsewhere in baseball. The Yankees and Tigers, last of the afternoon-only laggards, installed lights.

During the next three seasons, the Cubs did not finish above seventh place. But attendance stayed comfortably above 1 million until dipping under 900,000 in 1951. A hot start and slugger Hank Sauer's MVP season was enough to ensure a surprise 77-77, fifth-place and another 1 million gate in 1952, further putting lights out of Wrigley's mind. There was a significant ballpark change in '52, but only as a result of day baseball. The center-field bleachers in the batter's line of sight were finally closed off. Leading the pressure from players was the Cardinals' Stan Musial, citing the blinding effect of fans' white shirts.



Fans may have fun in the sun in Wrigley Field's famed bleachers, but the same schedule often does no favors for their pinstriped heroes. Photo credit: [Wally Gobetz](#)

When Wrigley made up his mind, he could hardly be moved off his stance. Cubs fortunes bottomed out through 1963. Attendance reached the 900,000 mark just once. But the inertia of the owner's day-baseball stance became ingrained.

Non-baseball events staged at night with portable lights

Suddenly, Wrigley adopted the excuse that installing lights would upset the surrounding Lake View neighborhood, debating that point with night-game-advocating fans via "Voice From the Grandstand" newspaper debates. Wrigley, in fact, talked out of both sides of his mouth. He had rented out the ballpark at night since 1934 for boxing, wrestling and basketball exhibitions under portable lights, drawing as many as 35,000.

On Saturday, Aug. 21, 1954, the Cubs played the Milwaukee Braves at Wrigley Field. After the game, workmen installed a portable basketball court over the infield along with the portable lights. The Harlem Globetrotters played an evening outdoor game against a college all-star team. The court and lights were then removed, and somehow

the infield was readied for a Sunday day game with the Braves in which Sauer was honored.

Wrigley cost himself dearly in lost attendance revenue with the all-day schedule. Fans typically did not buy season tickets in the mid-20th Century, nor would they play hooky from work or school in large numbers to attend a baseball game. A team's success at the gate was typically tied to its won-lost record, attracting walk-up customers.

Rarely did the Cubs draw more than 10,000 for weekday games. Sunday single-game contests and doubleheaders were their only salvation at the gate. However, weeknight games might have doubled the crowd counts with fathers taking their families for an evening out or businessmen going to the ballpark directly from the office.

Proof of the attendance losses from lack of Wrigley lights came two Fridays apart late during the lost 1965 season. On Aug. 20, a total of just 7,936 showed up to watch the eighth-place Cubs battle the Astros at Wrigley Field. But on Aug. 27, 90 miles north at County Stadium in Milwaukee, some 77 busloads of Chicago fans turned out to boost the crowd to 20,723 for an 8 p.m. game with the Braves in their final Brewtown season.

The faithful proved they'd even be willing to trek an hour and a half each way to watch their bedraggled heroes after dark. But duck out of the office or eighth-grade classroom? Not a chance. The turnstiles moved slowly for weekday games, dipping into the embarrassing 600,000 range in 1957, 1961, 1962, 1965 and 1966 in the country's second-largest market.

Wrigley takes loss to make gain in broadcast rights fees

Even more potential Cubs revenue was frittered away when Wrigley granted his broadcast rights to WGN-Radio and TV, and also WIND-Radio, for far under market value.



Jack Brickhouse helmed Cubs daytime telecasts that were ratings winners and financial bonanzas for WGN-TV with the modest rights fees owner Phil Wrigley charged.

The owner had taken a page from the dynamic duo of William Wrigley, Jr. and team president William L. Veeck, father of Bill Veeck. Both Williams believed in the free promotion radio broadcasts provided in the 1920s and 1930s. The Cubs set a major-league attendance record of nearly 1.5 million fans in 1929, a mark partially attributed by the elder Wrigley and Veeck to broadcast exposure whetting the appetite for ticket-buying. As many as seven radio stations simultaneously broadcast the Cubs in 1931. None were charged a rights fee until 1934.

In 1949, Phil Wrigley allowed three of the four TV stations on the air in Chicago to broadcast the Cubs at the same time. Their only fee was \$5,000 apiece for construction of broadcast booths and camera positions. Wrigley picked up most of the tab, though, spending some \$100,000 to accommodate the TV stations.

In the first year of Cubs rights for WGN-Radio in 1958, 10 years after WGN-TV began airing the team, the Tribune Co. flagship paid

just \$150,000 to Wrigley. Cubs-Sox TV voice Jack Brickhouse, doubling as WGN sports director, told station boss Ward Quall the radio broadcasts would run in the red the first year, then make money “forevermore.” Tribune Co. became the de facto minority Cubs owner with both guaranteed six-month programming and an annual profit center.

In contrast, the White Sox garnered more money from their broadcast outlets. By 1962, the White Sox collected an estimated \$1 million in rights fees from WGN-TV and the old WCFL-Radio (now WMVP/ESPN-1000), while the Cubs snared about \$600,000 from WGN-TV and Radio. WGN aired some 25 to 30 more Cubs games than Sox games, as all Wrigley Field day games were telecast, while all Sox night games at Comiskey Park were blacked out.

Phil Wrigley again unknowingly stumbled upon a marketing mother lode via TV in a manner reminiscent of radio three decades earlier. This time, the Cubs would benefit only by a delayed reaction. The short-term loss of revenue from bargain-basement rights fees turned out to be a long-term gain, not kicking in fully until after Wrigley’s death. The fans were never further away than their TV sets.

The Cubs were an afternoon viewing staple. Children raced home from school to watch the final innings. By permitting all home games to be televised, Wrigley set up the Cubs to become more popular than the consistently contending White Sox. The Cubs continually had more overall exposure to Baby Boomers than the Sox, planting the seeds for future ballpark patronage.

With their night games – Fridays being especially popular – the Sox were able to consistently outdraw the daytime-only Cubs from 1951 to 1967. However, the late Vince Lloyd, who broadcast both teams from 1950 to 1967 for WGN, said TV made the Cubs more popular at the core. Recalling early 1960s ratings numbers, Lloyd said the 100-loss-tickling Cubs had a larger audience than the contending Sox on WGN.

Sox move to WFLD gives Cubs big edge

The South Siders finally put all their home games, including all night contests, on TV in 1968 after they switched from WGN to what is now Fox-32. But the dye was cast. WFLD-TV, which signed on in 1966, could only be received by half the total TV households as UHF tuners had only become mandatory on sets in 1964. Both the team and TV station over-estimated UHF market penetration by the time the deal kicked in. The Sox contending years also ended in '68 with a steep downturn into 95-, then 106-loss hell. They lost much of a generation of new fans.

Meanwhile, Wrigley now could offer the majority of his schedule, including more than ¾ of road games, to WGN. Twinned with a young, rapidly improving Cubs roster under newsmaking manager Leo Durocher, the fans finally returned to Wrigley Field. The ivy and green grass appeared gorgeous in its daytime splendor for households purchasing their first-ever color TV sets in the late 1960s. Attendance would never again drop below 1 million for a full season starting in 1968. As those Baby Boomers weaned on everyday afternoon telecasts grew up, they’d begin spending money in the sun at Clark and

Addison.

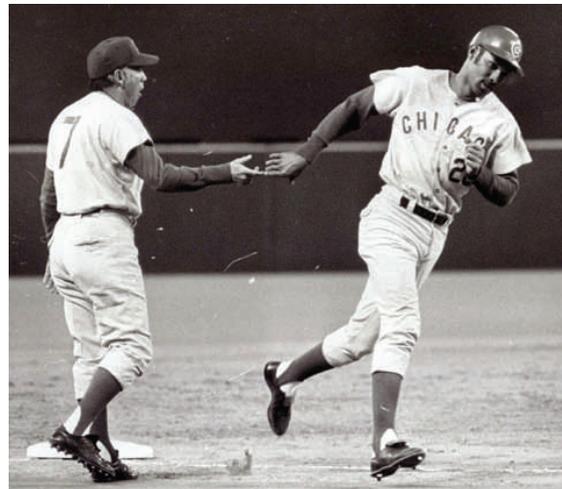
With baseball journalism of the era limited mostly to quote-less play-by-play newspaper accounts of games, very little analysis was devoted to why the Cubs consistently lost, let alone the playing conditions in which they competed.

But that began to change in 1969, when the Cubs zoomed to a nine-game lead in mid-August. Durocher had a contentious relationship behind the scenes with sportswriters, Brickhouse and some players. A few writers, most notably the Chicago Tribune's Dick Dozer, started noticing signs of a tiring team in mid-August. Durocher rode his regulars and top three starting pitchers hard while ignoring his bench and bullpen. When the Cubs collapsed with an 8-18 record in September while the Miracle Mets zoomed past them on their way to glory, blame was spread around liberally. Main culprits were Durocher, the players' spare-time appearances and endorsements, and the heat of day games.

Focus shifts to day-game problems in 1970s

The '69 flop was first in a series of almost regular second-half collapses. Even greater pratfalls took place in 1973 and 1977. In both seasons, the Cubs coughed up eight-game leads in June by playing 20 under .500 from early July onward. That pattern of hot-weather downslides began to focus more attention on the day-game issue and the refusal to install lights by Phil Wrigley and son William Wrigley III, who succeeded him as owner in 1977.

Cubs players had a real challenge on their hands. They played at 1:15 or 1:30 p.m. every day at Wrigley Field. Despite the image of players lurching from bar to bar after hours on Rush Street, most adhered to the 9-to-5 schedule as family men. Outfielder Billy Williams was most conscientious, going to bed by 10 p.m. in his far South Side home. Making the equivalent of comfortable upper middle-class salaries in the pre-free agent era, the majority of players settled year-round into Chicago's north and northwest suburbs. Two-time NL batting champ Bill Madlock became the first prominent African-American Cub to live in that suburban region. The likes of second baseman Glenn Beckert and catcher Randy Hundley lived in Palatine. They had hour-long rush-hour commutes each way to add to their daily labors.



Billy Williams used to have a 10 p.m. bedtime at home to handle Wrigley Field day games. (Photo courtesy of the [Leo Bauby Collection](#).)

But in attuning their bodies to conventional work schedules and commutes, the players then faced physical and competitive shocks going on the road. The change was most profound finishing a homestand on a Sunday afternoon, then jetting four hours to the

West Coast for a Monday night game. In the 1960s, the Cubs took the field at 10 p.m. (8 p.m. Pacific time) as their body clocks fell behind for those first road-trip games in Los Angeles or San Francisco. It was mini-jet lag. They were supposed to be at their physical and mental peaks at a time when they had just been cooling down for the night at home.

The most immediate effect was a big drop-off in offensive production by the Cubs stars going on the road. The West Coast swings especially deteriorated into death marches. Added to the time change as problems were inferior hitting backdrops, such as at Houston's Astrodome. The overall adjustment to lights prompted some Cubs to claim they saw just half the baseball. Early sabermetrics researcher Don Zminda calculated that Billy Williams hit .277 with a .462 slugging average in the first game of road trips compared to .297 and .507 in all other games. Ron Santo hit .245 with .378 slugging, compared to .281 and .480. Ernie Banks' suffered the biggest dropoff: .220 and .430 slugging vs. .277 and .489.

Santo had the biggest hill to climb. The third baseman played every day in these conditions while suffering from Type 1, or juvenile diabetes. He still amassed a Hall of Fame career despite the roadblocks. That prompted son Ron Santo, Jr. to wonder why Cooperstown voters – first the baseball writers, then various forms of the Old-Timers Committee -- did not consider what he had to overcome in delaying induction until after his father's death.

“If all of them could have lived in his shoes for one season,” Ron, Jr. said. “Come back and tell me how it was to play. I think that would have made a huge difference. It would have given them a much different outlook and a much better perception of what he played through.”

Glenn Beckert, Ron Santo's nine-year Cubs roommate, finally conceded, upon hearing of his buddy's election, that the heavy day-game schedule had a negative effect.

The day-night transition nailed the Cubs coming back to Chicago, too. At least once annually, the team is faced with playing a Thursday night getaway game on the road, then a Friday day game at Wrigley Field. Somewhat less extreme, but still tiring, was the arrival around midnight from a West Coast Sunday afternoon getaway game, then the quick turnaround to play a Monday afternoon game at Clark and Addison. The latter quandary was solved with the advent of the 18-night-game schedule in 1989.

Zminda discovered the Cubs had a .499 winning percentage from Opening Day to Aug. 31 in all seasons from 1969 to 1984. But from Sept. 1 to season's end, the winning percentage dropped to .439, biggest of all teams. In the same period, the Cubs had a .475 winning percentage for road day games, fourth-best in the then-12 team National League. But the numbers dropped sharply to .425 for road night games.

Cubs management possessed an internal survey on the negative effects of the constant home/road schedule upheaval by the mid-1970s, but suppressed the information. Team trainer Gary Nicholson presented the study to Phil Wrigley acolyte John Hol-

land. The longtime general manager ordered Nicholson to zip his lips.

“Everybody sort of conceded that it was correct,” said Chuck Shriver, then the Cubs’ media relations director. “But nothing was ever going to happen, so nothing was to be gained by making a big deal about it.”

Tiny, hot locker room added to woes

Sub-standard facilities at Wrigley Field were as much of a problem in that era as now to aggravate the day-night transition. Nicholson also noted the problems of the cramped locker room down the left-field line used from 1960 to 1983.

Afflicted with poor ventilation, the tiny clubhouse was actually warmer than the outside climate, recalled White Sox broadcaster Steve Stone, a Cub between 1974 and 1976. “It was hard to cool off in there after games,” Nicholson said. The players were packed so close together by their wire-mesh cubicles they were “butt to butt,” the trainer added. Randy Hundley remembered that during rain delays, the players literally had to sit at their stalls with nowhere else to bide their time.

Only a handful of shower-heads were available, and thus the players had to “shower in shifts,” said Nicholson. The space crunch was even more severe when minor-leaguers were recalled in September. The kids were stuffed into makeshift lockers in a rodent-infested equipment room.

The players’ internal body chemistry also came into play. Santo perhaps was not the only Cub who had blood-sugar problems playing the all-daytime schedule at home. Legendary clubhouse manager Yosh Kawano never served even a modest food spread before day games in that tiny locker room. “The players were more interested in chewing tobacco than eating,” explained Kawano. Thus they took the field on near empty stomachs, their only meal being breakfast or a nosh of donuts and coffee from nearby fast-food stands.

Caffeine – never an ideal intake before a hot-weather athletic event -- and the inevitable amphetamines likely were the only consumables keeping the Cubs going. By the 1990s, more enlightened clubhouse personnel made sure the Cubs at least had a light lunch – soup and half a sandwich – available before day games.

The Cubs ended up finishing first just once during the post-1948 all-daytime years. They had overwhelming talent in winning 96 games and the National League East in 1984, coming three precious innings away from making their first World Series since 1945.

Exceptions exist to every trend. In the post-1988 Wrigley lights era, the nearest-miss World Series Cubs team in 2003 saved the best for (almost) last. Dusty Baker’s first team was just above .500 before it ran wild at 19-8 in September to clinch the NL Central the second-to-last day of the season. The Cubs were 6-4 in the postseason until crazy things began to happen with a 3-0 eighth-inning lead in Game 6 of the National League Championship Series.

But talk about the schedule upheavals has continued to the present day with even more testimony to its difficulties. Former team-leader Derrek Lee played almost exclusively night home games with the Marlins. Lee recalled he typically could not fall asleep before 1:30 a.m. prior to home day games in his first Cubs season in 2004. Night-crawler Moises Alou finally adjusted to the matinee contests at Wrigley a season or so after first arriving in 2002. But that meant he'd also wake up too early, around 8:30 a.m., on the road for night games.

The present Theo Epstein management – almost exclusively imported from elsewhere -- no doubt has been privately brought up to speed on these historical trends. But given the frozen relations between Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a campaign to persuade the Wrigleyville community to approve 15 to 20 more night games isn't likely soon.

Epstein is under his own self-generated pressure to infuse the Cubs with overwhelming talent. And that's exactly the situation BleedCubbieBlue.com editor Al Yellon -- who went to his first Cubs game in 1963 – said trumps the day-night issue.

“Bottom line: the schedule has nothing to do with it,” Yellon said. “Put good-enough players on the field and they'll win if they play at 1:20, 3:10, 7:05 or at four in the morning if they ever had games then.”

Epstein ought to hire Yellon as a motivational speaker the first night game of a road trip or before those Friday day games that follow a getaway road game the previous night. No matter what tactics he employs to get around the most grueling schedule in the game, Epstein definitely is finding out he's not in Boston anymore.



Derrek Lee found a bumpy transition to Wrigley Field day games in 2004 as he was unable to fall asleep before 1:30 a.m. after playing mostly night games in San Diego.
Photo credit: [Emmymik](#)