



Mr. Cub could have instead been Mr. Sox

By Mark Liptak

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Here's something that'll make a Cub fan choke... if not for circumstances, Ernie Banks, the famed "Mr. Cub," might never have played a game for the North Side. Instead Banks might have spent his career on the South Side and consequently gotten into a World Series...or two.

As to why Banks didn't become a member of the White Sox, details are unclear but some facts are known and it appears the main reason was because of a personality conflict of two of the leading Sox figures of the 1950's, Frank "Trader" Lane and Paul Richards.



Did a personality conflict between Frank Lane (left) and Paul Richards cost the Sox a shot at Ernie Banks?

As Sox GM, Lane executed several brilliant deals, netting All Star performers like Billy Pierce, Nellie Fox, Minnie Minoso and Sherm Lollar. Richards, the field manager from 1951 through late 1954, was a brilliant tactician and a tremendous teacher. Pierce said Richards was the best manager he ever had. But both men were strong-willed and had big egos, and that would come into play in the Banks issue.

By 1952 Lane was earning \$35,000 a season plus a "nickel a head" bonus based on attendance that added an additional \$41,000. Richards, who had authored three very good seasons, was getting \$25,000 and a "nickel a head" for anything over 900,000 in paid admissions.

By Aug. 1954 Richards was looking elsewhere. He couldn't get a raise and he couldn't get a multi-year deal from the Sox. He was looking for a three-year package worth \$40,000 and was turned down by Lane. On Sept. 13, 1954, Richards accepted the role of both field and general manager for the Orioles, transformed from the old St. Louis Browns in their first season in Baltimore.

So how does Banks come into play?

Fast forward to May 21, 1956. Richards was in his second full season with the Orioles, while Lane had moved on to become GM of the St. Louis Cardinals. On this day the

Sox, led by co-GMs Chuck Comiskey and John Rigney, traded third baseman George Kell to the Orioles for outfielder Dave Philley and Yankee killer Jim Wilson, a starting pitcher.

When Lane heard about the deal, he told the press, “Comiskey got the best of Richards...” When Richards heard the comment, he exploded. “If you leave Lane alone, he’ll trade a first-place club into a sixth-place club,” Richards huffed. He ripped Lane for every ill-advised deal he ever made dating back to the trade of fleet-footed outfielder Jim Busby. Then he dropped a bombshell.

Richards told the press that the Sox had a chance to sign Banks, who in 1955 had burst into superstardom with 44 homers for the Cubs. Sox scouts had followed extensively back in 1953, but Lane apparently wasn’t interested in looking at him, according to the Orioles manager. Richards knew about Banks and pushed Lane to get him. However, by 1953, the two men weren’t on good terms and Lane basically ignored most of Richards recommendations.

What if the Sox signed Banks and he spent his Hall Of Fame career on the South Side?

There are some interesting scenarios here.

Banks likely wouldn’t have produced the same 40-homer numbers playing in Comiskey Park, but he would have supplied a great deal of power that was missing from the Sox lineups throughout the 1950s and 1960s. With Pierce and other Sox notables recalling one more productive bat would have made the difference, Banks might have enabled strong White Sox teams in 1955 and 1957 to win the pennant over the Yankees. Even an age- and injury-diminished Banks might have made the difference in close races in 1964 and 1967.

There’s also something else to consider....if Banks signed and was the regular shortstop, do the White Sox even bother signing Luis Aparicio?

Think about how the “Go-Go Sox” would have looked without the fastest man on the team and the American League’s top base stealer?

Aparicio signed with the Sox in 1954, that same season Banks hit .275 with 19 home runs for the Cubs. He was named AL Rookie Of The Year in 1956. Of course, had the Sox signed both, they might have moved Ernie to a different position, say first base, which would have really solved an issue on the club that had been lacking for almost a decade.

With great hands but more limited range as a shortstop, Banks also was thought of by some as a potential third baseman, another logical destination on the South Side. Banks played some games at third base for the Cubs in 1957 and 1966, and was shifted to first full-time in 1962.

Banks statue goes full circle in a way

The statue of Ernie Banks, returned to downtown Chicago's Daley Plaza for a public memorial Jan. 28 after a restoration project in Michigan, has in a way come full circle.

Placed in the plaza with the famed Picasso statue, the Banks sculpture that normally greets fans near Wrigley Field's main entrance recalls the dedication of the Picasso on Aug. 15, 1967. Not everyone was pleased at the time by the indecipherable artwork. No explanation of what it signified was provided by its designer.

Chicago Alderman John Hoellen of the 47th Ward, a frequent antagonist of Mayor Richard J. Daley, in fact suggested instead of the Picasso, the city should have erected a statue of...Banks!

George Castle



One suggestion was this Picasso statue should have instead been Ernie Banks.
Photo credit [Richie Diesterheft](#).