



Talk of Wrigley's 100th birthday always leads into the future of the old ballyard

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When Wrigley Field's 100th anniversary season is mentioned, the reminder is the ballpark, though ancient, has not been relegated to museum status. It is a living, breathing (many say wheezing), working stadium.

Past is always prologue in baseball. So when Wrigley's history is detailed, the storyline always links to the second hundred years, or a portion of such, with the long-planned renovations. Wrigley always has been an evolving ballpark ever since a porch was eliminated in its earliest days to move the left-field fence back.

While the ballpark has continually evolved, all the new construction has appeared as if Zachary Taylor Davis, Wrigley's architect, had designed the additions, from the bleachers and ivy to the light towers. But Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts' planned add-ons threaten to change that trend, as was detailed in a special program run by the Emil Rothe (Chicago) chapter of the Society for American Baseball Research at the Cliff Dwellers Club in downtown Chicago.

The most interesting angle of "Wrigley Field, Past, Present and Future," held five days before the ballpark's actual centennial date, looked at a ballpark that will appear far different in upcoming years if the renovations go through – and that's still a big "if."

Longtime Chicago baseball journalist Stuart Shea, author of two variations of a ballpark biography, the latest of which is *Wrigley Field: The Long Life and Contentious Times of*



Ed Sherman dovetailed from the future of Cubs TV rights to the most famous homer in Wrigley history during the SABR program.

the Friendly Confines, described in apt terms a stadium featuring a huge Jumbotron towering above left field and a large advertising sign above the bleachers in right.

“A little bit less open space” and a “more claustrophobic experience” were Shea’s words about the renovated Wrigley. The Jumbotron will “kill the golden goose” that featured a “perfect vista of a city – there’s nothing like it in American sports. I fear if you put a Jumbotron in left field you’ll cut off a lot of that experience.”

Indeed, so few media accounts of the renovations looked into the destruction of the one-of-a-kind cityscape that both ballpark patrons and TV viewers have enjoyed for generations. The blending of ballpark backed up by apartment buildings (albeit with erector-set rooftop bleachers reaching skyward) and even the L tracks is so entrancing that ballpark builders over the last two decades have trouped to Wrigley to take notes to incorporate the cityscape into their design. Now, in chase of sorely-needed revenue, the Jumbotron will be grafted onto the left-field wall, the first major feature that will cry out “I don’t really belong here.”

Rights-fees quest has the worst timing

To fund the planned renovation, Ricketts needs to tap into revenue streams that don’t presently exist. Here is another under-reported issue. Ricketts wants a huge bump-up in broadcast rights. He re-opened his WGN-TV contract, in its final season, for the over-the-air games, obviously seeking more dough from a station that has never paid really third-market rate rights due to a number of factors.

The biggest problem, is the intentional crashing of the franchise’s big-league fortunes to stoke Theo Epstein’s brainstorm of a rebuilding program that has scarcely been tried in a Top 10 market. In turn, the Cubs’ interminable losing the past three seasons has dramatically devalued the broadcast rights. We hear the words “losing our shirt” when WGN’s recent ratings and ad revenue on Cubs telecasts is tabulated. The station’s bottom line would take a big jump if the Cubs simply went away.

Say what you want about former GM Larry Himes’ poor stewardship of the team from 1992 to 1994. But Himes was proved right when asked years ago why he didn’t pull off an Epstein-style stripdown-and-rebuild. The Tribune Co. bosses vetoed such action, Himes said, because of the probable negative effect on ratings and revenue.



Media mega-mogul Rupert Murdoch could be a factor in the renovations in Wrigley Field's future. Photo credit: [Word Economic Forum](#).

Unless a wealthy benefactor not presently known steps forward, Ricketts' only alternative to WGN would be Fox-32 and Me-50, stations owned by Fox and media megamogul Rupert Murdoch. If WGN is losing its shirt, how would Murdoch stoke the viewership for a network-owned station (and shifting games to Me-50 to accommodate Fox prime-time programming) that already lags behind WGN in key parts of the day?

Meanwhile, WGN-Radio, on its own, re-opened its Cubs deal for re-negotiation this year. The Cubs were a ratings staple, boosting WGN in the spring and summer "books," for decades. In 1958, when WGN first acquired the radio rights from WIND, Jack Brickhouse told station boss Ward Quaal WGN would lose money the first season and then make a profit "forevermore." The latter term apparently had an expiration date in the 2010s.

This key element of the future was grist for conversation with Ed Sherman, longtime sports media reporter who branched out to write his on-line *The Sherman Report* along with continued contributions to his old base *Chicago Tribune*. Sherman was at the Cliff Dwellers meeting to promote his new book, *Babe Ruth's Called Shot*. But the intricacies of the thirst for revenue would not be far from the conversation flow.

"That's the question," Sherman said of Ricketts' video rights-fee dilemma. "Can someone figure this out? Can someone going to play on the idea when they do get good again, the ratings are going to explode and it's going to be very profitable? But there are creative minds. Do you sell the promise of doing a network down the line? That's what they pay these guys big money to figure out to maximize.

"I don't think they overestimated (revenue potential). The problem is their timing. Their timing is not very good. Their ratings are at all-time lows. But you bet on the come. You hope someone will jump on this thing. You see what happened with the Blackhawks. The Hawks got good. If the Cubs get good, there's no question those 1 ratings are going to be 5's and 6's and probably 10's at some point. Five to 10 times what they have now."

Ricketts' jamup is he can only go after a new partial contract. The Cubs' deal with Comcast SportsNet Chicago runs through 2019.

"They are not positioned to get any kind of (big) rights increase because they can't sell the whole thing (162 games)," Sherman said. "Every other team has been able to sell the whole thing. The only way you can make big money now is cable. You can't make money on over-the-air TV.

"This is only a partial contract. That's why they're looking at other alternatives, including looking at (minority-ownership) investors. It couldn't have come at a worse time to bottom out."

Sounds like the present melding into the future is stressful for those who want a more simple age. An hour later, Sherman became a great promotion man for his Ruth book with his description of the unusual angles in putting together a biography of the most mythical home run in history, during the 1932 World Series at Wrigley.

Greatest moment involved Cubs' foe

“Isn’t it fitting the greatest moment in Wrigley Field history involved an opponent?” Sherman mused.

Ruth certainly gestured, whether at the scoreboard, Cubs pitcher Charlie Root or the Cubs bench jockeys in the dugout, on what passed for the world stage at the time. Sherman said 14 Hall of Famers were on the field for the Cubs-Yankees showdown, with soon-to-be-elected Franklin D. Roosevelt in the box seats and the giants of print journalism gazing down from the pressbox.

Sherman said one possible origin for the myth that Ruth pointed at the far-away scoreboard and flagpole might have originated from a pressbox wire-service reporter who cried out during the Bambino’s gestures that he was “calling his shot.” Some colleagues heard him, some didn’t.

In baseball, you’d often rather be lucky than good. He was both in nailing then-Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, a grade-school witness to Ruth’s antics. Sherman thought he got a semi-brushoff from Stevens’ assistant when he called the Supreme Court’s offices with an interview request. But he got a call back the next day that the chat with Stevens was a go. Stevens put on a Cubs tie for the interview, conducted in chambers that featured a museum-style wall of sports photos. Sherman also talked to Lincoln Landis, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis’ nephew, who sat a couple of seats away from the commissioner during the game, and Julia Stevens, Ruth’s daughter (who was not at the game).

In Sherman’s view, the person who might have headed off the myth was Root. With Ruth already gesturing, the noted chin-music specialist apparently froze on the mound.

“Charlie should have knocked him on his butt,” Sherman said. “I think he missed the opportunity.”

A briefing through Wrigley’s history was provided by Brian Bernardoni, a veteran baseball historian and a ballpark tour guide for 17 years. Bernardoni grew up in tough surroundings as a Cubs fan on the Southwest Side (Garfield Ridge neighborhood) and St. Laurence High School alum.



Brian Bernardoni gave a capsule version of one of his Wrigley Field tours.

Wrigley originally designed for expansion

Bernardoni traced back architect Davis' mental imprint of ballparks. David had designed Comiskey Park, opened four years before Wrigley, and toured other ballparks throughout the game with Sox ace Big Ed Walsh to glean ideas (a precursor of those surveying Wrigley's cityscape). The designer left room for expansion of Wrigley. "The stands were pre-configured for an upper deck (added in 1926-27)," Bernardoni said. "The park was built for growth."

If his presentation lacked any depth, it was a too-brief mention of William L. Veeck, Sr., perhaps the Cubs' best executive ever as team president from 1919 to 1933. Bernardoni mentioned Veeck's "handshake deal" to bring the Bears to Wrigley in 1921, but otherwise did not go into any detail on the indispensable honcho's achievements in popularizing Wrigley Field through its expansion, Ladies Days, widespread radio coverage and season tickets conceived by trusted assistant Margaret Donahue.

Bernardoni relayed two "money" quotes from key figures in Cubs history. From William Wrigley, Jr., the dynamic original owner in the three-generation family ownership: "A man's doubts and fears are his own worst enemy." From son Philip K. Wrigley in 1932: "I know little about baseball and care for it less."

Bernardoni mentioned Charlie Grimm's and folksinger Steve Goodman's ashes were scattered in the ballpark. But perhaps Paul Rathje, former Wrigley park operations chief when Bernardoni first started as a tour guide, carefully did not want to tell him how a select group of fans had their ashes scattered in quiet ceremonies on, say, Sunday mornings when the Cubs were on the road. It was a word-of-mouth deal and Rathje did not want to be swamped with requests.

The entire program detailed a near-byzantine succession of twists and turns of Wrigley's history. The only certainty going forward is that more such eye-opening history-bending events are still in store.



Noted academic sports historian Steve Riess was in attendance.