

Rich King

Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in 2004. Originally published at White Sox Interactive in 2004.

When you speak with him the first thing that impresses you about Rich King is that he seems the same off camera as he does on it. As in friendly, professional, courteous, knowledgeable... all good words to describe him. He's not bombastic like Mike North; he's not looking for attention like Mark Giangreco. He is what he is...what he's always been... and that's been good enough to keep him employed in the third biggest market in the country in various capacities, since 1969. Rich has worked for WGN-TV since 1991 after a four-year stint with WBBM-TV.

One other thing about Rich...he's a long time, die hard Sox fan and when it comes to the team of his youth, he shows a side that he's not able to do on camera for WGN-TV and that's offer an opinion. Sportscasters are supposed to report, not give opinions, but since I caught up with Rich at his home on a rare off day, he was able to talk about a great number of subjects including working with Harry Caray and Jimmy Piersall as part of the White Sox radio gang in the early 80's, working for former Sox owner Bill Veeck, how current Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf is very misunderstood by Sox fans, what the mood will be like at the upcoming Sox Fest, why the Sox players haven't had a lot of fun the past few years and what exactly is in the WGN archives on the White Sox.

ML: Rich why don't we start with your youth. You were born and raised a South Sider... where did you grow up?

RK: I grew up at 1123 West 17th, it's actually Racine and 17th just a stone's throw from Comiskey Park. I walked to a lot of games, it was a long walk but I was able to do it. When I was 18, I moved into the Brighton Park area so I was on the South Side for a long time.

ML: Any early memories of the Sox?

RK: My father took me to my first game in 1957. The Red Sox were in town. I remember watching Ted Williams... for the Sox those were the days of "Minnie" Minoso, Nellie Fox and company.

ML: How did you decide you wanted to get into the broadcasting business?

RK: I always loved sports; I was the last cut from the De La Salle high school baseball team and my second year in college I decided I wanted to get into broadcasting. (*Author's Note: Rich is a graduate from Illinois - Chicago*) I majored in speech / theater and minored in history. I joined the broadcasting club and got an internship at WGN-TV in 1969. I joined WBBM radio in 1970 as a writer / producer for news. I didn't do sports. At that time WBBM had Brent Musberger and Brad Palmer doing sports. I actually worked in news for seven years becoming assistant news director / managing editor in 1972. I got a chance to start doing some sports in 1974 but primarily I worked in news.

WBBM had the Sox broadcasting rights and I knew Bill Veeck was looking for a fourth guy for the radio because Joe McConnell was also doing the Bears, which meant there would be times he wasn't going to be able to work in August and September. Our G.M. at the time, Bill O'Donnell, went to Bill and said that he thought I could do the job. That's how I got the chance to do Sox games. To me that was the culmination of a dream. I had always wanted to do the Sox and here I was 33-34 years old and getting the chance. I was pretty lucky because I got to do 20-30 games as the play by play man in 1980 and that went up to about 40 games in 1981.

ML: Do you remember the first game you did?

RK: It was in Boston. I did the game myself. Harry Caray and Jimmy Piersall were doing the game on WGN-TV. The Sox were on the FM station that day because the Bears were playing, so Joe was doing their game. Dennis Eckersley was the starter for the Red Sox. I had never done play by play before and I was nervous, oh man! I had a headache, my stomach was rumbling but it was great. I was lucky to get the chance and I was able to get better. I know Harry told me that he saw a big difference in my style the second year, (1981) I was projecting more and Jimmy said I had improved. It was a most enjoyable time although the travel could be difficult.

ML: How come your stint with the Sox only lasted two seasons?

RK: WBBM radio lost the broadcast rights to WMAQ. I had to decide if I wanted to take a chance and try to stay on with the Sox or stay at WBBM where I had worked for a number of years. As much as I wanted to keep doing the Sox it was better for me that I stay in a more stable situation.

ML: Tell us what it was like working with Harry, Jimmy and Joe?

RK: Harry was exactly like his image. I don't know how he did it but he could enjoy his beer, stay out late but when it was time he'd shake everything off and was always able to do the broadcast. Jimmy befriended me, he's still a good friend, but because of his background, it was always unpredictable what might happen. Joe taught me how to prepare for a game.

Harry and Jimmy were always entertaining but the players couldn't stand them. You remember they'd say what was on their minds especially if someone made a bad play. I'll give you an example of what I mean. I was good friends with Greg Luzinski. For some reason we just hit it off. Anyway one day Greg had a bad leg, he pulled a hamstring or something and couldn't run. In those days that kind of injury didn't get out so nobody knew about it. Earlier in the game he hit a couple of ground balls and couldn't run it out. Jimmy got on him about that saying something like 'for all the money they are paying him the least he can do is run.' Well somebody heard that in the clubhouse because they had the game on and let Greg know what was said. Turns out Greg hit a game winning double in the 9th inning or so and I go down to interview him for the "Star of the Game." I'm there with my equipment and Greg starts shouting to get the hell away from him, he doesn't want any part of the media and so on. I wound up interviewing the pitcher and about 30 minutes later I go up to Greg and ask "what's going on? What was that all

about?" Greg said he was sorry that he didn't mean what he said, but that Jimmy was just driving him crazy.

ML: This is an issue that's a real concern to a lot of Sox fans Rich and that's the feeling that with WGN owning the Cubs and the Tribune, the Sox can never get a fair shot in coverage. How difficult does that make your job? I know some of the Tribune writers have caught flak from Sox fans over this in the past.

RK: It's actually been pretty easy for me because of my background. Fans know that I broadcast for the Sox and have been a Sox fan. My coverage is balanced. From a production standpoint there is a difference between how a Cub game is presented and a Sox game but I have no control over that. I know that when I do my show I won't shortchange either team. Many times I go with the team that's hot. Last year I went with the Sox as the lead story three nights in a row and I had Cub fans calling me and saying 'what about the Cubs?' I enjoy both teams. I told Jerry Reinsdorf that myself last year... that I thought it was great what was happening on both sides of town.

ML: You worked for Bill Veeck a guy many fans remember fondly because of his affinity for the common fan but there are also fans who say he was nothing but a con man and that he didn't have the means to develop a decent farm system let alone with a championship. What was Bill... saint or sinner?

RK: Well remember he was a self-described hustler. That was the title of his book, "The Hustler's Handbook." Bill was an amazing character. He was very well read and could discuss with you anything from baseball to currency. Because of his leg he'd have to soak it in the tub for two hours a day so he'd read. It's true he never had the resources to be able to bring a winner to Chicago and things got so financially strapped that the Sox actually took a prop plane out of Toronto one time like something out of "Major League!" They were always cutting back on things. It was a great relief when Jerry Reinsdorf took over the team. It was unfortunate when Eddie Einhorn at the press conference said the new group would start running a 'first class' organization. Bill was very offended by that and stayed away from the park for the rest of his life. I know that Eddie made overtures towards Bill to apologize for the remarks but they were ignored. Bill could be stubborn and he was opinionated.

ML: Speaking of Jerry Reinsdorf, many fans don't remember that when he first got control of the club he went out and got two quality players every year through 1983, Carlton Fisk and Luzinski in 81'...Tom Paciorek and Steve Kemp in 82'...Julio Cruz and Floyd Bannister in 83'. He seems to have gotten away from that idea... what is the financial problem with this organization?

RK: It's the problem with baseball. Think about it, how many teams are in a position now to go out and spend money to get players? Maybe a half dozen? All the rest of the teams are in the same situation as the Sox. He doesn't have the resources. The Sox are in a major market but they are the *minor* team in that market. He has a number of different investors and nobody wants to lose money. I've known Jerry Reinsdorf for a long time; I know he isn't in this game to make a lot of money. He is dying to get to a World Series, that's what he really wants.

I think he tries to win with the resources that he's got. Recent history shows he's done a pretty good job. He's won a couple division titles, he's made the playoffs, he's got a new stadium built and is renovating it. I've seen it and the park looks great.

In retrospect maybe the Sox would have been better off had he succeeded in changing the economic system. Have he and the organization made mistakes... certainly. He admitted that the biggest mistake he ever did was firing Tony LaRussa. Overall I don't think he's as bad as people think. He's a straight shooter and I think he's been misrepresented.

The question is does he take the gamble? Do he and his investors take say a 50-million-dollar loan, go out and get top players and try to win a championship. What happens to the franchise if they don't? Look at the Diamondbacks who did the same thing a few years ago, they did win a championship, but now attendance has dropped, they are in debt and the banks today aren't willing to make loans and take on that kind of risk. The Diamondbacks could wind up bankrupt. I'm sure teams like Cincinnati and Pittsburgh are losing money; you'd think their owners would try to sell and get money back from the way the teams have increased in value. Why haven't they? Maybe because they can't find anybody who'd buy them and they have new stadiums.

ML: What about Kenny Williams? How hard is all of this for him? He seems to have that football player's mentality of wanting to win yesterday, win today and win tomorrow and so far he hasn't been able to.

RK: He knows what he's gotten himself into. He understands how much resources he has. Yes... he's wound up tight and he wants to win. He still feels that he has a shot because Minnesota lost good players. I wish everyone out there could be in a position of management for at least a little while, just to understand what goes with being a G.M. The easiest thing to do is sit back and say 'you should have done this, you should have done that.' It easy to make decisions when you don't have a stake in it. When you are actually the one to make the decisions you can't second guess yourself, you don't have that luxury. And we've all done it. When the Sox got Ed Farmer for Eric Soderholm I went on the air and said it was a bad deal. Farmer turned into a top relief pitcher and I went on the air and said "that's the last time you'll hear Rich King second guess anybody.

For the fan base out there saying "well we don't trust this organization and why is Rich defending it?" remember I have nothing to gain out of this. I don't need to have the Sox give me a job, I'm in a stable position, Jerry Reinsdorf never hired me... this is what I honestly think when I look at the organization and the job they are doing.

ML: The recent Cub Convention was a giddy affair full of happy fans dreaming of a trip to the World Series. Sox Fest is nearly here. What do you think the tone of the fans will be?

RK: Boy, Sox fans are not in a pleasant frame of mind. People are upset after how close they came last season; I can't blame them for that. I think it's going to be a rough convention for the Sox. One thing about Sox fans, they are not afraid to speak their mind.

ML: A few months ago on “Instant Replay,” (*Author’s Note: The long time WGN-TV sports segment on Sunday night after the news*) your colleague Dan Roan had an interesting comment in an interview he did with new manager Ozzie Guillen. Dan said “the past few years Sox players haven’t had any fun and certainly the fans haven’t had any fun.” Strictly your opinion, why hasn’t there been any fun on the South Side?

RK: I think Dan’s comment was directed more towards the atmosphere in the clubhouse as opposed to the fans. I was out at the park last year when the Sox were winning and the fans were electric. The atmosphere in the clubhouse the past few years has not been good and that has mainly come from Frank Thomas. He just always seems to be upset. He’s been really up and down... very moody and it affects everyone. I know his contract has been an issue but it’s like with Scottie Pippin. Both Scottie’s agent and Jerry Reinsdorf told him not to sign it but he did anyway. Well what you sign you live by. I signed a two-year contract, after one year I’m not going to go in and demand more money. Now you have this situation where nobody knows how he’s going to even get along with Ozzie because of some of the things that were said. Frank’s not the only one; Billy Koch was difficult to get along with. The whole clubhouse was no fun at all.

ML: What about 2004? What can we expect?

RK: I told Jerry Reinsdorf that he took a gamble naming Ozzie as manager. I said that Ozzie was either going to be sensational or it was going to be a pretty rough, that there wasn’t going to be a middle ground. I think the Sox are going to rely again on Esteban Loaiza and Mark Buehrle. They still have some good sticks in the lineup, Thomas, Magglio (Ordonez), (Paul) Konerko. The keys are going to be Jon Garland who’s been a disappointment so far and Koch. Garland has got to step up and give the Sox three good pitchers. Koch lost five miles an hour off his fastball last year. He’s a guy who saved 44 games with Oakland; he’s got to return to that form. If the Sox are still in the race come July, I expect them to go out and get players. They did that last year... they’ll get people.

ML: One final question Rich something off topic. Just about every game that WGN-TV shows, they usually have some type of historical flashback video. I remember last year when Bobby Bonds died they showed TV video of him hitting a home run with the Sox in 1978 and some footage before that when he was with the Yankees and Angels playing against the Sox. Just exactly what does WGN have in their morgue concerning the Sox?

RK: It’s actually very minimal. I know we have Sox material stored from 1985 on but not before that. A lot of the footage that you see was donated to the Chicago Museum of Broadcasting. I assume that the production people got it from there, you’d have to ask them that.

