

## Brooks Boyer

*Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in February 2008.  
Originally published at White Sox Interactive in 2008.*

*Before the announcement that Steve Stone was to replace Chris Singleton in the 2008 Sox radio booth, I had the opportunity to speak to Brooks Boyer about the Sox radiocasts and many other subjects, too. Little did we know what was to happen next! Singleton announced he was leaving to pursue a new position at ESPN. What emerges here is some unique insight into Brooks' state of mind just before this high-profile change.*

*It is a challenging and often thankless part of any Major League Baseball operation. But in today's game where so much of the "action" takes place off the field, it is of vital importance that your marketing department be first rate and increase any and all options to promote your franchise, which ultimately brings in more revenue.*

*For the White Sox, that area is handled by Brooks Boyer, who has the official title of Vice President / Chief Marketing Officer. Brooks is starting his fifth season in that position after spending many years with the Chicago Bulls.*

*Boyer is the highest ranking member of the Sox organization to consent to an interview with me.*

*The conversation took place on a snowy February day as Brooks was driving to DeKalb, Illinois, where he was going to speak to master's candidates at Northern Illinois University.*

*What struck me as I spoke with him were his core characteristics. He was open, honest, candid, and funny. His passion for the White Sox organization and for his role in it came through loud and clear but what also struck me, and this surprised me, was Brooks' desire to know as much about me as I did about him and his work. Throughout the interview he peppered me with questions like, "Where are you from in Chicago?" and "What's your honest opinion of ownership?" In addition, when I told him stories of incidents that happened to me regarding the White Sox or what some of the other interview subjects had to say about certain areas, he responded, "I love to hear those kinds of stories." Maybe it was simply the marketing director in him always wanting to know more about Sox fans in general but I don't think so.*

*Boyer seemed very "down to earth," and when he said that "every White Sox fan, even just one, is important to the organization," it was hard not to believe him. His passion, his sincerity, his enthusiasm came through. It was a very enjoyable hour and a half.*

*Oh and for the record, Brooks is well aware of the various web sites on the White Sox around the Internet. From some of his comments you get the strong sense that he's a regular visitor to them.*

**ML:** Brooks, how did you get into the marketing/advertising/public relations field? Was it something you were always interested in or did that come about when you were at Notre Dame?

*(Author's Note: Boyer graduated from Notre Dame after playing four seasons on the basketball team. He was captain of the club for two years and had a solid college career.)*

**BB:** "It started when I was in school. As an athlete you're always around it, especially at a program like Notre Dame. When we'd go on road trips it was only a small number of people and you were always around folks in sports information or marketing. My undergraduate degree was in finance and when I left Notre Dame I had a chance to go to grad school at USC or take an internship with the Chicago Bulls. I decided to take a chance and get my foot in the door with the Bulls ... eventually, I did get my graduate degree but it was while I was working for them."

**ML:** You were well established with the Bulls when Rob Gallas left the White Sox and his position came open. In fact, your title with them had become Director of Corporate Partnerships. Were you asked to apply for the Sox opening or was it something that intrigued you and you did it on your own?

**BB:** "I was very interested in the job. The White Sox were an iconic brand in the Chicago-area and my boss (longtime Bulls marketing director Steve Schanwald) wasn't going to be leaving the Bulls in the near future. I had known Jerry Reinsdorf and he knew me from the work I was doing and I wanted to take the next step in my career path."

**ML:** How did your work with the Bulls prepare you for this position?

**BB:** "The jobs really weren't that different. The skills that you used with the Bulls transferred to the White Sox. You're still touching all areas of business with the goal of driving revenues so that they can then be funneled down the hall to Kenny Williams' office so that he can translate that into talent on the field."

**ML:** I don't know if you did an analysis of the White Sox situation before you officially took the job or not, but if so, what was your take on the Sox as you were stepping in before the 2004 season?

**BB:** "I came into the job with my eyes wide open. I knew what I was getting into. I read the comments from the media that it was "the worst marketing job in sports." I also knew that the Cubs had a great 2003 season and that the excitement centered around them. I knew what I was up against. In my office I still have a column by Rick Telander where he wrote that the goal of this job was to somehow turn "a thousand grade steel wool into a silver chalice." I use that comment every year when we have our meetings with my staff. This isn't just me, it's everyone in the organization, we're in it together."

**ML:** One of the first campaigns you unveiled was the very successful "Us vs. Them" one. Take me through the process of how an ad campaign for the Sox is born.

**BB:** "We wanted to be more aggressive in our marketing. That's my style. I'd rather make errors of commission than of omission. I knew we were, say the Pepsi to Coke in Chicago, the Avis to Hertz. I felt the White Sox and their fans had nothing to be ashamed of and I wanted to emphasize the things that made White Sox fans unique and proud."

"Today we are still fighting the stereotypes that have surrounded the organization ... oh, the neighborhood's not safe, the ballpark is sterile ... the best way to fight that is to attack and that resonates with our fans. Also remember I started my career here the same time Ozzie Guillen did. How can you not get caught up in his passion, his love for the White Sox?"

**ML:** Talk to me specifically about “Us vs. Them.” What were you trying to achieve? As mentioned, Sox fans loved it, Cub fans and some of the media hated it.

**BB:** “It’s about us, about White Sox fans, about ‘Sox Pride.’ I didn’t want fans wondering or worrying about who ‘we’ were. We wanted our fans to know that we *knew* who we were. We had a lot of fun with it and it helped break down those stereotypes we talked about earlier. Fans took pride in it, they came out to the ballpark, they saw it was a beautiful place to watch a game from.”

**ML:** How about “the Grinder Rules” promotion which was received incredibly well.

**BB:** “The timing of that campaign couldn’t have been better ... as good as the concept of that idea was, it could have blown up completely in our faces. If the team didn’t play as well as they did, if they didn’t play along the lines of the way the campaign was conceived, it wouldn’t have worked.”

“The interesting part is that the whole idea was born out of a few interviews that Kenny Williams did where he talked about the type of player he wanted on the club, how he wanted the game to be played. Ozzie (Guillen) sat down with our advertising agency for an hour and he talked about the style of game he wanted, the type of guys he wanted. Again his passion, his enthusiasm for the White Sox and the fans came through and we based everything on those concepts. We played by those ‘rules.’”

**ML:** How do promotional nights come about? I see where you recently released the schedule for those for this season.

**BB:** “There are two areas that come into play on promotional nights. First there are things that we simply want to do. That’s how ‘Mullet Night’ came about. We thought it would be something that would be fun and that the fans would like. Originally it started out as a small sponsorship deal that turned out to be a big one. The other area is that our sponsors request a way to tie in their products with our fans ... a lot of promotional nights are driven by our sponsors. When that happens, if it enhances the ballpark experience and supports the sponsors who support us, then we certainly will do it.”

**ML:** The Sox have had some classic promotions over the years. Three in particular that I remember growing up were ‘Bat Day,’ the ‘Old Timers Game,’ and the ‘Father and Sons or Daughters’ game. Those seem to have fallen out of favor with the organization. Is there a specific reason why that’s happened?

**BB:** “I wouldn’t call it falling out of favor. My philosophy is that I’d rather have 81 great events, something for every home game, rather than just five or six events that everyone wants to go to at the expense of all the other dates. We try to do what we do for every single game so that our fans get value every time they step into the ballpark. Our focus is always on entertainment. For example, we’ll always have ‘Elvis Night.’”

“As far as the events you mentioned, there are some things in play that weren’t a factor back then. With Bat Day, the liability insurance is a lot higher now. We still had Bat Day, only it was plastic whiffle-ball bats. With the Fathers against the Sons and Daughters, you’ve got ballplayers on the field making millions of dollars. We wouldn’t want to see a 14-year-old hit a rocket and injure them or a 14-year-old hit a rocket off the head of a 4-year-old daughter.”

“Our promotional schedule is still evolving. We still have some things in the works but until they are finalized we don’t want to release them. That’s what happened last year when we thought we

had Hawk Harrelson bobblehead day set. We announced it and then things happened and we weren't able to do it and I know I got calls from disappointed fans."

**ML:** "Throwback games and weekends are very popular around major league baseball. Last year the Sox had the chance to honor the 1967, 1972 and 1977 clubs on their 40th, 35th and 30th anniversaries respectively, yet you chose to go in a different direction. This isn't a criticism but I'm wondering why you didn't?"

**BB:** "That's a very fair question. With no disrespect to those teams, some of the best loved in Sox history, they didn't get to the World Series. To some fans, 1977 for example, just isn't relevant. We honored the 1959 team with a weekend because they got to the World Series. A few years ago we honored the 20th anniversary of the 1983 team because they were special to a large number of our fans. We're going to do something again this season on the 25th anniversary but it won't be as involved. We'll have a game where we wear the 1983 style uniforms. We'll also have our "Halfway to St. Patrick's Day," where we wear the green uniforms and we've got the camouflage jerseys on July 4th. We don't want this to become gimmicky; we want to do things that are relevant to our current fans.

*(Author's Note: It was at this point that I tried to sell Brooks on the idea of the red pinstriped era, aka Dick Allen and how special that was to my generation!)*

**ML:** Over the winter there was a lot of discussion about the Sox broadcasting situation, the rehiring of Chris Singleton, the adding of Steve Stone to the mix and recently Hawk Harrelson getting a three-year extension. I don't want to get into the specifics of the broadcasters themselves but I'd like to explore the process of broadcast hiring.

I know you understand this, and I do as well having been in the business for almost 30 years, but there may be some readers who don't know this so I'd like to explain why I'm asking certain questions.

In the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, broadcasters were hired by and large, by the radio or television stations they worked for, they were paid by them. There was some distance between themselves and the teams they covered. It was how Harry Caray, for example, could be objective and at times downright critical without fear of being fired.

That distinction has been rubberized and completely blurred today. To start this area, I'd like to know how much say do you and the Sox have in broadcast hiring?

**BB:** "We have a significant amount of input. If we don't want someone or if say WSCR radio doesn't want someone, either party can veto the choice. It's a collaborative process, both of us have a large say in the matter. For example, and I'm just using this name, not that he was ever a candidate, if WSCR radio came to us and said we want Mike North in the Sox broadcasting booth, we'd say no. Why would we want someone who is going to knock our product or be very critical of it?"

"Regarding the specifics on Chris, it's no secret that it came down to either him or Tommy John. There was a mutual feeling among us and WSCR that we wanted a fresh voice. Tommy and Ed were both pitchers and both played in the same era. The game had changed a lot since they were playing. We felt it would be better to have Ed's perspective on the game and Chris' who played at a different time in a different position and certainly Chris, like Tommy, was a member of the Sox family."

“The process that time started when we put together a list of 10 to 15 names, WCSR radio put together a list of 10 to 15 names and then we interviewed candidates. We’d speak with them, then WCSR radio interviewed them, then we interviewed some candidates together before we made a choice.”

“Both Chris and Ed are employees of WCSR radio, not the White Sox.”

**ML:** Former Sox announcer Lorn Brown was an interview subject for me and I asked him about the state of the broadcasting business today and the pressure on announcers to walk that fine line between telling the truth and risking their jobs if they offend the people who are running the team. Here’s his reply and I’d like your opinion of Lorn’s comment.

*“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 Carpenter and Tom Paciorek. I was shocked when they let Tom go, but that’s part of the issue today. I was hired by and worked with baseball people, guys like Bing Devine, Bill Veeck 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.”*

**BB:** “I respect Lorn and his opinion, he’s a member of the White Sox family, but I disagree with it. The business has changed so much from when Lorn was doing the games; the stakes are a lot higher. The payrolls have gone from maybe \$10 million when Lorn was broadcasting to \$100 million dollars across all of pro sports. Marketing people have a lot on the line. And if Bill Veeck was a baseball guy, then what does that make Jerry Reinsdorf? Jerry’s involved in these decisions and he knows baseball. When some of the older players are around him, he can tell you everything about their careers.”

**ML:** I was very surprised this offseason when I read a statement from you saying that you were sending all the e-mails that you got about Ed and Chris from a broadcasting standpoint, to them for their examination. Obviously this doesn’t happen often, I mean could you imagine ESPN sending e-mails to Chris Berman on how fans feel about him?

**BB:** “I respect the fact that people care enough to take the time to e-mail me with honest feedback. As long as the comments aren’t vulgar or just flat out stupid, why shouldn’t I pass those along to Ed and Chris? It’s their job to broadcast the game for the fans. They’re big boys, they were professional athletes and they should be able to take the comments for what it’s worth, constructive criticism.”

“I know that Ed has picked up the phone and called fans personally to talk about things brought up in the e-mails and letters.”

“Ed talks too much during the broadcast about Notre Dame and about golf. He knows it, I know it and we talk about this a lot and will continue to talk about it in the future.”

**ML:** Brooks, talking about Chris Singleton, he didn’t have a lot of hands on experience when he got the position. If memory serves, he did some studio work for ESPN radio and some work for Fox Sports Arizona. I don’t know if it was any actual play by play or color analyst work. Would another person with so little experience get such consideration for so important a position in any other Sox department? Say in sales or marketing or player development ... or is the broadcasting staff under a different set of circumstances and guidelines?

**BB:** “Every hire has a different set of circumstances. Hiring someone for a broadcasting job and someone to sell sponsorships are two different animals. There is no standard procedure. With

Chris, after going through the process of researching and talking to a lot of candidates, we were comfortable with what he brought to the table and where he can go as a broadcaster.”

**ML:** I read where you have some specific points; specific areas that you feel must be covered during every White Sox broadcast regardless of medium. Can you go over those?

**BB:** “Every year we get all the broadcasters together and go over these points and we do it practically before every game as well. We want our broadcasters to paint the picture and obviously radio has to do this differently than television, educate our fans, teach our fans and sell the White Sox experience. Those are fundamental to a White Sox broadcast and like I said, we go over these things in practically every pre-production meeting that we have.”

**ML:** (Longtime White Sox organist) Nancy Faust is always a major topic of discussion around the internet. There’s been a lot of speculation on her future, about organ music in general and about her diminished schedule the past few years. Can you clarify those areas?

**BB:** “Nancy’s the best in the business. She’s worked for the White Sox for over 35 years, and with that amount of loyalty she earned the right to pick her schedule. She asked us if she could start doing a smaller number of games. Her contract is year to year but for all practical purposes it’s open ended. Nancy can work with us as long as she wants to.”

“Some fans have said that we should have a plan in place for when Nancy decides to retire but we’ll cross that bridge when we need to cross it, and that’s not right now.”

**ML:** You have to work in a two-team town, with the Cubs at least for now, still having the power of the Tribune Company behind them and the Sox because of a series of decisions over the past 25 years, some of their doing and some outside their control, considered the “Second Team in the Second City.” How does that perception affect your job? And in some cases is it easier being the ‘underdog?’

**BB:** “Everybody loves the underdog, think *Rocky* or *Hoosiers*. We are number one with our fans and that’s what I care about. The Cubs have done a magnificent job marketing themselves. They are now on the same level as the Yankees, Red Sox or Dodgers in that regard although they’ve done it without winning and the last I looked; the only championship baseball trophy in Chicago is sitting in the offices on the South Side.”

“The thing about being the underdog with the White Sox is that collectively everyone has that chip on their shoulder and that’s one of the things that set the White Sox and Sox fans apart. It’s part of who we are.”

“It is really going to be interesting to see how the next generation of fans break because of us winning the World Series. That really increased the number of Sox fans in the area and that could cause a big number of kids to become Sox fans.”

**ML:** Obvious statement time: winning the World Series, I’m sure made your job easier, at least in the short term.

**BB:** “One of the main parts of my job is to maximize our revenue and winning the series helped that. How we judge ourselves and the job we are doing is seeing how high the payroll is. If we’re doing the job well we can ship that revenue down to Kenny to use on the field. Last year was a bad season on the field but the fans still came out and I can’t thank them enough for that. The fact that we drew so many fans last year is a credit to them and a testament to the job our staff did.”

**ML:** This will be your fifth season in this position. What in general, have you learned about Sox fans in that time?

**BB:** (laughing) “Boy, to try to summarize all that, we may need a lot more time!”

“I’ve found that Sox fans are extremely passionate about the team and I think there’s a lot of truth to the sense that they are really educated fans. They *get* it. I don’t pay a lot of attention to what the media says about us or the spin they try to put on things and by and large I don’t think our fans do either. They aren’t going to be influenced by what someone on TV or the radio says. They’ll look at the situation and decide based on the facts. There’s a reason our motto is, “Pride, Passion, Tradition,” that’s a reflection of the fans and the organization. We still have something to prove both on and off the field.”

“Our fans feel that way and they expect the same work ethic and passion from us. In fact our slogan for this season reflects that attitude, “Share the Passion, Show the Swagger.”

“What I don’t like about Sox fans is that there aren’t enough of them! (laughing)”

“About the only thing that I wish I could change long-term is that sometimes the passion from our fans can be a weakness. What I mean is that a lot of Sox fans are so passionate, so into the team that if things aren’t going well, they get mad, they get fed up ... they say, ‘I’m not going to watch these guys, I’m not going to listen to them and I’m not going to show up at the game.’ That may be changing, though. Again, last year was a poor one on the field ... yet the fans still came out and we really appreciated that support.”

**ML:** You talk about Sox fans and I agree they are savvy, smart, and don’t tolerate excuses. The relationship between them and ownership has been rocky at times, although that seems to be changing since the World Series and the fact that many fans now honestly feel the organization is doing as much as they can towards ‘winning’ where before that issue was in question.

**BB:** “I know some fans are going to say, ‘Well, this is just Brooks saying the company line,’ but honestly, I go to bed every night knowing that ownership is doing everything they possibly can to win. The White Sox are not a for-profit business. Jerry Reinsdorf is not sticking cash in his mattress; he’s not buying islands off Hawaii. His first goal is to have the best production possible on the field.”

**ML:** Unlike your predecessor, many of who thought was aloof and taciturn, you actually seem to like dealing with the fans ... you answer e-mails, encourage conversation and take ideas. Is that simply sound business principles at work or is there something more going on here?

*(Author’s Note: At this point I explained to Brooks that in all the years I wrote Rob Gallas I only received one reply. Brooks comment was “That’s unbelievable, that he’d only get back to you once.”)*

**BB:** “Two things. First ... White Sox fans are special to us. Baseball is still a game about the fans first. If you want a clear example of why all of this is done, just remember the World Series parade and the millions of Sox fans who came out to share in it. That’s what it’s about, it’s about the fans. Our fans will tell you where they were when the Sox won it and they’ll never forget it. If they are going to take the time to contact me and unless the comments are vulgar or stupid I’m going to give them respect. Second, I believe in open communication even to a fault. “

“The hardest thing about dealing with the fans is when they offer a great idea or suggestion and for whatever reason we just can’t make it work. Having to write them back and let them know that is really hard.”

*(Author’s Note: I can share a personal story on this. The first time I e-mailed Brooks it was for a commercial idea revolving around the song, “The Boys Are Back in Town,” by Thin Lizzy. I wrote out the specific stanza’s that I thought would work and offered a rough overview of potential shots for the spot. Brooks got back with me and said specifically that “he got the idea,” and thought it was a great one but that’s he’d have to contact the advertising firm handling the Sox account to see if the song rights could be acquired. Cost, he said, could be a factor. Plus he said that when the Sox do a marketing campaign or advertising spot, they like it to have a long shelf life. My idea, while good, would only really work during spring training and perhaps in early April ... i.e. The “Boys” (the White Sox) are Back in Town.)*

**ML:** So what can you tell us about the future, what’s being cooked up in your department?

**BB:** “Right now, we are trying to secure our season ticket base. I’m actually already thinking about the trade deadline. We want to have as many season ticket holders as possible so that the money is there so that if Kenny needs to go out and pick up another part in July he can do it. We cap out at 21,500 season tickets and we aren’t there yet. We’re working with our sponsors trying to create as much value as we can for both parties and we’re working on the broadcasting end. Our television ratings were not good last season. We’re unveiling something in the spring that could be very interesting, the ‘interactive’ part. The middle innings will see the broadcasters interact with the fans. We’re always continuing to try to get better at what we do.”

**ML:** Final question, a little off the wall. What’s it like going to work in the offseason at U.S. Cellular Field? Especially in the middle of winter when the field is covered in snow?

**BB:** “It is bizarre. I look at the field and the wind is blowing and it just doesn’t seem right but at the same time how many people work in a building in the winter? I get to go to work every day, even in winter, at a ballpark and I know that sooner or later summer is coming.”

