



Larry Himes (left), along with wife Lee, meets Frank Thomas in Cooperstown for the first time since he was the Sox general manager who drafted him in 1989, then promoted him to the majors 14 months later. Photo credit Larry Himes.



## ***Thomas, Maddux speeches represented opposite ends of Himes' GM career in Chicago***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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Twenty-five years ago this summer, Larry Himes could never have conceived again meeting Frank Thomas in the circumstances he enjoyed one recent Saturday night in Cooperstown, N.Y.

When you draft a top prospect No. 1, when you craft the most optimistic projections, say 30 homers and 100 RBIs annually, you still cannot project a Hall of Fame induction.

But yet here was Thomas, pressing the flesh and accepting congratulations, including from Himes and wife Lee, the night before he delivered his tear-streaked speech literally crediting everyone for his enshrinement.

Amazingly, the Thomas-Himes meeting was their first since Himes was let go as White Sox general manager one month after he called up Thomas from Double-A in Aug. 1990 to begin his long, productive journey to the Hall. In the intervening generation, Himes watched and admired Thomas from afar, his succeeding jobs as Cubs GM and scout for the Cubs and Orioles taking him far from U.S. Cellular Field.

“Howard Pizer (Sox senior VP) called me,” said Himes. “I talked to him twice. He let Lee and I know the White Sox had decided to invite us back and wanted to if we wanted to come. ‘Geez, yes, that would be tremendous,’ I thought.”

In addition to meeting Thomas at the party, Himes and old No. 1 aide

**An 'insane' move and other corporate machinations involving the Cubs. [Read accompanying story below.](#)**

Al Goldis, the scouting director who formally picked the Big Hurt in the 1989 draft, warmly greeted Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf. Bygones were such at that celebratory moment, Himes' greatest achievement running the Sox being recalled instead of the Sept. 15, 1990 day when Reinsdorf declined to renew his contract going forward due to personality differences.



**Larry Himes (left) and Al Goldis in the early 1990s. The close associates combined to draft and quickly develop Frank Thomas.**

The entire Hall of Fame weekend presented mixed emotions for Himes, who surely was at the middle of the greatest comings and goings in Chicago baseball history. He and Goldis brought aboard Thomas, a hitter whose maturity impressed them.

But Himes also was smack dab in the middle of the fumbled negotiations in 1991-92 to lock up Greg Maddux as a near-lifetime Cub. He intently watched both give their Hall of Fame induction speeches as extensions of their personalities – and reminders of the agony and ecstasy of a general manager's career.

### **Grateful for Reinsdorf's invitation**

Himes, 74, has been retired from baseball since 2003, when he left his last scouting job with the Orioles. Even though he and Lee remain in their longtime Mesa, Ariz. home in a big-league market, he rarely attends Diamondbacks, spring-training or Fall League games. So enjoying the Hall of Fame weekend was really a brief comeback for a man who was immersed in controversy on both sides of town, much more so on the North Side.

"It was a great occasion and I really appreciate (Reinsdorf) including us," Himes said. "He said he wanted to include me and Al because of Al. That was tremendous. I have nothing but thankfulness and gratefulness that he included us. It was a lifetime experience for Lee and I, and we'll appreciate it from here on out.

"It was nice to see Frank. We took a photo with Frank and we'll treasure that. I've always told anyone who made it to the big leagues to reach over and pat yourself on the back, because you did it and no one else around you did it. Frank can pat himself on the back for making the Hall of Fame. He deserves all the accolades he got because he did all the work to get there."

Himes is also thrilled Thomas has moved back to Chicago full-time to tend to business, TV analyst work and an assistant's role with the Sox.

"Frank is Chicago. Frank is the White Sox," he said. "I'd have loved to have him on the Cubs when I was there. The family belongs there, he belongs there, and he's going to be a great representative of the White Sox."

Thomas was the third of four consecutive No. 1 picks on which Himes and Goldis struck gold from 1987 to 1990. They began with pitcher Jack McDowell, proceeded to third baseman Robin Ventura, then Thomas and finally pitcher Alex Fernandez. Thomas took his career much further than any of them.

“You never know,” said Himes. “Being in the Hall of Fame has as much to do with staying injury-free, getting at-bats every year, and then being able to produce when you get the at-bats. He had the offensive ability to know the strike zone, great hand-eye coordination to make contact with the ball, and the other thing he had that not too many people have is sheer strength in the strike zone.”

In a Ryan McGuffey-produced Comcast SportsNet documentary on Thomas, one of the Big Hurt’s early motivations was not being picked by any team coming out of high school in Columbus, Ga. in 1986. Perhaps scouts figured Thomas was all-in for playing tight end at Auburn and did not want to waste a draft pick on him. Yet Himes, then Los Angeles Angels scouting director, did not recall hearing about Thomas at the time.

“I remember Bo Jackson’s game coming up, and we drafted Bo the first time he was ever drafted,” he said.

### **Scouts look at raw skills instead of hitting**

Chicago native Mike Rizzo, now Nationals GM, was the area scout who pushed for the Sox to take Thomas. But his selection in ’89 was no slam-dunk at old Comiskey Park.

“It wasn’t a whole unanimous decision to take Frank,” Himes said. “What scouts look at are tools. First-step quickness, check, Frank didn’t have that. Throwing arm, check, he didn’t have a very good arm, below average. From a GM’s standpoint and scouting director’s standpoint, though, the big difference between those tools and one tool used more than anything else — hitting.

“(Scouts) get away from the hitting and they get involved with speed, arm, quickness. But if you saw Frank and what he did at Auburn, he had the discipline and eye-hand coordination and the strength, all combined.”

Thomas ended up as a DH in the second half of his career. But starting out, he needed to play on both sides of the ball concentrating full-time.

“We wanted to make him into an everyday first baseman,” Himes said. “For your fans, they want to see an everyday player as your star player. Our star player at the time was Harold Baines as the DH. We didn’t want to see Frank end up as Harold was. You’re a team player, you’re the guy, defense and offense.

“What plays in the major leagues, you see some funny bodies out there. But what the funny bodies do is hit. Hitting remains the No. 1 criteria. Hitting is the most difficult (skill) than maybe any in all sports. If you have that one skill, that skill’s got to play. When you add strength and power to it, that’s something special.

“We knew he had great discipline in the strike zone. That’s something hitting coaches would love to teach with every hitter and they can’t get. Frank had that natural ability

to know what the strike zone was, what pitch he was going to hit and how he could hit it. He had something a lot of kids don't have, that discipline."

Himes cited Willie Mays, Henry Aaron and Mickey Mantle possessing the same ingredients: "Discipline, eye-hand organization and strength."

At the time Reinsdorf relieved him of his duties, one speculative report was Himes was not enamored with Sox hitting coach Walt Hriniaik, a Reinsdorf favorite as a disciple of the Charlie Lau school of hitting. Hriniaik ended up as Thomas' guru. The Big Hurt thought his career did not change for the better once Hriniaik left the Sox in 1995.

### **Not a backer of top-hand hitting style**

Himes acknowledged both Hriniaik's effect on Thomas and his own divergence from Hriniaik's style.

"In my time in baseball, I thought Walt was one of hardest-working hitting coaches around. But for me, I never went along with the top-hand release from the Charlie Lau days. He changed Frank from his Auburn days to the top-hand release.

"I disagreed with the one way to teach hitting. I was more open to let's see what he can do, let him do his thing, instead of letting him conform. Walt was in early every day and worked hard. The Walt and Charlie Lau theory still changed Frank, but he had the three ingredients. He put it together in the Charlie Lau swing. Walt stayed on top of it make sure it was fine-tuned. He prepared Frank like every other player he had."

Thomas at least had his fulfilling career with the Sox before personnel and personality issues led to his departure as a free agent after 2005 for the final three years of his run with Oakland and Toronto. The same couldn't be said about Maddux, perhaps the biggest "what-if" in Chicago baseball history. The list of recriminations is long about the failed contract negotiations to prevent Maddux from defecting to the Braves after the 1992 season. He never wanted to leave the Cubs, and returned twice, as a pitcher and front-office aide, but ran into bad timing and corporate arrogance when he sought his security to keep him out of free agency. By the time Maddux amassed his 20-win, 2.18 ERA in his free-agent Cubs season in '92, the die was almost cast, and Himes neither had the political skills nor power of the purse to reel back in Maddux and steadfast agent Scott Boras.

"We didn't sign Maddux, and this was kind of where it was," Himes said.

After a year working as a part-time scout at Wrigley Field and out of his Lincoln Park apartment, Himes submitted a voluminous resume to Stanton Cook, the Cubs' chairman and former longtime *Chicago Tribune* publisher and CEO, in the fall of 1991. His timing was perfect. Four-year GM Jim Frey wanted out of his job, and he was demoted to scout to serve out the one year of his contract. Cubs president Don Grenesko transferred back to Tribune Tower to serve as VP of finance for Tribune Co. Along with a board made up of Tribune Co. officials and other corporate chieftains, Cook took financial charge of the team.

## Team Tribune makes bid for Maddux

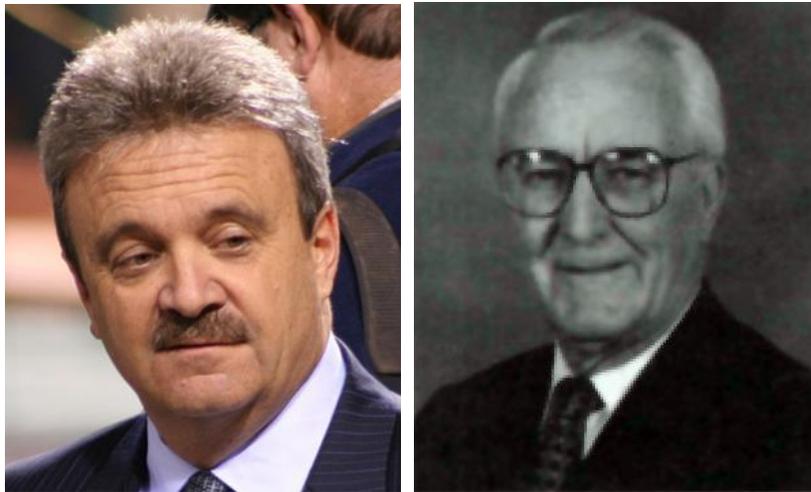
Himes recalls having to “hit the ground running” upon being hired to go to Las Vegas in an attempt to sign Maddux, going into his free agent season. Maddux had told this writer in the summer of 1991 that if he was signed to a long-term deal the following off-season, he and wife Kathy would buy a home in Chicago.

Himes was accompanied by Cook, attorney Dennis Homerin and Ned Colletti, the former longtime Cubs media relations official who had been promoted under Frey to an assistant-GM-level position. Homerin and Colletti first detoured to Phoenix to sign free-agent pitcher Mike Morgan, a Las Vegas resident. Colletti and Homerin made the offer to Maddux and Boras. Maddux, just 25, had won 67 games the previous four seasons.

The Cubs believed they were offering the longest and richest contract yet for a pitcher – five years for a total of \$25 million.

Contacted in Las Vegas, where he watched his Triple-A team, the ‘51s, present-day Dodgers GM Colletti recalled the situation:

“It was in this (Mirage) hotel, then a fairly new property, that Dennis and I met with Scott and offered 25/5,” he said. “I think (Dwight) Gooden was the highest paid NL pitcher at \$15.5 million for three years and (Roger) Clemens the highest in the AL at \$20 million-plus for four years....and Greg hadn’t won his first Cy Young yet.”



**Ned Colletti (left), now GM of the Dodgers, made the initial five-year, \$25 million offer to Greg Maddux. Stanton Cook (right) bears ultimate responsibility for the bungling of the talks when Maddux initially agreed to the first offer. Colletti photo credit [yfern328](#).**

Maddux soon agreed to the 25/5 deal and dropped the no-trade clause he had originally requested. From here it gets murky – and controversial. Supposedly Maddux, on a vacation, did not agree to the deal by an artificial 5 p.m. Friday deadline. Other stories said Maddux had imposed the deadline, with Tribune Co. calling at 5:05 p.m. The upshot was the contract was pulled off the table, shocking Maddux and apparently stiffening his stance with Boras’ enthusiastic backing.

Colletti did not respond when asked why a contract to which Maddux had agreed was pulled off the table. Neither did Himes, who apparently either has some firm old loyalties to his then-Tribune Co. bosses or is upset at the outcome.

“Do I know why? Yes,” said Himes. “But I’m not going to say (why).”

Famed for taking his clients into free agency and getting maximum dollars, Boras upped the ante for Maddux.

“Boras is looking at the big picture, trying to get as many people interested,” Himes said. “Here’s my trophy and who wants to buy him?”

### **A bigger offer without bosses’ OK**

Himes, Homerin and Colletti made another pass at Boras at the All-Star Game in San Diego in 1992. After Homerin and Colletti talked to Boras, Himes said he visited the agent on his own, without authorization from the bureaucracy to which he had to report.

“Without getting an OK from Tribune Co., I offered another \$500,000 a year to make it \$27.5 million for five years,” he said. “No (pitcher) had ever gotten \$27.5 million. But Boras apparently had made up his mind to take Greg to free agency and experience the full market.”

Once Maddux’s sensational 1992 season was over, Cook needed to have understood what he had in hand and met Boras’ price before the Yankees and Braves – Maddux’s eventual final suitors – swooped in with enriched offers. A Chicago Baseball Museum analysis ([Read it here >>](#)) showed Maddux pitched well enough to win 25 games in ’92. Except for his strikeout totals, his statistics were at classic Sandy Koufax levels, with a 2.18 ERA and WHIP just more than 1.00.

Maddux’s ’92 line was read to Himes, who said “there’s no doubt” he pitched well enough to win 25. “In Atlanta, he had a much better supporting cast.” He again used “no doubt” when asked if yielding just seven homers in 268 innings in any ballpark, let alone Wrigley Field as his home field, was a stupendous feat.

“If you look at his pitch counts compared to Koufax and (Nolan) Ryan, his pitch counts were real short,” said Himes. “That’s why he’s sitting in the Hall of Fame.”

Had Maddux finished, say, 25-5, would Himes have gone to Cook to demand more money?

“We’ll never know, because it never did happen,” he said. “But if it would have happened, hopefully I’d have done the right thing and got it done.”

And in the real world of dealing with Maddux’s Cy Young Award season of ’92?

“I’m not sure what could have been done differently,” Himes said. “Money was part of it. Obviously we could have gone and probably gotten some more. We didn’t do it at the time, and that decision impacted my future with the Cubs and Greg’s future with the Cubs.

“He knew the ballpark, he knew the people, he knew everything there. I just wish it had been different, but that’s kind of where it was.

“I’m comfortable with who I am. I’m comfortable in doing the things I think are right. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn’t. Here I think we put our best foot forward with our \$27.5 million offer for five years. I thought that was sufficient and should have been something I thought Scott and I could shake hands on and get it done. But it wasn’t.”

No wonder in listening to two contrasting Hall of Fame speeches in person, Himes no doubt had thoughts racing all over the place. Thomas and Maddux represented opposite ends of his own career in a nutshell.

## ***Maddux, other deals screwed up before Dowdle ‘cut the cord’ from Tribune Tower***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian*

Tribune Co. was thought of as a savior for the Cubs when it bought the team in June 1981 and supposedly ended the penury and incompetency of the Wrigley family ownership regimes.

Unfortunately, assorted corporate executives could not stop meddling in baseball operations and contract negotiations, engaging in a kind of fantasy-baseball-come-true operation until honcho Jim Dowdle, the former corporate broadcast chief who had hired Harry Caray for WGN, “cut the cord” of Cubs control from Tribune Tower in 1994.

Unfortunately, the whiz-kid Dowdle chose to change the culture, Andy MacPhail, turned out to be personally conservative in his spending – called “the antique” by several scouts – and spent less than Tribune Co. actually projected. Included was a 2005 quote where MacPhail said he preferred his front office to be understaffed. The Cubs ranked 29th of 30 teams in front-office staffing when MacPhail was forced out a year later.

The Cubs simply cannot catch a break no matter who owns the team. Even as new baseball messiah Theo Epstein rebuilds the farm system, he is under the thumb of



**Dallas Green thought he had full control of Cubs baseball operations. He found out otherwise when he could not sign Steve Garvey and trade Bill Buckner to the Phillies.**

owner Tom Ricketts in big-league spending as the Cubs intentionally bump along at the bottom of the NL to supposedly fuel the rebuilding process.

Through a combination of bottom-line adherence and corporate arrogance in labor relations, Tribune Co. meddling in baseball operations was as bad, or worse, than anything under the Wrigleys. The heavy hand of the suits played a major role in the departure of Greg Maddux in likely the worst screw-up in franchise history.

As he talked about the joys and heartaches of acquiring Frank Thomas for the Sox and letting Maddux go from the Cubs, Larry Himes described his superiors' system of financial control that had been enhanced since Dallas Green was ousted as GM in 1987 –but which had existed since Tribune Co. bought the team.

### **Unreachable Cook killed Garvey, Buckner deals**

Recruited by Tribune Co. to run baseball operations in Sept. 1981, Green thought he had full control, financially and otherwise, of all transactions. In his book *The Mouth That Roared*, Green recalled he had a handshake agreement with agent Jerry Kapstein at the 1982 winter meetings to sign free-agent Steve Garvey and, to make room for Garvey, trade Bill Buckner to the Phillies. But Green was informed by part-time Cubs president Andy McKenna, Sr. that the deals had be put on hold because Tribune Co. CEO Stanton Cook, traveling back from Europe, could not be reached. When Cook still could not be contacted the next day, an embarrassed Green had to call off the deals. Signing instead with the Padres, Garvey went on to haunt the Cubs in Game 4 of the 1984 NL Championship Series.

After Green fired manager Jim Frey in June 1986, Frey was re-hired the following off-season as WGN Radio color analyst, pushing Lou Boudreau to home duty only.

“That was completely insane,” Himes said. “To this day, I don’t understand why.”

Speculation, though, had Frey put in the broadcast booth home and road to spy on the Cubs and Green, with whom the Tribune Co. was increasingly dissatisfied due to heavy spending and poor results on the field. Sure enough, Green was forced to resign after the 1987 season by the steely-gray John Madigan, another financial suit who took his turn overseeing the Cubs. His successor? None other than former longtime manager and hitting coach Frey, who had no front-office experience up to this point in his career.

In the post-Green era, Tribune Co. solidified its grip on the team. Young financial exec Don Gronesko was promoted from business VP to Cubs president. Budgets came under tight control and staff was cut. But Frey really felt he was kneecapped when Gronesko went around him to fire Frey childhood friend Don Zimmer as manager in May 1991.

Meanwhile, Tribune Co. culture really enmeshed the Cubs when Stanton Cook retired as *Chicago Tribune* publisher and corporate CEO at 65 on Aug. 1, 1990. Instead of retiring, Cook desired to stay on. The press lords put him in a charge of the

smallest corporate subsidiary – the Cubs. Ostensibly, Cook would have the least impact there.

Oh, he had impact, all right, all the way into putting a Braves cap on Maddux.

Cook, who started with Tribune Co. in 1951, had been production manager before earning a CEO job. He and fellow bottom-liner Charlie Brumback oversaw a debilitating strike by Tribune Co.

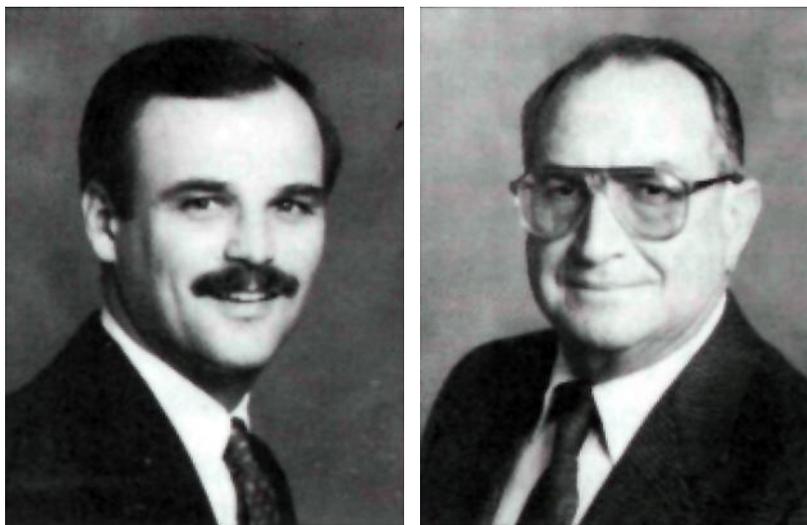
production unions in 1985 over lifetime job guarantees. Although federal courts eventually ruled in favor of the unions, the executives' long holdouts and hiring of replacement workers broke the spirits of scores of veteran loyal printers and pressmen, many of whom Cook no doubt knew by first name. Only a portion of these workers ever were re-hired at the new Freedom Center printing plant northwest of downtown Chicago.

Cook, nicknamed “The Senator” for his distinguished visage, could handle baseball backroom politics as well as anyone. After opposing Commissioner Fay Vincent’s plan to shift the Cubs and their WGN-TV games into more late start times in the National League West, he was instrumental in the effort to oust Vincent in 1992.

### **‘Senator’ ordered player cuts to save front office staff**

He had another, more human side, though. Cook worked with editor Clayton Kirkpatrick to oversee the massive book-length publishing overnight of Richard Nixon’s just-released Watergate tape transcripts in May 1974. *The Tribune*, former bastion of conservative Republicanism, soon called for Nixon to resign the presidency. And when Cook ordered Himes to jettison several middle-level Cubs in the off-season 1993-94 in advance of a potential strike, he had well-thought-out reasons for his actions.

“We let some good ballplayers go, but (Stan’s) feeling was -- and this to me was admirable -- he didn’t want to let (front-office staffers) go (during a strike). He kept everyone on board, no one got fired. He wanted to assure the people working there for years weren’t losing a job because of the strike.



**Under the team presidency of Don Grenesko (left), Tribune Co. tightened its grip on day to day control of the Cubs. Jim Frey (right) claimed he would have signed Greg Maddux if he had stayed on as GM, but likely would have run into corporate interference.**

“Stan was fine. He was a very nice man. Someone you can sit down with and talk with and be comfortable. Someone I had great respect for.”

But Cook and aides went too far in trying to manhandle and show the arrogant corporate side to Maddux and uber-agent Scott Boras. Backed by player rights steadily added since Marvin Miller energized the Players Association into the strongest union in the country, Tribune Co. could not muscle their young ace when he tried to agree to a five-year, \$25 million deal going into 1992. The corporate pushback backfired, Boras' price went up nearly \$4 million and the already-pitching rich got richer in Atlanta.

Frey claimed he would have locked up Maddux had he stayed on as GM past Oct. 1991. But the corporate structure allowed little financial leeway to a GM answerable to a conclave of suits who knew little about baseball.

“The Cubs' budget had to go through a Tribune committee,” Himes said. “It was a complicated process. We had to have a committee, a meeting down at Tribune Tower. They had a ton of guys around the table. They would make a determination what the budget was.”

Himes did not know if that committee was the Cubs' board or a larger group. Going into 1994, Cook chaired a Cubs board that included Grenesko, Brumback, McKenna, ComEd pooh-bah Thomas G. Ayers and Frank Considine of American National Can Co. fame.

Not a real baseball man in the bunch -- other than possibly McKenna's longtime involvement back to Bill Veeck's Sox ownership group.

“The Tribune mission statement was ‘Be competitive,’” said Himes. “It wasn't win at all cost.

“What it was is what it got. “

Dowdle, promoted to No. 2 Tribune Co. executive by 1994, apparently acted as the new sheriff in town and cut through the corporate morass. The Cubs budget now would go through just one man above a new team president MacPhail -- Dowdle. However, he was fooled by MacPhail's two World Series championships in Minnesota, captured by a core of home-grown players developed before MacPhail arrived at the Metrodome. A cagey farm director, George Brophy, from the Calvin Griffith ownership days took the real credit for Kirby Puckett and Co.

### **Cubs' spending tied to revenue levels**

MacPhail professed to want the Cubs to emulate the Atlanta Braves, but never spent the kind of development money Ted Turner had shelled out. He tied Cubs spending and payroll to team revenue levels – “middle of the pack” rather than Top 3 market status. When asked about apparent understaffing in his office, MacPhail said he'd rather be “one man too short than one man too heavy” so the Cubs workers would

feel “engaged” in their tasks. His mantra, repeated both to media and Tribune Co. superiors: “slow, steady, unspectacular.”

“He (Andy) was Stan, that’s what he was,” said Himes, claiming MacPhail had Cook’s level of financial authority. As GM, Himes did not have the spending leeway MacPhail possessed.

What about MacPhail’s underspending?

“That was Andy’s prerogative,” said Himes.

In the end, Green yielded to Frey, who was replaced by Himes, who was demoted to a scout’s job while being succeeded by Ed Lynch, who also was demoted to scout with MacPhail taking over, all the while grooming Jim Hendry to be GM. Down on the field, only Jim Riggleman managed as many as five full seasons among any Cubs pilot from Leo Durocher through the present. It all made up an unstable recipe, one that is Epstein’s now to craft into a competitively edible mix.

“I think the biggest (negative) thing with the Cubs was turnover of managers and GM’s,” Himes said. “That history is more an indication of lack of performance in the field. The Braves, Dodgers, they don’t have big turnovers. Same now with the Giants.

“That’s one thing everyone overlooks. (Bleep), there’s constant turnover with the Cubs. When (management) gets flak coming back when the team isn’t performing, instead of them taking the flak and saying OK, let’s have patience, they’d step on it and make a change.”