

'72 Rewind: Mr. Allen Sox It to Them

(The Chicago Baseball Museum will pay tribute to Dick Allen and the 1972 White Sox in a June 25 fundraiser at U.S. Cellular Field. We will chronicle the events of that epic season here in the weeks ahead. Sports Illustrated published this story in its June 2, 1972 edition.)

By Ron Reid

The scene was suited more to midsummer than May, but the temperature was 82 degrees and a gleeful glut of black children last week ran through the sloshing plume from a Chicago fire hydrant, a good outfield throw from White Sox Stadium.

A block away, on 34th Street, a bunch of white kids similarly were taking the waters, most assuredly because of the heat but also, one suspects, because neighborhood unity is being spawned by the success of the friendly, neighborhood White Sox — one of baseball's current hot items both in Chicago and the American League.



Dick Allen lights up Chicago's South Side — and his own phiz — with a big bat.

The Sox and their expansive home arena stand at the focal point of a fascinating sociological development in the Windy City, primarily because of South Side geography and a need for heroes that is nowhere more urgent than in the ghetto. Formerly known as Comiskey Park, after the founder of the team, White Sox Stadium is a sociologist's dream — or nightmare.

To the south and east is largely a black ghetto area. Many tenements near the stadium have given way to new buildings. The ball park stands on a ragged, non-demilitarized zone between it and a predominantly white area to the north. The demographics of the area have been cited as reason for Chicago's attendance problems, which plumbed a nadir in 1970 when the club finished last in the AL West and drew fewer than half a million spectators.

"This neighborhood is rough," says a patron of the F's Inn, a drinking establishment unlikely to be mistaken for the Pump Room. "They used to have a protection racket going in the parking lot. A guy would say, 'Gimme two dollars and I'll watch your car.' What he meant was, 'Gimme two dollars and I won't tear the hell out of it.' "

But an elderly usher who has worked both the Sox' contests and those of the Wrigley Field Cubs insists that an old law is defeating the harsh surroundings. "You give the people here a winner," he says, "and they'll come to the park. The police have clamped down on a lot of stuff. This place is cleaner than Wrigley Field. And at night, when you've got 30 or 40 thousand in here with the lights shining down on the field, it's really nice."

So it is a boon to their city that the White Sox have been leading their division — partly through defiance of baseball's hallowed book, partly by making the game's most renowned maverick happy. As reward for that nice bit of social work, Chicago is contending for a pennant that has not loomed within the team's reasonable grasp since the mid-'60s.

Individually, the White Sox' most content competitor is Dick Allen, more commonly known as Richie during nine National League seasons in which he earned a reputation for controversy, repetitive affront to management and nearly every capricious off-field deed but barratry. Allen's well-documented troubles in Philadelphia, a city whose fans, it has been said, "would boo the losers in an Easter egg hunt," not only prompted Allen's trade to St. Louis in 1970 (a deal that gave birth to the Curt Flood case) but seemingly haunted him afterward. For the Cards dealt him off to the Dodgers after a season in which he hit 34 homers and drove in 101 runs, and Los Angeles followed suit a year later by sending him to the Sox after he led the team in homers and RBIs.

Allen indeed is a man who marches to his own wry drummer. On the day his teammates were going out on strike, Allen signed his 1972 contract. Among the accusations that have been hurled in his direction, however, the charge that sticks is that Richie, a hitter by any name, wreaks outrage on pitched baseballs. American League moundsmen are now wincing the way their NL brethren did a year ago.

The mutual esteem prevailing between Allen and Manager Chuck Tanner, who grew up eight miles from Dick's bucolic hometown of Wampum, Pa. (pop. 1,189), indicates that Chicago could be a last stop for the thrice-traded first baseman.

"I can say this," said Tanner after the White Sox defeated Texas last week for their sixth straight victory and 12th in 13 games, "I think Allen is not only the best player in the American League but the best in the majors. He can run, field, throw, hit for average and hit for power. How many of the best can do four of those things? Plus the fact that his attitude has been fantastic. He's our leader. Of our 10 pitchers, seven have less than two years' experience. When one of those kids gets in trouble, Allen's the guy they come to. Just his presence makes our players better. He's the most valuable player in the league for me. When he's through with the White Sox, he's going to walk right into the Hall of Fame."

To such praise Allen has responded by leading the league in RBIs, smashing seven homers and smiling a lot out from under a batting helmet that rests nearly on the bridge of his nose. He has yet to be charged with an error at first base. With the Sox, baseball has become fun again.

"A whole lot of it," Allen agrees. "I wish I had come here the first time I got traded. The difference is Tanner. He's from home and he's like a brother. I carried a reputation here, you know. Those other clubs wanted that kind of publicity to draw. Here they just wanted me for my ball-playing."

It is a measure of the man's ease of mind that Allen talks about his past almost clinically.

"Philadelphia? If I was doing so much wrong, why didn't that man call a big press conference to clear the air? I think they needed that kind of publicity to draw crowds. We sure didn't do it any other way. We were usually 21 or 26 games out. I did some things wrong, but not half as many as I got blamed for.

"Los Angeles, that was strange. I didn't have the feeling they wanted me there, anyway. I saw a comment from Walter Alston, I don't know if it was true or not, but he said if I came to the Dodgers, he would go. Al Campanis was the guy who made the deal and he said he wanted Allen's bat but not his personality, so I gave 'em a bat and no personality. I was disappointed in that situation, but there were some good guys on the team. I've known a lot of ballplayers and I haven't met a bad one yet."

One of the closest friends Allen has made in Chicago is Bill Melton, whom Tanner inventively describes as the most underrated player in baseball. Melton won the home run championship last year—to the applause of virtually no one but his immediate family. Along with Carlos May, who ranked seventh among American League batsmen in 1971, he and Allen have given the White Sox the kind of power that once seemed ill-advised for the vast acreage of their ball park, with its 352-foot foul line distances and 400-foot reach to center.

Even before the arrival of Allen, however, Tanner had converted the White Sox from the singles-hitting, defensive teams of Al Lopez' era toward a more brutal breed that didn't have to rely as often on the opposition's mistakes. Only five players remain from the roster Tanner inherited when he was hired two years ago, and Chuck's changes have brought remarkable progress. In 1971 Chicago improved its record by 23 victories and was rewarded by an attendance jump from 495,355 to 833,891. This year the Sox drew 47,099 more fans for the first 17 home dates than for the same number in '71.

"We aren't the Go-Go Sox anymore," says Roland Hemond, director of player personnel, "we're the Sock-Sock Sox."

Allen has helped the power ploy in geometric ways. "You put a bat like that in our lineup," says Shortstop Rich Morales, "and it makes everyone better. They can't pitch around our lineup now."

Thus, with a beefier offense, and with Tanner (prompted by Coach John Sain) ready to violate sacrosanct baseball laws, like using a pitcher after only two days' rest, it should be an exciting year for Chicago sociologists, perhaps all the way to October.

"That's what remains to be seen," says Allen with a smile. "That's what we put it on every day for."