

Lorn Brown

Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in late November 2007. Originally published at White Sox Interactive in 2007.

It's a very small fraternity, even smaller than those who actually played major league baseball. That fraternity is made up of men (and now some women) who have actually broadcast major league baseball for a living. Lorn Brown is one of the few who can make that claim.

Brown, a South Side native, was part of the White Sox broadcasting team in the late 70's and then after a hiatus, came back for more in the 1980's. In addition, Brown has called big league games for the Cardinals and Mets and has a basketball history as well, having been the voice of the Chicago Bulls, Bradley University and the Big Ten Conference. Brown even did high school games in central Illinois and in Iowa.

It's been a career that probably wouldn't be able to be duplicated today since Brown served in the military and through them got his GED before actually going to broadcasting school. He's been around, seen a lot and had the chance to work with some colorful individuals, including Bill Veeck, Harry Caray and Jimmy Piersall.

Brown is still working today down in New Mexico. He's the host of the Reggie Theus show, showcasing the New Mexico State basketball coach and continues to do voice over work for companies in the area often driving to El Paso to record them. He even did some fill in work for New Mexico State University baseball last season. I called him one afternoon in late November, right after shoveling the first snowfall of the year and counting down the days until the voices of baseball could be heard once again.

ML: Lorn talk to me about growing up in Chicago.

LB: I grew up in the Woodlawn / Stony Island area and went to Mt. Carmel high school. I used to listen to the Sox, Cubs and Tigers games. My family was basically all White Sox fans on my grandfather's side except for him. He turned his back on the team after the "Black Sox" scandal and would listen to the games simply to deride them. The first Sox game I ever saw was against the Washington Senators at old Comiskey Park.

At one time I lived near Sox players Luke Appling and Cass Michaels so I certainly knew about the team and the franchise but I'd have to say I was probably a little more of a Cub fan growing up. That's when I took a page out of the Bible and became a Sox supporter. I'm talking about the passage that says 'when you're a child, you do childish things, then when you grow up you put them away!' (laughing)

ML: So how did you go from growing up on the South Side to actually broadcasting Sox games? There has to be incidents that took place that led you from one point to the other.

LB: I was working in a steel mill when I saw an ad for the Midwestern Broadcasting School so I went there. I had some great teachers and one of them told me that it was clear I loved sports and that's where I needed to be. So when I got out I found a job in Galesberg, Illinois and then Springfield doing news and being a DJ.

My first taste of sports broadcasting came when I did Springfield high school games and then the regional basketball tournament; this was in 1962 and 1963.

Illinois Bell then approached me and said that Jack Drees didn't want to do the state high school championships anymore and they wanted me to join the TV team as the #3 guy so that's what I did. That's how I got into television. I worked in the Springfield area from 1960 to 1967.

From Springfield I got a job in Peoria doing sports. I did four football games in three days one time. In Peoria I did high school play by play as well as Bradley University. From there I was hired by Channel 19, first on weekends and then as sports director. I worked there from 1968 to 1973.

From there I went to Des Moines, Iowa doing high school sports, Drake University football and basketball and the Triple-A baseball games of the Iowa Oaks. The Oaks had just become a White Sox affiliate as they moved there from Tucson.

ML: So that's how you got the Sox job?

LB: Not right away. In September 1974 "Bing" Devine of the Cardinals called and asked me to fill in for Jack Buck. Jack was contracted with CBS doing NFL games so I worked for him. Then I got exposure in Chicago because I was hired to do the TV coverage of the Bulls. I worked with Andy Musser on WSNS-TV.

In 1976 the Sox job opened up so I sent a tape to Bill Veeck, Charlie Warner of WMAQ radio and Ed Morris from WSNS-TV. I got a call from Morris basically saying that I got the job but they were going to check with "Bing" Devine on me and I still had to meet with Bill Veeck. So I got on the phone to Devine and he told me Morris had already called and I got a good recommendation from the Cardinals. Then I met with Bill and he liked my work, especially since I had covered the Sox Triple-A team in Des Moines. Bill thought it made perfect sense for me to move up since a number of those players were on the Sox roster.

Three guys were actually interested in the Sox job. It was me, Pete Van Weiren and Lanny Frattare. It turned out all of us got jobs with major league clubs. (*Author's Note: Van Weiren has been a part of the Atlanta Braves broadcasting team since the late 70's, Frattare has been with the Pirates since 1976.*) The other thing I remember from my interview with Bill and it's stayed with me till this day, was his comment about having fun in the job. He's the only boss I ever had in any line of work to ever say that.

ML: When you got to the Sox on a regular basis in 1976 the broadcasting landscape wasn't the same as it is today but I'm wondering how you walked the line between telling the truth and supporting the club. And how difficult was it to broadcast a full season of baseball when the team was bad? (*Author's Note: As it was in 1976, 1978, 1979, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988 during Brown's tenure*)

LB: It was never really an issue as I was paid by WSNS-TV and WMAQ Radio. I looked at the job as my being a broadcaster/reporter. I gave an account of the game to the fans as I saw it. My attitude was that every day was a new day regardless of what happened in the game yesterday or the last week or the last month. I also remembered what Paul Richards, who managed the Sox in 1976 told me, "They're not playing for you."

I also had the good fortune of working for some of those years with Harry Caray and he gave me some great advice, Harry said, if anything controversial came up to "leave it alone and I'll handle it." Harry had been around long enough to know that he could handle the controversy that would arise if he commented on it, where I was just starting out.

I was never told what to say at any time by Bill Veeck. In fact, the only time something came up where I had to change what I said, took place when I returned to the Sox in 1983. I used to open my broadcasts with "from Comiskey Park on the South Side of Chicago, its Chicago White Sox baseball. Hi everybody this is Lorn Brown" etc. etc. etc. I did it from 1976 through 1979. When I rejoined them in '83 I did the same thing. I believe somebody noticed the opening in '84 and management told me that we represented all of Chicago not just the South Side, so drop the South Side reference. It's interesting that after sometime they realized the Sox were a South Side team and the announcers have been referencing that the past few years. Either I was ahead of my time or I knew anything south of Madison was the South Side or both.

ML: You mentioned Harry Caray. The way we actually met was when you called me at home after reading the interview I did with Jimmy Piersall. Jimmy didn't have the nicest things to say about you in it and I wonder about what it was like working with all those strong, opinionated personalities and ego's and that doesn't even include the first female broadcaster in MLB history, Mary Shane.

LB: All of us got along professionally. I was especially close to Harry on the road because we'd hang out together after a game. Jimmy usually went his own way. Harry was an outstanding broadcaster who did a tremendous amount of preparation work before a broadcast and he was a great interviewer. He taught me a lot. Harry was the type of guy who'd rip a player on the air over something the night before but the next day he'd be in the clubhouse where all the players could see him. He never ducked away from anything he said and you have to respect that.

Yes, Jimmy was critical of me in your interview. I think he called me a “kiss ass” who used to bring Bill Veeck books. Well Bill was the greatest person I ever met and I’ve said that many times but I never brought Bill any books. I never needed to since he’d read a number of books a week on his own, while he was soaking his leg. (*Author’s Note: Veeck lost a part of his leg when an artillery piece fell on it in Bouganville during World War II. He’d have to soak his stump daily.*) There would be times when I’d give Bill a lift home after a game but what Jimmy didn’t tell you was that when we’d fly back to O’Hare after a road trip I’d give Jimmy a lift back to his house many times. So if I was a kiss ass to Bill because I’d drive him home then I guess I was a kiss ass to Jimmy since I did the same thing for him. If someone asks you for a ride you’re going to give it to them right? Especially if you live in the same area.

The thing I remember about Mary was that the day the Sox had the press conference to announce her hiring as the first female broadcaster in baseball was the day Mayor Daley died and there wasn’t anyone at the press conference except for Dick Dozier. (*Author’s Note: Daley passed away on December 20, 1976*) His death came suddenly and there wasn’t time to change the press conference to another time.

ML: Both times you worked for the Sox you had to do some innings on radio as well as TV. In fact, practically all of the announcers rotated around from one medium to the other. Tell me about the differences from a broadcasting standpoint between radio compared to TV.

LB: The biggest difference is that on radio you have to tell folks what’s going on. On TV you have to back off because the fans can see what’s happening. That took some getting used to because if I started the day on radio I’d be all keyed up and in the mode of describing a lot of action. Then you go to TV and you have to dial it down, then it’s back to radio and you have to pick up the pace again. I’ve always said TV is a director’s medium. He controls what you see... on radio though it’s in the play by play announcer’s hands.

ML: 1977 turned out to be one of those magical, amazing seasons for the Sox. I’ve asked other members of that team like Wilbur Wood, Chet Lemon and Eric Soderholm if they had any indication things were going to turn out like they did. I ask you now the same question.

LB: No, because we had so many new guys on that club. Free agency had changed baseball directly in this way. I thought that manager Bob Lemon was a very calming influence on everyone and that was a big help. I guess I thought the Sox were for real when they kept winning games after the All-Star break. I go back to what Harry used to say and it’s true, “big possums walk late.” In this case the better teams win games later in the season. That season was certainly more fun to broadcast given the way the team was performing and the fact that Comiskey Park had big crowds.

ML: Going back to the broadcasting aspect, did you ever get into trouble with anything that you said?

LB: It happened twice and both times it was because someone misunderstood what was said and it got distorted as it was being repeated. The first time was when Larry Doby was managing. The Sox were losing and I said something along the lines of “did Larry Doby suddenly become a chump? No... He didn’t...” Doby thought I was calling him a chump and he came up to me and wanted to know what was going on. I brought both Bill and Mary Francis (*Author’s Note: Bill’s wife*) Veeck into the discussion and they both told Larry flat out exactly what I said.

The second time was when Tony LaRussa came up to me and was upset because he heard that myself and Del Crandall (*Author’s Note: Brown’s radio partner in the mid to late 80’s*) were managing on the air. I asked Tony where he heard this and he said the guy who filled up his car told him about it. I basically couldn’t believe that Tony would listen to that in the first place. The guy pumping gas was trying to ingratiate himself with Tony, act like he was his friend. I told Tony exactly what Del and I said and that was the end of it.

ML: After the 1979 season why did you leave the Sox?

LB: Part of me wanted to stay but I had gotten offers from “Bud” Selig in Milwaukee and the Pirates also called. I saw Bill (Veeck) and we talked about it. Bill said he couldn’t give me a raise and I explained to him that I had accepted the Brewers job. So I did the Brewers in 1980 and 1981 and then went to the Mets in 1982.

ML: So how did you return to the Sox? Outside of “Hawk” Harrelson I can’t think of any former Sox announcer who eventually returned to the team. (*Author’s Note: After resigning from his job as team G.M. after the 1986 season, Harrelson, who broadcast Sox games from 1982 through 1985, returned to the booth beginning in 1990.*)

LB: The Mets went through several announcers in the early 80’s and I was one of the folks who went through the doors. When my contract wasn’t renewed I contacted the Sox and Eddie Einhorn thought I’d be good to work for the new SportsVision. That’s why Early (Wynn) and I were hired. We’d go off to Texas say and do the Twins-Rangers game for SportsVision or I’d be off doing a body building show for them. They eventually started working me into the Sox rotation because Joe McConnell was off doing Bears games in September. That’s how I got on the broadcast the night the Sox clinched the divisional title (*Author’s Note: September 17, 1983*) I have the highest respect for Joe who I think is the best football announcer I’ve ever heard.

ML: Then why did you leave the Sox again after the 1988 season?

LB: The Westinghouse Company bought WMAQ Radio and fired everyone. I mean everyone from announcers to engineers, basically the entire operation. Del (Crandall) and I met the new people before the season was over. Basically the guy said that he hadn’t decided what they were going to do but if I wanted to, they would fire me now! (laughing) I said no that if there was a chance to stay on I’d like to remain. It turned out Del and I was fired on Christmas Eve. Back when I was younger I’d come up to Chicago and visit the Sox broadcasters, just sit in and get an idea of what they do and how they do it. I recall meeting Milo Hamilton and asking for advice and the one thing he told me was, “kid, never work for Westinghouse...” Turned out Milo knew what he was talking about! (laughing.)

ML: So was that it for you from a baseball standpoint?

LB: No, I actually did the St. Paul Saints for four years when Mike Veeck was in charge. That started about 1993. In fact, I even got into the movie “Grumpier Old Men,” because of it. Remember that movie has about four minutes of footage on a lake in Minnesota. In the background they are listening to a game on the radio. That’s me calling the game! And yes I still do get some residuals for it.

ML: Talk to me a little about your relationship with some of the other top Sox people, like the new owners and Roland Hemond.

LB: I respected Eddie Einhorn a lot; he was a broadcaster and a marketing guy. Jerry (Reinsdorf) was very open to me, we had a good relationship although I related better with Eddie. Jerry liked my work; in fact, he offered me the Bulls job again after the radio station let me go. He said he enjoyed listening to me do the Bulls games the first time around.

Roland Hemond...I think the world of him. He was always so positive, always the same guy who always kept his cool. The best example I can give you of the type of person Roland is revolves around the story of Sox pitcher Dave Baldwin. Dave was 30 days short of getting his major league pension but instead was planning to go to the University of Arizona to finish getting his degree. He’s now a geneticist by the way. Anyway Roland needed another pitcher to play for the Iowa Oaks and asked Dave if he’d go for the season. Dave said he wanted to finish school instead so Roland promised him that if he’d report to Iowa, that Roland would make sure he got called up to the Sox in September, to get his time in for his pension and that’s exactly what happened. In fact, Dave wound up pitching an additional season.

ML: What’s your opinion of the broadcasting business today in regards to Major League baseball? Sometimes you feel sorry for these guys because they constantly have to walk the fine line between telling the truth or risk offending the team and potentially losing their jobs.

LB: I think the pressure is worse now. Overall I think the broadcasters are better in the National League. I particularly enjoyed the Nationals team of Bob Carperter and Tom Paciorek. I was shocked when they let Tom go, but that’s part of the issue today. I was hired and worked with baseball people, guys like “Bing” Devine and Roland Hemond. Now it’s all handled by marketing guys. In my opinion marketing guys don’t have the expertise needed to make broadcasting decisions.

ML: Care to sum up your time on the South Side?

LB: I loved it. At banquets I always close with this comment which comes from the heart with me. “I want to go to heaven when I die but I don’t know if they let sportscasters in. If not, then I want to return to old Comiskey Park because that’s the closest to heaven I’ve ever been.”



How new Sox colorman made it Lorn Brown took long, rugged road

IF IT WEREN'T for his teenage fascination with the mellifluous tones of an all-night WCFL disk jockey, Lorn Brown today probably would be a Chicago cop instead of a well-traveled sportscaster about to take his place alongside Harry Caray in the White Sox broadcast booth.

"My only goal as a kid was to be a policeman," Brown recalls. "But you had to be 21 to join the force, so I was marking time at the U. S. Steel mill at 7th and the lake."

Lorn worked the 11-to-7 shift and used to listen to the radio while he worked. That's how he came in contact with the fellow who changed his life.

"There was this very smooth guy named Mike Rapchak who did the all-night show at WCFL. He's now a booth announcer at Channel 7. Well, I was really spellbound by Rapchak's program, and suddenly I had this terrific desire to be a radio announcer."

BEFORE LONG, Brown was spending his days hanging around the radio station. Eventually he signed up at Midwestern Broadcasting School where his teachers included John Doremus, Jerry Golden, and Jerry Layton, better known as "Mad Man Muniz."

And by the time he completed the broadcasting course, he got laid off at the steel mill.

"So, out of necessity, I went right into radio. I got work as a deejay at WCVS in Springfield. But I must admit I had no real ambition to be a sports announcer. I simply wanted to be a very good disk jockey like Mike Rapchak."

WITHIN A FEW months, however, Brown found himself broadcasting high



Gary Deeb
TV-Radio critic

school football and basketball at five bucks a game. What he didn't know then was that it would take him 15 years of sweat in Springfield, Peoria, and Dan Moline before he'd make it on the air back in his hometown.

"It was a real struggle. There was very little money in it. My wife had to work as a travel agent to supplement our income. But, you know, I was mentally comfortable. I liked those folks downstate very much."

Lorn handled play-by-play of Bradley basketball and football, Illinois-State basketball, and lots of prep sports. He did TV and radio sportscasts, hosted radio talk shows, produced documentaries, and even sold advertising time to sponsors.

But it wasn't till 1972 that Lorn decided to take a shot at the sport he loves best—baseball. He called the games of the Iowa Oaks, the White Sox farm club, for two seasons and also filled in for a while on St. Louis Cardinal broadcasts over KMOX Radio.

A YEAR AGO Olympic Broadcasting, which packages the Bull basketball telecasts, hired him as Andy Musser's color partner on Channel 41. It was from that

perch that Brown was plucked to become Caray's White Sox sidekick.

"As a broadcaster, I love baseball best because it demands so much concentration. I firmly believe that you can measure the value of a sports announcer by how he performs when he's stuck in a baseball booth for four hours every day.

"Some guys just die up there because they can't entertain you during all the pauses. In football, basketball, and hockey, you're describing continuous action. Not so in baseball. You've gotta be able to think on your feet."

"That's why I've always admired Harry. He's the best baseball announcer in the world—bar none. You know why? Because even if the Sox are losing 10-0, Harry still is interesting."

ONE OF BROWN'S strongest points is his status as a reasonable, clear-headed reporter.

During Bull basketball telecasts, for instance, he never gets infected with hometown paranoia and never automatically hammers away at the refs. Instead, he's refreshingly impartial at granting credit and assessing blame, a talent usually lacking in basketballcasters.

And Lorn's halftone and postgame interviews often are minimesterpieces. He asks insightful questions, usually gets solid answers, and never shifts for the club's front office.

You can be sure he'll bring those same reporterly instincts to his TV-radio descriptions of Sox baseball.

AND THAT'S Lorn Brown, the straight-talking, square-shooting sports-



Lorn Brown

man who took 15 years to work his way back to Chicago.

Not that he always has been that honest. "As a kid, I had a tendency to lie about my age," he confesses. He was an Andy Frain usher at Comiskey Park at 14, joined the Air Force at 18, and was tending bar at a steelworkers union hall at 19.

It's nice to see that he has settled down sufficiently to be compatible with the bashful, soft-spoken Mr. Caray.

