Champs, meet champs

The Cell stages grand welcome as parade stop for triumphant JRW

By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Wednesday, August 27th, 2014

Champions met on a sun-splashed Wednesday, and history was made again.

Nothing they encountered on their long parade route to Millennium Park likely topped taking possession of the White Sox’s 2005 World Series trophy at U.S. Cellular Field for the United States Little League champion Jackie Robinson West team. Coach Darold Butler and his players clambered off the lead trolley in the parade eastbound on 35th Street as Sox coach Harold Baines, toting the trophy, and team chairman Jerry Reinsdorf greeted the champs.

The group hoisted the trophy high for a minute. Like a magic talisman, it was held close – giving off good vibes -- as the players took it aboard the trolley for the home stretch to the rally where they received the same kind of heroes’ welcome the Sox, Blackhawks and Bulls enjoyed over the past two decades.

In keeping with JRW’s stunning achievement that has united a city, if not much of the country, the sight was beyond anyone’s comprehension going into the event. The Sox and the city cooperated in turning the front entrance of The Cell and the curbs of 35th Street as a prime viewing spot for the parade. Newly-minted JRW fans from all over the
city began arriving at the end of the morning rush hour, milling about the front plaza, even dancing as a threesome strum some rhythmic background music from the bandstand that normally entertains pregame arrivals to the ballpark.

The backdrop was far more intimate for heart surgeon Hilton Hudson and daughter Isabella to watch JRW pass by than Millennium Park, close to their downtown home. Isabella Hudson won’t soon forget the confluence of the other event on this day – her sixth birthday.

“The fact that if you never quit, you continue to prepare, you never, ever, ever give up – you win,” was the moral the elder Hudson believed came out of JRW’s run. “It just reinforces what I believe in and what I’ve been taught all my life.”

Said Isabella: “What’s special to me is how they won the Chicago (championship).

So was it special to celebrate these champions on the same day as her birthday? The calmest response in the entire city came forth from Isabella: “Kind of.”

**JRW neighborhood is family**

A few feet away, Linda Johnson, occasionally breaking into a two-step dance as the music wafted her way, had an insider’s knowledge of JRW.

“I lived in Washington Heights for 20-some years, until I left two years ago,” Johnson said. “But I’m still part of that family. My sons played for Jackie Robinson West. One went to basketball. I have a great-nephew playing for Jackie Robinson West in the 9- and 10-year-olds. They won the state championship.

“We support our family. Jackie Robinson West is our family. We have brought a lot of great athletes out of that community. We strive and work to make our children realize their potential.”

The legion of fans lining 35th Street steadily grew as the morning progressed. First big cheers came when a westbound popcorn truck began spraying free samples of his snack at the fans. The group had 10 minutes’ notice as helicopters following the parade route northbound on Halsted Street turned east to track 35th Street.
The Sox further helped out the event by opening their parking lot on the northeast corner of 35th and Shields to fans. Symbolically, they parked on the site of the old Comiskey Park, where Negro League teams played for decades and Larry Doby broke the color line in the American League for the Cleveland Indians on July 5, 1947.

**Baines, Boston get up early for welcome**

The team wisely did not detract from JRW’s day by having any active players present. After a 10-inning game -- the Sox’s seventh straight loss -- the night before, the players were allowed to sleep in. However, Baines and fellow Sox coach Daryl Boston were on site, and eagerly posed for photos for the waiting fans.

For both Baines and Boston, the JRW feat was especially significant. Both have been at every Sox-sponsored event in The Cell’s Conference and Learning Center to commemorate Jackie Robinson, remember the Negro Leagues and stimulate interest in inner-city baseball participation.

“You can talk about it all you want, you can have seminars and open forums, try to do all these things,” said Boston. “But until you are able to put a finished product, a win-
ning product on the field, they’re not going to come. The Jackie Robinson West program is at the highest level.

Hopefully that encourages kids to play and stay off the streets. It has to be on the stage at the highest level, on TV. Kids want to be the basketball players, they want to be popular. We’re just trying to bring the popularity back to the sport of baseball. They played some outstanding baseball. And the kids handled themselves well off the field.”

Baines has had experience with Chicago amateur baseball since he first arrived as a top prospect under Bill Veeck in 1980. He’s hopeful of more participation.

“They put themselves on a national stage,” Baines said. “Hopefully it will inspire a lot of energies around the country.”

The Sox joined in many other MLB teams in becoming JRW fans.

“A lot of times the games were going on at the same times our game was,” said Boston. “But it was always the (clubhouse) TV with the Jackie Robinson game on. Everybody was rooting them on. We had a couple of guys from various parts of the country rooting for their team, like Joe McEwing from Philadelphia and he was rooting for the Philadelphia team. All in all, it was a great time for everyone.”

“It doesn’t matter what color you were, but they were rooting for this South Side team to win,” said Baines. “It’s been a long two months for these kids, and they represented Chicago very well.”

And now it was time to JRW’s roster and coaches to rest and accept their just rewards. Although they had to go back to their workaday worlds – the kids to school and Butler to the locomotive he pilots – their lives would never be the same.