By George Castle, CBM Historian

Three dimensions were not enough to apply when sizing up Jack Brickhouse.

A broadcaster with somehow enough hours in his day to do play-by-play for the Cubs, White Sox, Bears and Bulls in 1966 and 1967, Brickhouse’s true impact on his adopted city can’t really be measured by his on-air work during his long, full 82 years on Earth.

A gentleman who exuded sunny optimism on the air with countless “Hey, Heys” and “Oh, brothers!,” Brickhouse would have been a super salesman if he could have foregone sleep. “Never take the first ‘no’ for an answer,” he counseled late in his life, and he meant it. To his legion of viewers, including several generations of kids who’d run home from school to catch the tail end of his baseball telecasts, he wouldn’t allow negativity. They caught on to his sales pitch. Brickhouse peddled passion for the game.

“I would say it had a major, major impact on my baseball career and broadcast career,” said Cubs radio color analyst Ron Coomer, who grew up watching Brickhouse, first in a Chicago neighborhood near Midway Airport, then in southwest suburban Lockport.

“It was his love of the game of baseball,” said Coomer, a Cubs infielder in 2001 after years of service with the Twins. “You’d sprint home from school to hear the last four, five innings. To hear him do a Cubs game and his enthusiasm for baseball, it was infectious [thanks to Brickhouse]. I wanted to be a broadcaster before I was a baseball player. I’ve had the best of both worlds.”

Coomer’s words were echoed by countless players and fans growing up within signal range of Brickhouse. In a five-channel universe, his voice and face were first among equals. His catch phrases, mimicked in baseball press boxes for decades, far outlived his mortal form. Although Harry Caray sold the sizzle of baseball and was first with a statue
near Wrigley Field, Brickhouse was the steak, more than doubling Caray’s tenure here and leaving him light years behind in total number of hours on the air in sports, separate from the news and other programming on which he appeared.

Brickhouse, possibly the most ubiquitous local broadcaster in any market in from 1940 to 1981, was certainly the ringmaster of Chicago’s toy factory in his time. He broadcast eight no-hitters, including Don Cardwell’s masterpiece in 1960 at Wrigley Field. The scene for which he expertly ad-libbed included at least 6,000 fans storming the field, mimicking a World Series celebration.

Watch the last out and aftermath of Don Cardwell’s no-hitter in 1960, likely the oldest sports videotape of any kind in existence. >>

Even with the excitement of no-nos, great personal achievements by Chicago athletes, the 1963 Bears NFL title and 1959 White Sox World Series, Brickhouse relished non-sports assignments as much as the games themselves.

“I have been in mine shafts, towers, disasters, tornadoes, fires, parades and explosions, Brickhouse wrote in the Chicago Today weekly TV magazine on May 18, 1969. “I have been the ‘Man on the Street,’ an actor, and even Uncle Bill, reading the funnies.”

“Some of the most memorable moments I have known have been aside from sports. I have always had a keen interest in news, and I’ll accept a news assignment any time of day or night, if it only covering a lost dog.”

Brickhouse made news early in 1968 when he received the Order of Lincoln from Gov. Otto Kerner at the Illinois Statehouse in Springfield.
He dovetailed with broadcast history even on the sports beat. In 1962, several minutes of a Cubs-Phillies telecast from Wrigley Field was included in the first over-the-air trans-Atlantic satellite broadcast via the newly-launched Telstar. Fittingly, it was Brickhouse’s voice providing a slice of Americana to European viewers after Walter Cronkite and Chet Huntley had provided the proper introductions.

Watch how Jack Brickhouse handles play by play of the color clip of a Cubs game being fed to Europe on the first trans-Atlantic satellite broadcast in 1962. >>

And yet there was an even more impactful part of his life that takes a back seat in all the biographies and narratives of his unparalleled career. He used his celebrity to help others – and also employed his bully pulpit to present athletes of color as equal human beings at a time when society was just toying with the concept of civil rights and integration. Being complimented on-air by Jack Brickhouse and, most importantly, being consistently selected for interviews on the Midwest’s most-watched combination sports-and-news television outlet did much to advance the image of people of minorities.

‘He was my buddy:’ Minoso

His most important legacy was his on-air treatment of the first generation of African-American and Latin athletes to grace Chicago teams. For evidence of Brickhouse’s impact on this issue, just ask the incomparable Minnie Minoso, pushing 90. “He was my buddy,” Minoso said, and that was no small feat. He was a black Cuban, barely speaking English, breaking into the White Sox in May 1951.

Brickhouse was working for a TV station run by the arch-conservative, Calvin Coolidge-type Republicans of Colonel Robert R. McCormick’s Tribune Co. Brickhouse, a native downstate Peoria, was a card-carrying Republican, too. You’d expect nothing less of a high-profile WGN announcer, so much so that station colleague Vince Lloyd said of himself, “I was the house Democrat.”

Brickhouse would be seen around the GOP candidates at election time, and was friends with Republican power brokers. But while many of them kept the civil-rights movement at arm’s length, with McCormick’s editorial heirs doing nothing to portray the movement favorably, Brickhouse was at least color-blind in recognizing his fellow man and he clearly leaned toward using his celebrity to do good.

Perhaps his refusal to take on airs was due to his own very modest upbringing in Peoria. He possessed no silver spoons, latching on to CBS affiliate WMBD-Radio as an announcer at age 18 and working his way to Chicago at 24. He arrived in the City of Big Shoulders in 1940, under the auspices of veteran WGN announcer Bob Elson, who’d reached out to the younger man via Western Union telegram. “Remember,” Elson instructed, “if asked, you know baseball.”

“Who did more (positively) for racial issues for Chicago when this town was torn by that in the Fifties?,” asks longtime Chicago broadcaster Chet Coppock, who was as close as anyone growing up to Brickhouse, a family friend with whom the Coppocks spent many a Thanksgiving and Christmas in the north suburbs.
“Jack never, ever talked down to (players of color) and treated them as equal,” Coppock said. “His message was, ‘these people should be welcome in your homes.’ ”

Jack Rosenberg, WGN’s long-time sports editor in that era and Brickhouse’s writer, concurred. “We didn’t care about (color),” he said. “They were (ballplayers) just like everyone else.”

Shortly before his death in 1998, Brickhouse recalled the shyness of Ernie Banks and Billy Williams in interviews when they first broke in with the Cubs. But he kept at it, and by mid-career Banks and Williams could handle the give-and-take of those very public conversations. They included the daily in-season “Tenth Inning” post-game show or Brickhouse-hosted “Sports Open Line” panel programs from the WGN studios on Monday nights.

**Listen to how Jack Brickhouse recalled how reticent Ernie Banks and Billy Williams were early in their careers. >>**

“When I first came to the big leagues, he made me comfortable in interviews,” said Williams. “As a kid coming up from the minor leagues, you might say the wrong thing.”

**Listen to a 1968 interview where Billy Williams talks about the possibility of playing in 1,000 straight games. He ended up playing in 1,117 in a row. >>**

After going AWOL from the Double-A San Antonio Missions in mid-season 1959 to go home to Whistler, Ala., partially due to the virulent Jim Crow culture of the era, Williams felt a sense of relief two years later with the welcoming style of Brickhouse.

“That’s what I liked about him – you were just a baseball player,” he said. “He treated all the same.”

Brickhouse did not limit his color-blind, non-patronizing treatment to interviewees. He actively helped break the color line in the WGN sports department.

**Smith broke Chicago color line on 10 p.m. news**

At 87, Rosenberg cannot specifically remember whether Brickhouse was instrumental in the 1964 hiring of Wendell Smith, Jackie Robinson’s Boswell and the first African-American
American sportswriter at a downtown Chicago daily newspaper. However, with Brickhouse holding an executive title and negotiating station TV rights contracts with Chicago sports teams in the 1960s his stature at WGN was very high. Station boss Ward Quaal would surely have allowed the “Big Brick” to be instrumental in hiring Smith.

Smith eventually became the 10 p.m. WGN sports anchor as the first African-American regular on any Chicago station’s signature news program. Previously, the station’s only black on-air talent had been deejay Daddie-O-Daylie, consigned to the overnight hours on the radio side in the mid-1950s, pre-Franklyn MacCormack’s “Meister Brau Showcase.” The parent Chicago Tribune had no African-American editorial staffers.

Listen to 10 p.m. sports anchor Wendell Smith narrate Jack Brickhouse’s calls of Adolfo Phillips’ four homers in a doubleheader on June 11, 1967. >>

A few years after Smith began, Banks came on board to do short-form TV and radio gigs, including Sunday-night sports anchoring that is still remembered for Mr. Cub’s language mangling. Brickhouse once recalled how he worked with Banks on diction, and Ernie seemed to catch on in dry runs. But when the camera’s red light flashed on, “Mr. Cub” reverted to form.

Overall, Brickhouse believed in a big-tent theory in hiring.

“He opened the door for Jewish people at WGN,” Coppock said. “Rosey, Jake (producer Jack Jacobson), Arne (Harris), Jack Minevich. Remember there was an obvious quota system for Jews in Chicago broadcasting then.”

Brickhouse’s endorsement of equal opportunity wasn’t limited to his own workplace. He lent his celebrity to outside civil-rights organizations.

“It was not known to a lot of people that Jack Brickhouse at that time was a member of the Chicago Urban League,” longtime Chicago writer and photographer John Reyes said of the Bill Berry-helmed organization. “He was also a supporter of (Operation) PUSH when it started. He used to go to the meetings. “

As busy as Brickhouse was on the air, he could have booked himself most nights each week doing personal appearances and charity affairs. He said yes as much as he could.
“Jack Brickhouse was enthused in whatever he did,” said all-time White Sox pitcher Billy Pierce, whose South Side starts Brickhouse telecast from 1949 to 1961. “He’d go to a banquet and I don’t care what the charity was for, he’d be enthused. He was just that kind of gentleman. He’d go to more banquets than anyone I knew and visit with more charities.

“We ran the Chicago Baseball Cancer Charities. He’d come to our meetings all the time. Sometimes he had to hustle out because he had to go to another place. But he said, ‘Bill, anything I could do for you, I will…I know Northwestern Golf, I can get you a set of golf clubs for a prize.’ He did almost the same thing for almost every charity he went to.”

Mentoring younger talent also was part of Brickhouse’s regular routine. Brickhouse had to work his way up from a modest upbringing, and he never forgot.

“Broadcasting is all I have ever known,” he wrote in Chicago Today in 1969. “I was a child of the depression, consequently, since I was not that good a student or athlete, I was not able to get a college scholarship, nor could I find a job good enough to help me continue beyond my first year at Bradley. I was very lucky in that the job I did land put me in the field that I loved from the first moment.”

Warm welcome for Skilling in ‘78

WGN weather guru Tom Skilling has now exceeded Brickhouse’s 33 years of continuous service at WGN by three years. Only WLS-TV’s Joel Daly had a longer run at one station. Such a statistic both surprises and shocks marathon-man Skilling, who is on the air during the 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. news, then the 5 p.m. news hour and finally on the trademark WGN News at Nine. That’s not counting WGN-Radio appearances in between, on-line tapings and work for the Chicago Tribune’s weather page.

Brickhouse provided a grand welcome for Skilling when he hired on as weatherman in Aug. 1978. Skilling, who had grown up in Aurora, came home after tours of forecasting duty in Florida, Madison and Milwaukee.

“He was amazing,” Skilling said. “No wonder people liked him the way they
Skilling got the highest-profile introduction possible when he started at WGN.

“I was told I was to report to the Cubs broadcast booth, and Jack would interview me and kind of introduce me to the WGN audience during one of the Cubs games,” he said. “You’re pretty nervous at that stage in that situation. He was so kind.

“He says, ‘Tom, are you a baseball fan? Do you know a lot about baseball?’ He was trying to see how comfortable I was with baseball and how far he should go (with questions). George Will was in the booth that day. It was amazing. You know, I don’t know remember what we talked about other than he said this is our new weather forecaster.”

Skilling also appreciated Brickhouse’s on-air ease along with that of anchor Jack Taylor in dealing with the newbie when he joined them on the set for the then-10 p.m. WGN news. And he enjoyed Brickhouse sitting down with the broadcasters in the WGN cafeteria even after he retired from baseball broadcasts.

Another WGN hand who benefited from Brickhouse’s support was Chuck Shriver. Now 75, the former Cubs and Sox media relations director is retired in Elk Grove Village. In the mid-1960s, Shriver was a young WGN newswriter, sometimes working the imperious Carl Greyson’s “Nightbeat” post-midnight newscast, when Brickhouse invited him to switch over to the sports department in a staff expansion. Among other duties, Shriver wrote scripts for Brickhouse’s 5:55 p.m. studio sportscast, to which the announcer would race after day games at Wrigley Field and old Comiskey Park.

“It was kind of funny, he was such a good ad-libber, he really didn’t need a script,” he said.

After a while, though, Shriver realized long-term advancement was tough at the station. Rosenberg had a number of decades to go as the top administrator and writer in the sports department. Still, he loved the relationships and camaraderie.

“Rosey was a great guy,” Shriver said. “He really was my mentor. He knew ‘Brick’ backward and forward. They both took me in like family.”
One call nets Shriver Cubs PR job

Shriver expressed to Brickhouse an interest about working for a sports franchise. A while later, after the Cubs looked around for a public relations director to replace ex-first baseman Ripper Collins following the 1966 season, Brickhouse sprung into action.

He called Shriver into his office with news of the opening. Then Brickhouse called Cubs general manager John Holland to set up a job interview for Shriver.

“The funny part of that story is I went in for the interview and I was under the impression there were 20 people interviewing for the job,” Shriver said. “I didn’t know ‘til much later I was the only guy they interviewed. I think John Holland had enough confidence in Brickhouse to feel Jack wouldn’t recommend somebody who couldn’t cut it.”

Shriver worked nine seasons for the Cubs, including the tumultuous 1969 campaign, and continued his close relationships with Brickhouse and Rosenberg.

Still another longtime Chicago sports personality who encountered Brickhouse early in his career is WGN (Ch. 9) sports anchor Rick King, who began his career at the station as a producer in 1968-69.

“He was WGN,” King said. “He’s a guy you better please if you were a young broadcaster or a young writer, as I was. But he was very fair.”

So many other stories about Brickhouse using his personality for a greater good abound in Chicago, 16 years after his death. This image behind the first monochrome, then full-color public persona is the key to the measure of the man. He midwifed the careers of many. But the bottom line is the memories he emblazoned in his viewership.

Those whose work he touched honored him for his ability and longevity. In 1963, he already had telecast 2,000
games. Both the Cubs and WGN showed their appreciation during a “Leadoff Man” telecast.

Watch the ceremony via black and white kinescope of Brickhouse being honored for 2,000 baseball telecasts in 1963. >>

The ceremonies got bigger later in his career. On Aug. 5, 1979, in between the games of a doubleheader against the St. Louis Cardinals at Wrigley Field, Brickhouse was honored for his 5,000th baseball telecast that day. Some 35,769 looked on while Gov. Jim Thompson and Mayor Jane Byrne helped officiate the ceremony. As the festivities wrapped, Brickhouse stated his identifying of the real fans with an emphatic acknowledgement. He turned around, faced the bleachers and bowed.

The relationship between announcer, co-workers and the fans at home was two-way. The base was the Brickhouse personality away from the microphone, not as exciting as his “Hey Hey” over an Ernie Banks homer, but just as impactful for so many who benefited.

“Jack was a superstar,” said King. "He was exciting. He owned the city.”