



## ***Impressionist Grote granted his freedom to creatively begin, end Cubs broadcasts***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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*Sweet Lou as channeled by Mark Grote, being asked how he'd think Grote would have handled a pre-game show with him daily:*

*"He...he asks the questions and we give the answers...He asks about Murton, he asks about DeRosa. And that's it. And we go home. What would you like me to say?"*

Lou Piniella is retired, comfortably ensconced in his native Tampa, watching the Cubs from afar trying to make it back-to-back world championships instead of just back-to-back three-and-out playoff appearances in his managerial day.

But Mark Grote was busy covering both Piniella's Cubs and the more successful versions piloted by Joe Maddon. That gives him the perspective often lacking when teams and/or stations bring a talent in from out-of-town. Grote grew up in northwest suburban Itasca, saw some winning and a lot of lesser Cubs teams as a fan, farmed himself out to central Illinois for broadcast seasoning and has been rewarded with one of the most high-profile non-play-by-play baseball radio jobs in the country.

Better yet, he is given creative freedom in his third season hosting the Cubs' pre- and post-game shows, in 2015 on WBBM Newsradio 78 and now on AM 670 The Score. That means his spot-on Piniella impression could always pop up to keep things light.



**Mark Grote at the Ron Santo statue outside Wrigley Field. Like Santo, Grote brings a humorous touch to the Cubs radio booth.**

Grote is a very fortunate man, indeed. But he climbed the ladder in classic fashion.

“They allow me 100 percent latitude,” he said of Score management. “I love the fact I can go into the clubhouse every day and I can sort of create from a totally blank palate. When I go into the clubhouse, I decide who I want to talk to. You can’t get everybody you want every day because some players are not available.

“If there’s the news of the day, that dominates. A lot of times it’s going to be someone who did something significant the previous day. Or someone who struggled the previous day. And those are the tough interviews.”

Grote content won’t always be Baseball 101 or 201. He won’t become enmeshed in sabermetrics, a trap into which some new-age broadcasters have fallen.

“Of course you want to bring baseball X’s and O’s, and be hardcore baseball,” he said. “But I also want to bring the personality out in the players. And at some point in time have a little laugh with them or find out something about them you didn’t know.

“We always say never, ever take out the part (in editing down for time) where a guy is laughing or a guy is saying something not about baseball, that’s just about fun stuff. There’s enough X’s and O’s to go around. That’s my only big-time demand I’ve made of my producers. If there’s ever fun stuff, never cut that out.”

*Sweet Lou, channeled through Grote, wondering if Matt Murton was for certain:*

*“Murton, he was with the Cubs. He played with the Cubs. And then was back with the Cubs. Now, I don’t know where he is. He played baseball. And then he stopped playing baseball. He went overseas to Japan. I don’t know where he is. Murton, he had big legs, he looked like he could hit. And...and he hit singles. He should have hit home runs. Schwarber, he’s a great big guy who hits home runs. That’s all you need to know.”*

Grote never strays far from Matt Murton, and maybe he’ll be interviewed one day on his shows. Murton was a promising outfielder who came to the Cubs with shortstop Nomar Garciaparra in a deal with the Boston Red Sox at the trade deadline in 2004. He batted .297 and .281 in his Wrigley Field seasonal tenures, but could not generate the power expected from a left fielder. Eventually GM Jim Hendry flipped Murton in mid-season 2008 to the Oakland Athletics in a deal for Rich Harden that also cost future American League MVP Josh Donaldson, then a minor leaguer.

Pre-game duties are only Part 1 of Grote’s daily assignment. He’ll back up ultimate blue-collar baseball guy Ron Coomer when he works the fifth in-



**Matt Murton in a post-Cubs incarnation in Japanese pro baseball. Photo via [STB-1 on Wikimedia Commons](#).**

ning in relief for play-by-play man Pat Hughes. He'll also chime in with scores, other baseball news and observations as needed.

Noted for his wry, sly and dry humor that played so well off the late Ron Santo, Hughes has been impressed so far.

"Mark is smart, funny, a good guy and a talented broadcaster," he said. "He and Ron Coomer and I have a lot of fun in the booth."

Grote, of course, had known Hughes from his previous years working Cubs games. But working in the same booth was a bit daunting in concept.

"He's great," Grote said. "I kind of felt like an intruder at first because he had it a different way for years. Judd Sirott did the pre-game before I did and did an unbelievably great job, and Pat loved him. But Pat has been nothing but welcoming. He helps me when I ask for it. He makes everybody comfortable in that booth."

And when Grote sends Hughes home with his post-game show, he has two tasks: to expertly set up analyst Ryne Sandberg, working home games, and play a baseball Dr. Phil if needed with callers.

The post-game show helmed by Grote separates him from how ancillary Cubs programming was handled in his childhood and further back, in mine.

Amid WGN-Radio's memorable tenure as the flagship from 1958 to what turned out to be an ill-timed bowout in 2014, fans always heard the manager and a pre-game interview. The "Durocher in the Dugout" segments with Leo Durocher and Lou Boudreau were often a hoot from 1966 to 1972. Sometimes Durocher fouled up the taping with blue language Boudreau was forced to do it live, relying on his old shortstop's/point guard's quick hands to yank away the mic if The Lip still spewed a profanity.

However, with the Cubs all-daytime home schedule, WGN simply aired a 10-minute "scoreboard" post-game show and quickly switched to lucrative drive-time news-talk-music programming. For night road games, a quick flip was employed to whatever show led into all-night voices like Franklyn MacCormack, Jay Andres, Eddie Schwartz or Steve and Johnnie.

Unlike many stations, such as KABC in Los Angeles with "Dodger Talk," fans and the announcer did not have the chance to ruminate over the game. In many seasons there was plenty of room for complaints. Perhaps WGN did not want its hosts to employ the "dump" button too much on callers.

"I love it," Grote said. "In the first year, WBBM had extremely highly-rated drive-time and evening news coverage. Our post-games on WBBM were get out as fast as we can. It was 25 or 30 minutes. It was a scoreboard show and we didn't take calls.

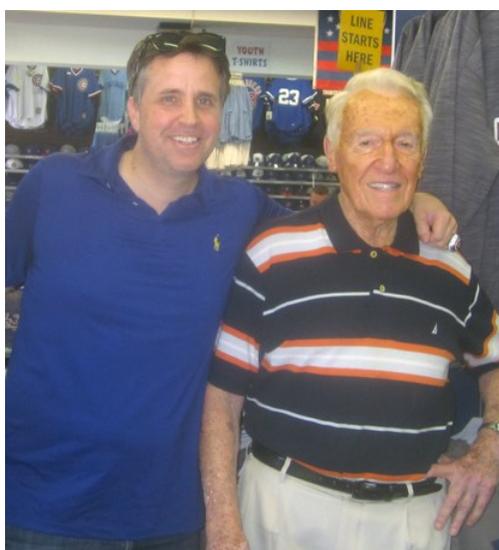


**Pat Hughes appreciates Mark Grote's ability to bring analysis and look at the light side of baseball.**

“My first year on The Score was great. In our first meeting, our boss Mitch Rosen said we’ll extend our post-game a bit. It was so important to me to be able to take calls, to hear what people are thinking. I had a lot of complaints from Cubs fans about why we were not taking calls (on WBBM). Now I have 45 minutes minimum. If I want to go longer, I can go longer. We get to kick back and analyze the subtle things that happen, like if Carl Edwards came in during the fifth inning.

“The pre-game is pretty tight. I stuff all those notes in my folder and use them for the post-game. Having Ryne Sandberg for the post-game brings another huge layer because he played at a massively high level. And he was a manager, for cryin’ out loud.”

Cubs fans now are semi-spoiled, so any blips in their contendership status brings out the post-game angst in callers.



**Walking to Wrigley Field recently, Mark Grote greeted NFL Hall of Famer Marv Levy, signing his “Go Cubs Go” book.**

“I actually embrace a lot of that,” Grote said. “The expectation is bigger and better than it ever was. These fans are winners now. They can act accordingly. I love the fact fans expect their team to get to the World Series instead of the other shoe dropping. When people call in and the sky is falling and everybody should be cut and guys should be fired, I do have to bring perspective and maybe talk a guy off the edge. But I embrace that and nobody is going to be cut off or told they’re completely crazy.

“I say, hey, if you’re upset by your team, this is what we do. This is why we exist to break out every single Cubs game, 162 and hopefully more. If you want to complain about a guy who got thrown out at third when he should have stopped at second, let’s do it.”

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Grote broke into broadcasting at the student station at Illinois State University in Normal. He quickly landed a part-time, jack-of-all trades position at WMBD-Radio in Peoria, appropriately a cradle of Cubs announcers in Jack Brickhouse, Vince Lloyd and Jack Quinlan.

After school, Grote took the classic path of starting in a small, small market. He landed his own morning show, where he was a “goofball,” on WVAX in downstate Lincoln. Then he moved up to a reporting gig on news-talk WMAY in Springfield.

Grote broke into Chicago sportscasting as a part-timer at The Score in the 1990s. In 2002, he took on full-time duties at WBBM, well in time to attend Piniella’s verbally colorful pre- and post-game media sessions. He returned to The Score in 2010 as an update announcer and talk-show host.

He applied for his present gig to WBBM program director Ron Gleason, a former Score program boss. He was told at least 100 others bid for the job.

“If you are a broadcaster who wants to raise his or her game, why wouldn’t you throw your hat in the ring for a Cubs broadcasting job?” Grote recalled. “I had confidence I should be doing the job. I always thought that I should be part of Cubs broadcasts. I felt I could bring something real to the broadcasts.

“I felt more pressure (with the huge number of applicants). I felt like, ‘Oh, God, if all these people did it, I better be the right guy.’ A little bit of fear, a little bit of pressure, a little bit you have to do this job right because there’s 1,000 other people who want the job.”

Grote always tried to pass the long hours of games with humor and impressions. He simply was training for his ultimate calling.

“Cubs radio and TV has always been about personality and fun. Now it’s about winning,” Grote concluded.

*Sweet Lou, channeled through Grote, asked about long-ago predecessor Jim Frey’s desire that Rafael Palmeiro “hit the (bleep) out of the baseball.”*

*“He’s a good manager...Palmeiro? I want guys who hit three-run homers. I don’t want singles up the middle. I don’t need a conga line. I want three-run homers. Mark Grace, he hit singles. Palmeiro, he hit the ball out of the park.”*

*But not with the Cubs, Sweet Lou,*

*“And..and they were both with the Cubs. And then one of them got traded. And they kept Grace. He hit a lot of doubles. That’s all you need to know.”*