



Sox can survive as lower-cost, accessible alternate to champion Cubs

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Tuesday, November 22, 2016*

The White Sox still play in Chicago.

They will be open for business in 2017 and years to come at Guaranteed Rate Field. Hard to type that new ballpark name after nearly 15 years of “The Cell,” but change even in an often-slow moving game like baseball is inevitable.

You sometimes forget the Sox even exist in this Autumn of Everything Cubs. The event Sox fans feared and Cubs fans pined for eternally has made its expected impression – a World Series championship at Wrigley Field. Under the circumstances and given the dominance of interest the swells after a title, it's hard for the Sox to get in a word edgewise.



Jose Abreu high-fives autistic kids at a school event the Sox slugger sponsored in 2015. More such events throughout the area would build Sox popularity away from the ballpark.

Yet there is hope. The Sox simply have to accept a new niche in a town that has tilted toward the Cubs since the late 1960s. The stark fact is the Cubs have possessed a larger regional fan base since the late 1920s, when blanket radio coverage popularized the North Siders. Frank Thomas called Chicago a “Cubs town” in 1993, when the Sox actually were outdrawing the Cubs. More recently, Ozzie Guillen said the Sox would have to win “five straight World Series” to take the town away from the Cubs.

The Sox have no choice but to act. Already, cynics are suggesting the charter American League franchise will be headed out of town once the Reinsdorf family is no longer involved in ownership. That day is still awhile off. The Sox have an excellent stadium lease deal with the Illinois Sports Facilities Authority that cushions a crimped revenue stream.

Still, just the mere mention of a Sox move revives the nightmares of the mid-20th century when the team literally had one foot out of town on several occasions. A Cubs World Series victory in, say, 1969 or 1970, when the Sox were operating in increasingly decrepit, poorly-attended old Comiskey Park would have put the other foot beyond the city limits toward Milwaukee, Seattle or a couple of other municipal suitors hungering then for big-league baseball. They could not have survived drawing 500,000 on the South Side with mediocre media coverage while the Cubs attracted 2.5 million playing media deadline-friendly day games.

The Sox can establish themselves as the lower-cost baseball alternative in Chicago. In the new, unprecedented championship era, Cubs tickets will be increasingly too expensive and unavailable for large chunks of the populace. If tickets are indeed purchased and typically reserved well in advance, traveling to Wrigley Field has to be carefully planned via public transportation. You just don't drive to Wrigleyville on game day unless you're willing to double your ticket money spent for parking and are willing to sit in traffic both ways.

The Sox can sell price, availability and egress.

They can offer a "20-20" concept: \$20 for tickets, \$20 for parking. Better yet, "20-10." Knock that parking fee down to \$10 under the right circumstances even if it cuts into revenue. Navy Pier charged just \$10 for parking after 6 p.m. That's a good deal, and you see the crowds at the lakefront edifice that's now practically the entertainment capital of the city.

Not a dime more than necessary for tickets

The Sox never, ever can overcharge for tickets in this environment. I can easily remember the stark sight of near-empty left-field bleacher seats at "The Cell" in 2012 for a Yankees weeknight game while the Sox held onto first in the AL Central. I heard such seats were going for \$50-plus. Management wrongly assumed fans would storm the gates at premium prices to see a traditional draw like the Yankees. But this is the 2010s. As we deduced from the presidential election, traditional rules of consumer attitudes are out the window.

The ghost of Bill Veeck, never popular with the present ownership, should be consulted. A boost in bread and circuses, including an increase in kids-friendly activities, should be a staple of Sox games going forward. If improved price points make it possible for entire families to attend games on 35th Street, they should get a ton of value for their moderate expenditures. That's how you draw repeat fans, which will be an issue at the expensive Wrigley Field, as popular as "Hamilton" tickets.

Veeck's spirit might in fact endorse a program called "Expedition Upper Deck," in which patronage of the long-criticized top reaches of the 1991-vintage ballpark is made into a fun proposition. The Sox did a decent job cutting into the acrophobia felt sitting upstairs via the 2003-vintage rebuilding. But the top of the stadium with its reasonable prices is still under-populated much of the time. Make fun of the situation, and have fans join in, almost like they are earning badges of honor up top. Extend those fun ac-

tivities to the top reaches so people just don't have a faraway seat and a few concession stands in the concourses.

To cast as wide a net as possible, the Sox must market to all parts of the Chicago area. The team traditionally has had a city/south-southwest suburban orientation. But the southward suburbs are still the least populated/least demographically desirable parts of the area. Some southwest suburban areas between Tinley Park and Joliet are still semi-rural.

If attending a game at Wrigley Field is going to be more expensive/difficult, then go after fans left behind in the north, northwest and west suburbs. Really concentrate on the latter, as that would have been the Sox primary drawing area had the team moved to Addison in the 1980s. Too many connected to the Sox revel in the blue-collar, tough-side-of-town South Side image. That may be romantic in media accounts of a Dave Hoekstra "Disco Demolition" book, but it's outmoded now.

The journey should go both ways. The Sox should aggressively develop a series of team appearances and clinics in all parts of the metropolitan area. The Sox come to you when you can't go to the ballpark. That builds fans for the future with kids. Such a program would again be in marked contrast with the Cubs.

Don't stop at the edge of the metropolitan area, even though that is where 90 percent of present Sox fans reside. The Sox can fill a gaping hole by taking a winter caravan downstate to drum up new fans who will find access to Wrigley Field equally difficult and expensive as Chicagoans.

Several years ago, the Cubs cut out the age-old downstate part of their mid-January caravan, passing up loyal fans in places like Peoria and limiting appearances to the Chicago area. The assumption at 1060 W. Addison was they had a lock on the downstate/Iowa crowd anyway. Never assume. At present, only the Cardinals caravan tours central Illinois. The Sox should try to win over new fans here, too. You don't know how much fans appreciate the visit of big leaguers 100 to 150 miles away from their home ballparks.

The abandonment of the downstate caravan continues a trend at Wrigley Field leftover from a Tribune Co. ownership that did not extend itself financially beyond some free-agent forays and the first rebuilding of the bleachers in 2006. Successor owners in the Ricketts family are establishing a kind of Fortress Wrigley with additional attractions in and just outside the ballpark, under the Cubs' financial control. Marketing is concentrated in the ballpark area.



Community-relations chief Christine O'Reilly-Riordon distributes Sox shirts at a Jackie Robinson West watch party in 2014. The Cubs were not represented at the same event. So the Sox have a built-in advantage in community reach-out efforts.

Again, going back to Tribune Co., the Cubs never really established a footprint in personal appearances and clinics throughout the area. That trained Cubs fans to rarely consume anything connected with the team away from Wrigley Field, their TV sets/phones, or the most convenient championship apparel vendor. They put on Cubs jerseys and hats, and make a pilgrimage to the shrine at 1060 W. Addison St. Only after a World Series title did they affix “W” flags in appreciable numbers onto cars – and not as many as you’d think after the greatest sports event in Chicago history.

So the outside market is wide open for the Sox.

Leave the driving to others?

Reaching out is crucial for another reason. Expressway travel to the Guaranteed Rate Field – there, I typed it again – is difficult from the north and west suburbs during the evening rush hour, and particularly on Fridays. The Sox cannot build more expressways or L lines, but maybe they can encourage and organize more group trips where the stressful driving is left to someone else. I don’t believe getting fans to switch to public transportation via the Red Line L or the 35th Street Metra stop will appreciably boost the gate. A decent section of the public does not want to take public transportation south of downtown at night. Besides, the vast majority of Sox crowds are car-bound.

As an added attraction, the Sox ought to develop the southwest corner of the parking lot across from GR Field at 35th and Shields as a historical attraction that leverages the civil rights legacy that the franchise possesses like no other MLB team. Add new statues of Rube Foster, Double Duty Radcliffe and Bill Veeck outside the ballpark. Commemorate that baseball has been played in the neighborhood since 1890, when Charles Comiskey build Brotherhood Park for his short-lived Chicago Pirates.

Several markers and a plaza commemorating the old Comiskey Park on this site, and all it represented, will draw the curious and generate publicity for special events. Not only was the Sox’s soul developed on this ground, but also the American League was integrated here via Veeck signing Larry Doby on July 5, 1947. The Negro League also played its annual All-Star “East-West” Game on this site, drawing capacity crowds and some of the game’s all-greats that was the highlight of Black America during the ‘30s and ‘40s.

In contrast, the way the Cubs are developing the area around Wrigley Field leaves little room for honoring history. Jack Brickhouse’s statue on Michigan Avenue has not found a happier home around his old ivy-covered workplace. But the Sox have some slack here. Perhaps the commemorative area won’t be a profit center – a possible reason the team closed its small museum inside The Cell in the early 2000s. But a historical corner builds up goodwill that could be turned into cash flow.

In addition to touting the spaciousness of GR Field’s compared to a cramped Wrigley Field and increasing the non-baseball events on the South Side field, the Sox and the Illinois Sports Facilities Authority haven’t exactly over-used the ballpark’s conference facilities. A re-made Wrigley Field still does not have the ability to host business conferences in a sports setting that is attractive to attendees’ collective psyches. We’ve attended many events in the South Side ballpark’s conference center. It can comfortably

handle a crowd. No reason why the place cannot be used 12 months a year with the landlords turning away some events due to its popularity.

All of the above, of course, won't matter much if the Sox don't field a decent on-field product. A collection of promising young position players is the most logical way to win, as the Cubs have proved. Possessing several ace-level pitchers doesn't do the trick either in the won-lost column, if not supported by lineup depth, or in gate appeal. Transport a Kris Bryant or Anthony Rizzo to the South Side, and watch the fans get interested.

Jerry Reinsdorf's desire to win every year was admirable, but could not be executed via the Sox strategy of trading for veterans or signing middle-level free agents. Such commodities are the cherry on the sundae after assembling a core of quality younger players. Cost control of the player payroll is the most immediate benefit rather than throwing good money after bad.

The Sox cannot be Chicago's No. 1 love, not after a Cubs World Series championship that should have at least a decade of shelf life (barring any repeats). But they can survive and even prosper with a different, and very tight, focus. They can be the city's big-league team whose doors are open to all comers.