

One City, Two Teams, Two Generations

By Michael Wilbon

Tuesday, September 30, 2003; Page D01

By birthright, I had to be a White Sox fan. I grew up on the South Side of Chicago, 47 blocks from Comiskey Park. In the segregation of Chicago in the 1960s, black folks didn't go to Wrigley Field, didn't live on the North Side in the neighborhoods surrounding Wrigley, and that included the ballplayers. And there was one other thing.

In 1947, when my father dared go to the North Side to see Jackie Robinson's first game at Wrigley, he was turned away, told that there were already too many coloreds in the ballpark that day, certainly one too many on the field. And my father, who had fled Georgia and the back of buses and southern bigotry a couple of years earlier, vowed he would never set his eyes on Wrigley Field again, and he wouldn't have, except for 1969.

By then I was 10 years old and the Cubs were on fire, building this huge lead over the New York Mets. The Cubs had an incredibly charismatic team, between Ernie Banks's saccharine charm, Billy Williams sweet swing, Ferguson Jenkins's complete-game tenacity and Ron Santo's heel-clicking along the left field line after every Cubs victory. Not only that, but the players were knowable.

Most people hear the words "South Side of Chicago" and they think of two people: Al Capone and Bad Bad Leroy Brown. But it was also the chunk of land where some of the richest black folks in the world were plunked down right next to working class stiff and people crammed in the projects. Along 79th street, between King Drive and Cottage Grove, you'd see men without a dime rolling dice with Muhammad Ali. The men who created Ebony Magazine and Johnson Products, who built some of the richest black businesses in America, lived there. If Michael Jordan had joined the Bulls in 1965 instead of 1985, he'd have lived there, too, not in some gated suburban expanse. It was a time and place in America black folks under 35 know nothing of, and white folks of any age know little about.

Billy Williams, the Cubs' Hall of Fame right fielder, lived within walking distance from my house in the 1960s. White Sox outfielder Walt (No Neck) Williams lived two streets over for a spell, and I can still see him riding his motorcycle. Bill Melton, the White Sox third baseman, who is white, either bunked with No Neck for a while or simply hung out with him so often we thought he lived there. I can still see Melton, the Grand Marshal of our 1969 West Chatham Little League Parade, riding in the back of Jimmy Payne's father's convertible Cadillac.

Banks, God bless him, barely made more than \$50,000. He lived about 20 blocks east of my family.

The point I'm making here is that ballplayers then, particularly black ones, lived in ordinary neighborhoods. They weren't allowed to live anywhere else. If you hung around the ballpark too long and they recognized you, they'd pick you up and drop you at home. It was one of the few wonderfully positive things about segregation.

Everybody was within arm's reach, even for a few years the heavyweight champ of the world.

So with players from both teams right there, I rooted for them all, for both teams. It's not like they played against each other, or that either was so successful it was a case of bandwagon hopping. It wasn't until I reached high school, St. Ignatius, where my classmates from all-white Bridgeport, which borders Comiskey Park, told me I had to pick one team.

Really? I was supposed to obey some arbitrary rules set forth by kids who lived in a place where someone of color could be beaten senseless (as happened on occasion) for simply entering?

There's no delicate way to put this, but I have zero tolerance for people who lived outside of my circumstance attempting to tell me who I should root for and why. I like the White Sox. I love the Cubs, even though my father hated the Cubs because of their ownership and said every chance he got that he hoped they'd lose every game.

Anyway, in that summer of 1969 my brother Don and I begged my father to take us to Wrigley Field, begged him to break his vow to never set foot in the joint. My mother intervened, told him 22 years of anger was long enough even if it was justified, and his loyalty now was to his sons, not Jackie Robinson.

So we went, took the "L" to the North Side for the first time in my life, past all these lily white neighborhoods I'd never seen, straight to Wrigley Field. It helped that my father could see Hank Aaron that day.

Aaron homered, the Cubs won. Santo clicked his heels as he ran to the clubhouse door in the left field corner, and I was hooked. On days that high school classes were over early, I could hop the train and go to Wrigley. By the early 1970s, I'd see a few other black people there. You could sneak to the ballpark, see an afternoon game, and still be home by dinner, the whole thing costing no more than \$5, including a hot dog, if you sat in the bleachers. My parents never had to know.

It isn't the losing that has been the charm of the Cubs, it's WGN carrying the games all over the place for 25 years, it's Harry Caray leaning out of the press box and singing during the seventh-inning stretch, it's the ivy on the outfield walls once spring turns to summer, it's the timelessness of Wrigley. If they simply opened the ballpark for lunch, 15,000 would show up.

I never felt the Cubs were going to reach the World Series in 1984; there was something fatalistic about the NLCS with the Padres, even though the Cubs won the first two games at Wrigley. They had no chance in 1989 against the Giants, the last time the Cubs won a division title. The 1998 wild-card appearance was a postscript to the summer of Sosa and Mark McGwire.

But there is something incredibly hopeful about this postseason. They won a division despite Sammy Sosa missing nearly a month with his beaming and corked bat episode, with talented young center fielder Cory Patterson missing the second half of the season with a ripped-up knee. For the first time that I can remember in 40 years of following this team, the Cubs have overcome serious adversity. Not only that, but I'd take Mark Prior, Kerry Wood, Carlos Zambrano and Matt Clement over any other starting rotation in baseball.

The Yankees, Braves and Giants feel they are just starting their seasons because they expect to win it all. Red Sox fans are awash in their usual melodramatic angst. Those of us who have cast our lot with the Cubs are, of course, just happy to be invited to the party, though also daring to be more hopeful than in the three previous postseasons trips. But we don't dare expect anything.