



Fur shouldn't fly with mascot debut

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Posted Thursday, January 16th, 2013

Baseball history is replete with teams, fans and others who didn't like change, only to later embrace that change or at least coexist with it.

Mascots are a perfect example of this, the latest being the debut of the Cubs' Clark the bear.

Somehow, mascots are often seen as unnecessary for the game's more "traditional" franchises, with Cubs fans setting Twitter aflame with negative reaction. But do those teams benefit less than others from the public service work, marketing opportunities and fan happiness mascots provide?

Of course not.

There's no better example of this than the organization the Cubs emulate more than any other.

The Boston Red Sox introduced Wally the Green Monster years before the 2002 arrival of the John Henry-led group of aggressive owners. While leaving Fenway Park essentially unchanged, a trusted aide to the Yawkey family brought a mascot to the charter American League franchise. After initial objections from traditionalists, Wally caught on, helped by nightly promotion in the Red Sox TV booth, where analyst Jerry Remy perched a mini Wally alongside.

Times have changed. Smart teams change with them. The White Sox' Ribbie and Roo-barb never really gained traction. But early 20 years later, Southpaw became a hit on the South Side. The Phillie Phanatic has stood the test of time. All but three MLB teams have mascots.

Really, now, do any kids have negative reaction to these "creatures?" And have you ever seen adult fans complain when mascots are nearby?

In fact, the Chicago Baseball Museum is proud to be partnering with the forthcoming Mascot Hall of Fame (MHOF) that will be located in Whiting, Ind., just 17 miles from downtown Chicago right over the state line.

Headed up by the original Phillie Phanatic David Raymond, the MHOF will celebrate the family-fun entertainment that mascots bring to sports teams, drawing young fans and cement brand loyalty.

Baseball certainly needs to reach out to a new generation of fans, who have so many more entertainment choices. The World Series, for example, is no longer “appointment TV” for kids each October. The average World Series viewer last fall was 54.4 years old, according to Nielsen, the media research firm. The trend line is heading north: The average age was 49.9 in 2009. Kids age 6 to 17 represented just 4.3 percent of the average audience for the American and National League Championship Series this year, compared with 7.4 percent a decade ago.

We believe that the Cubs are making an overdue addition to their roster with Clark that can help in part reverse the disturbing demographic trend that kids are not as attracted to baseball as past generations.

Sure, the on-field roster is of greater importance to all fans, but why let that obscure the advantages of a bit of feel-good progress at Wrigley Field in its 100th birthday season? Long term, Clark is a significant image addition as the mascot develops a following with a generation to whom the Cubs need to reach out in renewing a lasting fan base.

Welcome, Clark, but we're staying neutral when it comes to picking a winner in your wrestling match with Southpaw before this year's first all-Chicago game.