

Mike Veeck

*Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in 2004
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If there is such a thing as a baseball family, it's got to be the Veecks'. Mike Veeck's grandfather ran the Cubs in the 20's and 30's. His father, Hall of Famer, Bill Veeck, planted the famous (or infamous?) ivy at Wrigley Field then took over the operations of the White Sox twice... from 1959 through 1961 and from 1976 through 1980. In addition Bill ran the St. Louis Browns and the Cleveland Indians. Mike did just about everything that could be done for the White Sox when his dad ran the team the second time and has also had positions with three other major league organizations. Who knows what the future may hold for Mike's children with regards to baseball?

Now living in South Carolina with his family, Mike continues to have a hand in the sport, owning a half dozen minor league clubs along with some well-known partners. He took time out on a Saturday afternoon to speak with me about a number of topics.

The conversation was a mixture of poetry and prose, of how baseball has a hold on generation after generation, about why his famous father had to sell the team in 1961, how then Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley refused to let the White Sox go and called the one man he thought could be of help in 1975, about how the idea for "Disco Demolition" came about, what went wrong that night and how he got an interesting letter in 1998 when he tried to stage a "Disco Demolition 20th Anniversary" from representatives of Steve Dahl.

Mike also discussed the current Sox ownership, the insult that his dad never forgave them for and what has gone wrong for a franchise that dominated the Chicago baseball scene during the 1950's through the mid 1960's. Of course Mike had the time for this discussion as he is recuperating from a bicycle accident. He tried to catch and shoot a basketball while riding it, but wound up breaking his leg in four places.

(Author's Note: According to Mike's wife though he has actually pulled this maneuver off in the past!)

ML: Mike when your dad first got ownership of the Sox you were around nine years old. What was your childhood like? I get a sense of privilege being the son of the owner. Was that the case?

MV: It was the exact opposite Mark. I was very much a typical child. That was by design. My mom and dad wanted me and my sisters to live a normal life. I remember one day my mom took me aside and said that what my dad did was no different from say a bricklayer. That he worked for a living just like anybody else, that we weren't any different from anybody else. The only difference was that the media reported on what my dad did. I never considered my dad as an owner; I thought he was more like Gepetto.

ML: Is it true that during the 1959 World Series you and your mom, Mary Francis watched the games from the walk way aisle under the press box?

MV: That's true. I thought it was strange and asked my mom about it. She said that my dad would be able to sell the seats so we sat in the aisle.

ML: How is your mom doing by the way?

(Author's Note: Mike's mom has always been a White Sox fan even to this day and had a hand in designing the retro uniforms that the Sox wore from 1976 through 1981.)

MV: She's great. She still lives in Chicago. She's 83 now but still in good health.

ML: Did you have a favorite Sox player growing up?

MV: You couldn't be a Sox fan and not like the great Luis Aparicio and Nellie Fox but my favorite was Early Wynn. I loved the idea that he'd throw at his own mother if she was crowding the plate.

ML: Mike it has long been the subject of speculation about why your dad sold the team the first time. Many have said it was because he might have been very sick at the time. Do you know why your dad sold the Sox in the early 60's?

MV: My dad *was* very sick. He'd been having blackouts, that's why he had to drive to the park with "Dizzy" Trout. He couldn't drive a car anymore. He had a tumor the size of a golf ball in his head. He sold the team in July 1961 and we moved back to Maryland. He was putting his things in order getting ready to die. My mom told me that she prayed it away because it just disappeared. The family wasn't supposed to know about it but I discovered he was sick one day by accident.

ML: Sox fans know how the sale changed their lives but how did it change yours? How tough was it for you to not be able to hang out at the ballpark, loving baseball like you do?

MV: That aspect wasn't that difficult. The biggest change for me was going from concrete to Eastern Maryland which is basically a pastoral setting. I'm was a city kid growing up at Sportsman's Park in St. Louis and Comiskey Park. It wasn't that hard not being around a baseball team. My dad always told us that you get a baseball team, worked it, and then got out. He didn't like people staying too long in the sport.

ML: We fast forward now to the mid 70's. The Sox were in financial trouble, John Allyn was looking to get out and moving the team to Seattle was a real possibility. Do you remember when and how it first came up at your house that your dad might want to get the Sox back?

MV: My dad actually made a bid to buy the Baltimore Orioles first. In fact he had a handshake agreement on it. We in the Veeck family always felt a handshake *was* a deal. When that fell apart

my dad got a call from Mayor Daley. He wanted to know if my dad would be interested in getting the Sox again.

ML: Mike *why* the White Sox? Why did your dad show such loyalty to a city that he only resided in for a few years the first time around as owner? Was it strictly a good business deal or was there more going on with the situation for him?

MV: Mayor Daley called in December 1975 and offered considerable support. My dad always had the philosophy of ‘you can’t go home again’, and he wasn’t comfortable in the savior’s role, but he loved Chicago. He was a Midwesterner by birth and had a Midwesterner’s pride. He understood and had a lot of respect for Chicago. He knew it was a working town and it was the town of ‘everyman.’ He also loved the idea of the Sox being the underdog. He never made any apologies for the fact that there were two baseball teams in Chicago so he stepped up when he was needed.

ML: The other American League owners made it very difficult for your dad. They rejected his first proposal saying it basically didn’t meet the way business was being done at the time and then they gave him 10 days to come up with a new deal or the Sox were basically gone to Seattle. Was there a time when your dad ever thought he would *not* be able to pull it off?

MV: No... he always thought he was going to get it done. Again he loved being the underdog and he loved the intrigue in baseball, the politics and the dealing. I don’t, I’ve worked for four teams and I’ve seen what goes on but he took a very Machiavellian view of the situation.

ML: White Sox fans really responded as well. I remember Johnny Morris at WBBM-TV starting a “Save the Sox” campaign on his TV sports show.

MV: One of the first things that I did when my dad took over the club was open all the cards and letters that the fans sent it to us. I’d see 50 cents from kids, 10 dollars from people... all doing what they could. I sent two tickets to a future Sox game to everybody who sent anything. We then contributed all the money, I think it was 60 or 70 thousand dollars to the American Cancer Society in the name of Nellie Fox who passed away from it. But I was touched by what they did, remember I was 25 years old and to see people care about the team like that was very special.

ML: Why has the baseball establishment been so opposed to the Veeck family over the years? What did they have to fear from your dad and you?

MV: It was unheard of for a baseball owner to be as well thought of, to have a one-on-one type relationship with the fans. That cut against the grain of the other owners. My dad had the ability to laugh at himself as well as anybody he thought was a stuffed shirt. He loved to take a pin to those types of people. The single greatest attribute that my dad had was that he wouldn’t talk about himself. Somebody asked him about why he was like that one time and his answer was “because you can’t learn as much.

ML: I’m curious how close you were to your dad?

MV: At first I was only going to work for him for two years. I got out of college; two days later joined a rock and roll band and did that for a few years so at first we weren't close. But I stayed the whole time he had the team and in that time we became close.

ML: The owners finally re-approved your dad's deal and the Veeck family was back in business in December 1975. Over the years though, some Sox historians and even some fans have basically stated a different take on the matter of your family re-gaining control. I'd like to explore your thoughts on this. Basically what they said, and have written, was that in essence, your dad saved the Sox from himself. That if your dad doesn't purge the Sox farm system in 1960 of future stars like Johnny Callison, Earl Battey, Norm Cash, Johnny Romano and Don Mincher, the Sox perhaps win the pennant in 1964, 1967 or both. If they win the pennant they don't suffer the collapse they had in the late 60's which put the franchise on the road to financial extinction in the first place. They also feel that your dad, when he re-gained ownership, never had the money to make the Sox winners in the first place. How do you react when you read or hear this?

MV: I'm familiar with those comments and you have to remember that there were *no* takers for the White Sox in 1975. No one...they were going to Seattle. No question my dad made some terrible deals but he was part of a small group of baseball men like Frank "Trader" Lane and "Birdie" Tebbetts who weren't afraid to take a chance. Today about the only guy who is like that is Dave Dombrowski of the Tigers. Today the baseball people look at salary structure and if the guy can fit in. My dad took chances. It's very easy for those people to say in hindsight that my dad was a bad owner but I think that's revisionist history. And the same people who say he helped put the Sox in a bad situation don't give him credit for helping to build the White Sox of the early 1980's that won the division in 1983. He traded for LaMarr Hoyt and Richard Dotson. He drafted and signed Britt Burns and Harold Baines. When all is said and done my dad's record speaks for itself.

(Author's Note: Dombrowski was an assistant to Roland Hemond when Veeck owned the White Sox and for the first few years of the Reinsdorf / Einhorn ownership. He was let go when "Hawk" Harrelson became G.M. in 1986.)

ML: What was your input with the team Mike when your dad owned it the second time around?

MV: I did everything. I worked selling tickets in the Sears Tower; I cleaned out all the storerooms in Comiskey Park. I became involved in the marketing and public relations with the club.

ML: Did you have any input in the famous opening day 1976, "Bicentennial stunt?"

(Author's Note: On that day for the home opener Bill Veeck, Manager Paul Richards and Rudy Schaffer all donned Revolutionary War garb as the drummer, fife player and flag carrier.)

MV: No that was the idea of those individuals. I worked at getting the props. By the way Richards refused to be a part of it unless he could say the second and third verses of the National

Anthem. I bet a lot of people don't even know the anthem has them. They said yes, so Paul participated and said the verses.

ML: Talk to me about "Disco Demolition." How did the idea first get started and how did you develop it?

MV: The idea actually started two years earlier in 1977. Jeff Swartz, a guy who worked for United Artists, suggested it to me. In 1978 in connection with Coke, we had a dance contest at Comiskey Park. There were 25,000 kids dancing on plywood stages that we had on the field. We thought it might be an idea to have a night for people who hate disco.

Anyway, I get a call one day in 1979, from Swartz who says to turn on my radio to WLUP, that there is a guy named Steve Dahl who is going to blow up disco records at a shopping mall. I listened, then called him at 10:05 AM, as soon as he got off the air, and offered him the chance to do that at Comiskey Park. He was going to do it in front of 3,000 kids. It didn't take long to convince him he could do it in front of 40 thousand kids.

ML: Let's talk about that night, what went wrong, and what would you have done differently?

MV: My mistake was thinking that we'd get about 35,000 for the promotion. It turned out there were 60,000 inside the park and another 30-40 thousand on the streets around the park. Traffic was backed up all the way out to O'Hare Airport! Who had any idea that many kids would come out? WLUP was a 5,000 watt station; it wasn't a giant like WLS or WCFL from when I was a kid.

The other thing that happened was that we moved some of the police off the field. We had an adequate security force for 35,000 fans but not for 60,000. Outside of the park there were some temporary ticket booths staffed by older people. The kids were starting to get out of hand and started rocking those booths. We moved some of the police off the field outside to help. What happened next was the worst thing that could possibly happen, the crowd began thinking as one and they realized there were only 35-40 police on the field. When a crowd begins thinking as one there is no such thing as crowd control. They said 'let's go on the field!

ML: Some Sox fans feel DJ Steve Dahl could have done more to help calm the situation; instead he left the park with the riot in full force. Could he have done more to help?

MV: He could have made an effort. I, my dad and Harry Caray were all down on the field trying to regain control and he wasn't... but the responsibility was mine. It was a bad decision.

It was also a slow news day and that generated a tremendous amount of publicity, it was also an election year and Jayne Byrne used the situation as an election photo-op. What I most remember is newspaper guys like Bill Gleason saying what a tragedy it was. I know what a tragedy is, my daughter is losing her sight... this wasn't a tragedy. The sun came up the next day; the Sox played another baseball game a few days later. It was the fourth forfeit in baseball history but how many take the same umbrage at 30,000 Dodger fans throwing baseballs on the field causing the fifth forfeit in baseball?

(Author's Note: That took place on August 11, 1995 when Dodgers fans threw baseballs by the thousands on to the field with one out in the 9th inning in a game against the Cardinals. St. Louis was awarded a forfeit win.)

ML: You were mentioning something about hearing from Dahl 20 years later.

MV: When I was working for the Devil Rays, I was going to have a "20th Anniversary Disco Demolition Night" when the club got a letter from Steve's lawyers. It was a 'cease and desist' order from them. *Dahl actually copyrighted the term "Disco Demolition!"* and the letter said that if we were going to have such an event they wanted financial considerations. By then I had already left the Devil Rays because of the health of my daughter so they never did anything.

ML: When it became apparent that financial considerations were forcing your dad to have to sell the team again he wanted it to go to Ed DeBartolo. Once again the owners stepped in making things difficult for the Veeck family. Do you think some of them had a personal vendetta against your dad?

MV: When my dad testified at the trial for Curt Flood he sealed his fate. Dad was the only owner to testify for the players union. That's why the players loved him, the owners did not. My dad got a first-hand lesson in the politics of baseball.

(Author's Note: Flood, a star outfielder for the St. Louis Cardinals sued major league baseball in the early 1970's saying the reserve clause was unconstitutional and then he wouldn't accept a trade from St. Louis to Philadelphia, that he wasn't a piece of property to be bought or sold. Eventually the courts ruled in MLB's favor but the trial set the stage for the Andy Messersmith / Dave McNally cases in 1975 that overturned that rule and permitted baseball players to become free agents.)

ML: Who knows how different baseball would be today if some of your dad's ideas were adopted earlier like complete revenue sharing and overturning the reserve clause.

MV: When my dad proposed revenue sharing, the owners of the Yankees laughed at the idea, guys like Dan Topping, but Pete Rozelle and Bert Bell of the National Football League weren't laughing. They came to see my dad to get a complete understanding of what he was proposing. The NFL adopted his ideas back in the early 60's.

ML: Basically, those owners said it would be the Reinsdorf / Einhorn group or nobody. I guess your dad resigned himself to this but how did he feel about those two individuals?

MV: He was a businessman. He did what needed to be done.

ML: That group made the first in a long line of faux faux when Eddie Einhorn made a statement the day they bought the club along the lines of 'we're going to start running a first class operation.' Many Sox fans and reportedly your dad were shocked and insulted by that comment. Making it worse was that your dad was right there when it was said. How did your dad and the Veeck family feel about that comment?

MV: We have never equated money with class. Just because we didn't wear 200 hundred dollar shirts and 3,000 thousand dollar suits didn't mean we didn't have manners or didn't respect other people. The one thing that my family has always done first and foremost was respect the fans of baseball and the game of baseball.

ML: I have heard that supposedly, Eddie Einhorn over the years privately apologized to your dad and tried to mend fences with him to no avail. Is that true?

MV: No... Eddie Einhorn never apologized for that remark, Jerry Reinsdorf did, and there is a difference between those two men.

ML: Mike you've followed the Sox in various forms and capacities for 40 years. You were here when the Sox owned Chicago, won on the field seemingly every season, and got the lion's share of the media. Today it's completely opposite. The Sox have been ignored starting around the mid 80's. How did this happen, what in your opinion has gone wrong with the marketing / PR / on-field approach that this ownership group has taken?

MV: When you veer from your history you take chances. We were proud of the blue collar / working class nature of our fans. Our fans worked for a living, that's why we played night games. Being a Sox fan isn't for the faint. We were the team of "Jungle" Jim Rivera, Earl Torgeson and Early Wynn. Day baseball is for the Cubs. The club has gone away from their history.

Old Comiskey Park was destroyed and it didn't need to be, it could have been fixed for a modest amount of money... that hurt many fans. When the Sox announced the formation of "Golden Box Seats," I had to laugh..."Golden Box Seats"... just exactly what is that outside of a way to raise ticket prices? Eddie Einhorn said that the Sox would never have rock and roll concerts at Comiskey Park like we did, like it was distasteful. Three years later Michael Jackson played at Comiskey Park.

The Sox owned every underdog in Chicago. The Sox were much more comfortable to them. If I had a part of this club I'd have so much fun at the Cubs' expense. I would not be politically correct. Chicagoans expect that, they embrace honesty. "Disco Demolition" was ridiculed, but it got the Sox into Rolling Stone magazine.

ML: Talk to me about Mike Veeck. I know you are still involved deeply in baseball. What are you doing?

MV: I love minor league baseball and am part owner of six teams along with friends like Bill Murray and Jimmy Buffett. Maybe I'll get back into major league baseball someday. I've worked for four organizations.

ML: I've got to ask you to tell me the story about how you found "Shoeless" Joe Jackson's White Sox contract.

MV: I told you Mark, I cleaned out every storage space at old Comiskey Park and this was one of them. There was a rumor that someone had been murdered and dumped down the elevator shaft. Well in 1976 I was lowered down into it and cleaned it all out. When I was in there I saw the contract and knew immediately what it was.

ML: You wrote a comment in one of the books about the White Sox, about how in a very unstable world, you always loved to be in Comiskey Park, either early in the morning or late at night. You eloquently wrote about how peaceful it was, about how when the wind blows you could feel history, the ghost of “Babe” Ruth and so forth. What is it about baseball that even today, with all its troubles, still has a hold on a large number of people?

MV: Baseball is a simple comforting game. I’d sit at Comiskey Park and think ‘this is where Arch Ward started the All-Star Game,’ ‘this is where “Babe” Ruth played.’ It’s staggering to think of all the people, all the talent, that passed through this small patch of ground. Comiskey Park was built in 1910, it was the oldest park in baseball, and it was the oldest park in the world...older than Wrigley Field, Tiger Stadium or Fenway Park. It’s the place where your dad came, where your granddad came. It was something that was passed down and connected the generations. It’s right.

The other thing is the language that has been passed down, the great literature about it that no other sport has. Hockey doesn’t have the same resonance does it? There is no better way to make a living and if my son or daughter wants to get into it, I’d be proud to have a fourth generation of Veeck’s in baseball. My dad has been dead for 17 years but it seems like an hour ago. I talk to my dad everyday through baseball.

