

# BASEBALL DIGEST



## OPENING DAY EDITION



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*By Abe J. Shear*  
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Better than most, the Veeck family has understood the game of baseball and the fun it can offer. Mike Veeck, firmly believes that neither more and louder music and noise, nor more food and concessions, draw fans to the ballpark as successfully as does good baseball.

Mike is known for lots of things, including the legendary disco night at Comiskey Park nearly 40 years ago. Of more lasting importance, however, is his contribution to so many minor league teams, drawing large crowds, focusing on baseball as “the” product which ultimately makes a night at the park “must do” family entertainment.

Mike and his family have loved the game and, surely the Chicago White Sox, for many many decades. Their commitment to baseball reminds us, in all of our pursuits, that focus, passion and fun can go hand-in-hand. As you will read, Mike is both humorous and insightful and I am certain that you will enjoy his observations.

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### Mike Veeck “A Creative Family”

**Shear: What are your first memories of baseball?**

Veeck: I remember walking into Comiskey Park when I was 8 years old and walking through the concourse. I was holding my dad’s hand. I never felt safer, and it seemed like he knew everybody in the world working around the ballpark and on the scaffolding getting ready for the season. Everyone got down to say “hello” and he stopped and shook hands, then we walked through the vomitory behind home plate and there was the most beautiful lawn I’d ever seen and it seemed to me that life was just about perfect.

as I get older, I admire so much about him.

**Just out of curiosity, did he bring his work home with him? Was he baseball at home and baseball at work or was he just baseball at work?**

There was never a division. My son’s the fourth generation working for the White Sox and I think because of our strong recognition of the fact that we’re so lucky to be able to work, not only in our passion, our vocations and avocations blur, so it was just baseball. It was your job, but it is also was your hobby. It was your passion, it was your fun. There was never a line, even during unemployment

“I never thought that anybody would say that they’d throw at their mother.”

**He probably knew everybody by their first names too, I imagine, or by their nicknames.**

He used nothing but given names. He never used a nickname in all the time that he was on this planet as my father.

**You grew up in Chicago?**

No. I moved 17 times in the first 11 years of my life. While I was born in Tucson, I just tell everyone Chicago’s home because it’s easier than explaining 27 moves. You go where the work is.

**I see. Even when you were a little boy.**

Because my father was never independently wealthy, he, of course, had to follow the work, which is something,

there was no line.

**Sort of like it was your girlfriend, almost.**

Yeah, only truer.

**Did you play baseball as youth?**

I did indeed. I had a pretty good control and a curve ball, as I was telling Ryne Sandberg the other night during the hot stove dinner, that broke a foot in half. Unfortunately, it broke in the same spot. And so you could close your eyes, and by the time I was pitching against juniors in high school, they could close their eyes and swing right through the middle of plate, right down the cock, as we used to say, and they would hit it a mile, and they

did. My dad came to see me play really only once and two guys from Delaware had back to back home runs. I hope they went to work for the space program because at least one and a half of those ball are still in orbit. I mean, they hit them like the kick of the mule. Driving home, my dad said to me “as a pitcher McGill, you’re a pretty good drummer.” I took that as great career advice.

**Did your family see baseball as a sport or as a social experience when you grew up?**

It was very much a sport. I probably veered off. Dad was intensely competitive. It was all about the game and, as I tell people all the time, if we did not have to promote, we’d probably let the game peddle itself. The problem is that everybody that does not promote is out of business very quickly. 35% of the people who come into your ballpark – and this number has held for 100 years – love the game, don’t need to be told anything about the standings, averages, things like that. That leaves 65% of your seats filled with fans who respond if you stimulate, but when dad drew 2.6 million paid people in Cleveland in 1948 with the Indians, that was a ball club with any number of Hall of Famers, so that made that a great draw. But it was all about winning. He just liked to dress it up for those days that it wasn’t quite as interesting.

**Did the people where you grew up go to the ball game to see the teams or did they go to see the players? It seems to me today often times they go to see the players.**

I think that you are right. But I think they went to see the players back then too, just for a different reason. They went to see their favorite players who consistently played on their favorite teams. And now, of course, they move with some rapidity. I think that has changed. Fox and Aparicio on the ’59 White Sox were going to be there forever until Aparicio suddenly found himself in Baltimore.

**Compared to today, you knew all the teams and you had half the number of the teams that you have today. I think you had 16 teams, but the players from year to year, there might only be 2 or 3 new players on the team or 4 new players on the team, so you knew exactly who was where and you knew**

**everything about them.**

Yes. There were card sets, and only bums ended up in the spokes of your bike or the brim of your cap, but at any one time most kids that I knew had their favorite team in their back pocket and in their front pocket were a team of doubles that they were willing to trade. There was also greater identification with players than there is today because you don’t have the time now to get to know them.

**I know that you said that the first game you went to was a White Sox game, but**

nonsense. Whatever we’re experiencing in social upheaval, obviously football comes to the fore, you know, it reflects our societal landscape. So, during the ’90s, we were relatively at peace and so baseball is perfect in that backdrop.

**Clemente would have been a player that would have been great on ESPN for the highlights, that’s for sure. Everything he did just was electric. When he made a play, or made a catch, or made a throw, hit the ball, or ran, it was exciting.**

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**“Players have to be accessible and there has to become an emotional relationship.”**

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**what was your favorite team when you grew up?**

The 1957 Milwaukee Braves. I’m sure because of our loathing to this day of the Yankees, and corporate America. Del Crandall catching, Adcock at 1st, Schoendienst, Johnny Logan, Eddie Mathews at 3rd, Covington, Bruton, and Aaron in the outfield and, the unsung hero, Joey Jay, and of course Burdette and Spahn. At the age of 6, I was a huge Milwaukee Braves fan for some reason.

**Who were your favorite players when you grew up, notwithstanding what team you were rooting for?**

Early Wynn. I never thought that anybody would say that they’d throw at their mother if she dug in the box. The day he was quoted in the papers, he became my favorite. I always wanted to be Willie Mays, the Say Hey kid.

**What about non-pitchers? Were you an American League fan?**

Yes, I was an American League fan. Although, Roberto Clemente managed to worm his way into my heart. I just couldn’t believe that anybody could throw like that.

**And what about a guy like Ernie Banks who played for the Cubs?**

I’ve only been to 2 or 3 Cubs games in my entire life. I’m a White Sox fan through and through. Fifty some years later, and Bill Murray and I still argue constantly as partners about the Sox and the Cubs. Ernie Banks was, you know, if there were 40 Ernie Banks in the game today, there would be none of this

A lot of that was, you know, it was Forbes Field where you couldn’t see home plate. I just think the idea of throwing Mays out, or throwing a guy out at the plate by 15 feet when it’s shot into that corner was something. But Banks is very similar to Minoso. Kirby Puckett was like that in the upper mid-west. There are players who were so fascinated by the ever-changing landscape of the game, and yet never lost sight of the fact that without the fans it doesn’t exist, so they become super-human in so many ways. You don’t view Banks as a Cub really, you view him as an ambassador of the game.

**I was at Comiskey Park once, the new one I haven’t gone to in protest. I was at the old one and thought it was just this great old park with steel and shade and overhangs and, as you said, great green grass wedged into the city in some sort of almost impossible way. I kind of miss Comiskey Park.**

People wax so eloquently about Fenway and about Wrigley, two of the great old ballparks, Tiger Stadium, and of course Comiskey, are left out of the conversation. Comiskey was not only built with great rapidity, it also, having opened in 1910, was the oldest ballpark in the world and they saw fit to knock down. With those great Roman arches over left field, it represented everything to the working stiffs of the south side, of which the Veecks numbered themselves in that group. It represented something to us. It represented exactly what you

said, “steel”. It was workman-like, but it had a beauty to it in its lines, the brickwork and, as I mentioned, the arches and, of course, then dad added the exploding scoreboard. Comiskey was a workingman’s ballpark. It did its job, and it could have stood for another 50 years had they put money in it rather than allow it to deteriorate.

**Instead they’ve got a ballpark that I’ve never heard, honestly, anybody say anything very nice about.**

Well, I will tell you, Abe, that they’ve improved it over the last 3 or 4 years. It’s still – I couldn’t agree with you more. It looks like a bank. And it looks as if it were dropped on the south side. The irony of the park now looking like Chase at 35th and Shields is not lost on White Sox fans. It’s become a Cub town, but during the ’70s when we were there, it was very much a White Sox town. You know, Maddon is just driving a nail in the coffin, because having him on the north side is going to make it even more difficult.

**He is a pretty good manager, too.**

He’s a great manager. The White Sox have just never had – and I sound like my dad’s son, and I very rarely do that – but in this case, really since Bill Veeck left, the White Sox haven’t had a personality. The south side hungers for one of their own, and nobody’s going to mistake Eddie for one of their own.

**When you were young, did you go to minor league games?**

Not particularly. I didn’t discover the joys of minor league baseball really until after the disco – after I blew up those disco records and was unceremoniously escorted out of the big leagues [Note: July 12, 1979]. I didn’t realize that causing the forfeiture would insure you not getting hired for a while. When I realized that it was the only way I could get back into the game I loved, I discovered it quickly. Doesn’t mean I didn’t go, but I started with the White Sox and worked 6 years and learned my trade at that level and endured all the things that you can imagine go along with being the owner’s kid.

**But the problem with disco night wasn’t really that you didn’t have a great idea, you just didn’t really see that it was as great as it was. It was just better than you ever thought it**

**would be.**

Well, unfortunately, that’s the position all these years later I’ve taken. By now I’m old enough to recognize that I guess somewhere in there I should have slipped a couple of mea culpas in. I did apologize to the season ticket customers. In the scheme of things, I can tell you that we’re not experiencing the troubles in the Middle East we are having because of a forfeited ball game.

**The sports page is sort of like the sports and legal page today. I think a pretty good story to counterbalance whether people are gambling on tennis illegally would be disco night at a ballgame. I think that sounds pretty sane to me, actually.**

**Did you have any favorite owners that you got to meet back in those days?**

I’ve always had kind of a soft spot for the Griffith family, not for any particular reason. I was crazy about Chuck Comiskey. He and dad were not friendly – but he always seemed lovely to me – an elegant man in the best sense of that. Mr. Wrigley was – I knew very early on that Mr. Wrigley, no matter how inviting a target he was for promoting when I got to Chicago, he was off limits. So I think that dad, after his father died, became his surrogate son. The ivy actually was a result of the fact that horticulture was probably the only thing on which Mr. Wrigley and my dad agreed. I always thought that Yawkey was very polite, and I could understand why Gussie Busch chose to run my dad off. But I think the Griffith family, I kind of like their “aw shucks” approach that we’re all in this together.

**Did you collect memorabilia when you were young?**

No. I collected cards. I was a voracious card dealer. I early on understood that there were wolves in sheep’s clothing with memorabilia.

**Right. What about announcers?**

**When you grew up or even later, who were the announcers that you loved to listen to?**

Chuck Thompson with the Orioles was I think one of the great, underrated announcers of all time. We moved to Maryland when dad was going to die from a brain tumor so I became a closet Orioles fan and I just loved listening to him do ballgames. I got a chance to work

with Harry (Caray) as an announcer. Harry did not rate up there, he certain wasn’t a Vin Scully, but he was very passionate about the game. What I admired about Harry was that he was no homer and I liked that. Brickhouse and Elston were very workmen-like, very popular in Chicago, but frankly they were both homers. Harry did not mind taking the club on. Piersall should have stayed in Texas.

**Have you ever been a beer vendor?**

Only at the minor league level. I’ve done every job you can do at the minor league level.

**I think I could get a job at one of your ball parks selling beer – I think I’d be good at it.**

Well, you could do that with our lobbyist in St. Paul, who helped us get the new ball park built this year, one of the great lobbyists of all time and one of the great beer vendors.

**I think I may do that at some point.**

**Tell me, if you could have dinner with 3 or 4 other people to talk baseball, who would you have dinner with?**

Wow – I had a chance once to meet Maris, but I would love to have dinner with Roger Maris about that (1961) year. I wasn’t particularly a Mantle fan. Elston Howard. Also, I’d do anything for Larry Doby to come back. There are really any number of great people like Stengel, great characters. I enjoyed Earl Weaver notwithstanding the fact that you had to tip behind his back. And Bob Dylan, who sneaks into ballparks and watches the games and wrote that song “Catfish.” I think that would be an interesting group of people. I love writers too.

**How do you think baseball changes in the future to make it more compelling to the public at large?**

I don’t think we have to do a whole lot to it. I do think two minutes between innings so they can get an extra 30 second spot is corrosive. I think the music played for players is ridiculous. I think anything you can do to speed it up, I think the 20 second clock should be enforced. I think we should go outside for our next commissioner. I also think access is tremendously important. We averaged 8100 people in St. Paul and we got a new ballpark in our 24th year last year. The key to the success is to be accessible; kids can go down and get

autographs. That's the problem we have to struggle with at the big league level, players have to be accessible and there has to become an emotional relationship but, like I said, when we figure out the turmoil in the world, baseball will rise in its pastoral setting.

**Well, I had three questions left but you just answered one of them. Tell me, what's the best food you ever had in the ballpark?**

That's unfair – I think they do a great job in Baltimore. I think we did a great job in the '70s. We were the first to sell light beer. We were the first to experiment with food, and I am talking '76 and '77. We brought in independent food stands. Now I think they do a great job. The Red Sox do a great job with their food. The problem is making a distinction always with the price. We owned the ball club in Fort Myers, the Miracle, and I sold my share of it because we had raised our ticket prices for spring training 18 times in 20 years or some such nonsense and that's a problem. That used to be the spot where the fans could check in and kids could get a lot of autographs and you did not have to spend an arm and a leg for it. Now, of course, they are looking for spring training as profit centers. They spend so much money on these ballparks and the prices keep going up. That's going to be a problem at some point. San Francisco has good food but you're paying for it. We caught on! I think

they learned a lot from us folks in minor leagues. I have 10 years of experience in the big leagues. I've worked for four teams. I don't want you to think I take shots at them.

**The last question I have, and I hope it's not unfair: Do you think is more fun today to go to a minor league game than to a major league game?**

Yeah, I do. I get into this beef all the time and people always say the same thing to me. They say "You know, Mike you can do things in St. Paul or Charleston, or wherever, and we really can't do it." I say Bill (Murray) and I will go to Wrigley Field and he'll coach 1st base, does the laughter sounds any different to you? Instead of having little things in life that happen - you know it has to be a profit center. That's why it is today more fun to go to a minor league game. One thing in their (MLB) defense I will say, when I started in this game nobody moved up from the front offices of the minor league game to the big leagues and now they are raiding the minors. I think currently there are a number of broadcasters at the major league level. So, they look at us now and we've become a training ground and I think that bodes well for baseball.

**It's always occurred to me when I go to a minor game or even a spring training game, which is in a small park, a minor league park – it's pretty neat to see the kids just running recklessly all**

**around the ballpark. It is a little bit old fashioned whereas you know big stadium holds 40-50,000 seats, it really is like going to a big city, a bit more of a cautious environment to me.**

Well, our society has of course changed and I am not blind to that. Baseball has something going for it. Baseball has that lovely kind of feel to it – you get three innings in with your kids, the only rule we have in any of our ballparks is that if you complain about a kid we are probably going to toss you out. See, you've It's always occurred to me when I go to a minor game or even a spring training game, which is in a small park, a minor league park – it's pretty neat to see the kids just running recklessly all around the ballpark. It is a little bit old fashioned whereas you know big stadium holds 40-50,000 seats, it really is like going to a big city, a bit more of a cautious environment to me. lost your sense of humor. Yes, you're right. Society has changed and some things are horrible, but the fact is that kids get lost in a contained environment. Unlike when I was young, both of my children grew up in ballparks. Dad encouraged us not to go into the baseball business. I can't think of a better way for my kids to make their living.

**This is absolutely, totally perfect and I'm very appreciative. Thanks very much.**

Mike Veck  
"A Creative  
"Family"

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