

UNLIKE THE CUBS, WRIGLEY FIELD IS HARD TO BEAT

Chicago's diamond

By **JERRY SOVERINSKY**
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

CHICAGO — For most people, it's an easier proposition to consider religious conversion than switching baseball team allegiances. Respecting this, I have no intention to persuade you to adopt the Chicago Cubs as a baseball alternative to your Red Sox (truth be told, I grew up in Detroit and am a lifetime Tigers fan anyway). But visiting Chicago and incorporating a game at Wrigley Field carries no disloyal undertones. It's a noble pursuit for any baseball purist, regardless of hometown affinity; and for the non-baseball faithful, it's the best nine-inning outdoor place to drink beer west of Fenway Park.

Serious fans know the Sox met the Cubs in the 1918 World Series (Boston in six with two victories by Babe Ruth), the team's last championship until the heroics of 2004. And many Sox fans made the pilgrimage to Wrigley in June 2005 for a rare inter-

league matchup.

Wrigley and Fenway are remarkably close in characteristics and distinctions:

OLDEST BALLPARK: First, Fenway (1912); second, Wrigley (1914).

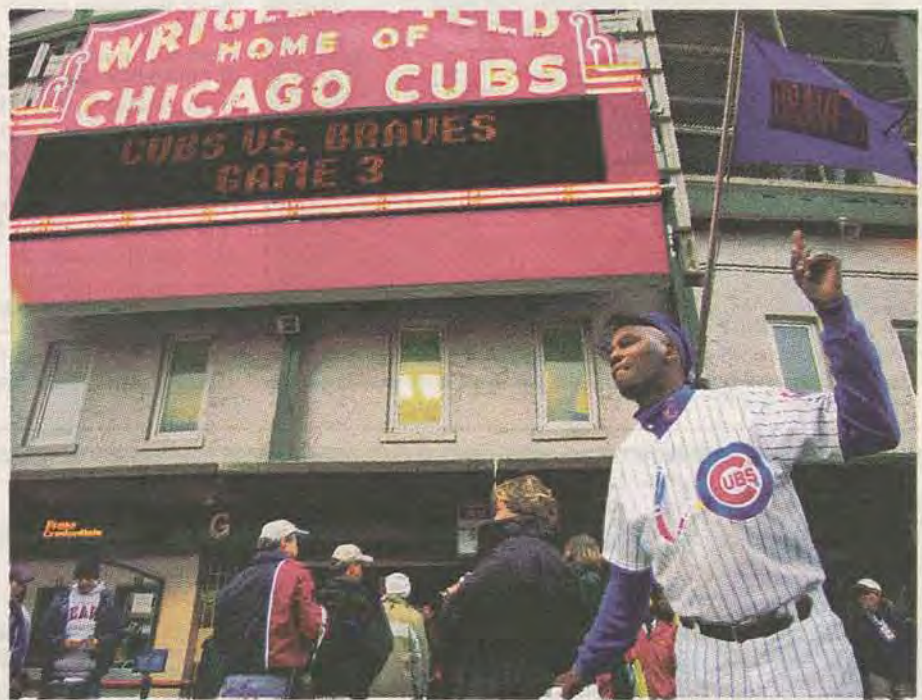
SMALLEST BALLPARK CAPACITY: First, Fenway (34,892); fourth, Wrigley (39,111).

ATTENDANCE, PERCENTAGE OF CAPACITY: 2006 — First, Fenway (100 percent); second, Wrigley (99.3 percent). 2005 — First, Wrigley (98 percent); second, Fenway (97.2 percent).

These numbers bear little significance to on-field performance. Granted, your Sox have earned a couple of championships in the last century. As for the Cubs, though, just three more barren postseasons and they'll officially begin their second century of championship futility.

The attendance figures speak to the allure of spending an afternoon or evening in one of the last great traditional ballparks. Nestled in a

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AP PHOTOS

TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALLGAME: A Chicago Cubs fan pumps up the crowd before a recent game at Wrigley Field, the second-oldest major league ballpark. Below, fans pour into the bleachers while players finish their pre-game warmups.



Beloved park is green with ivy

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residential neighborhood that, like Kenmore Square, has an abundance of nearby bars and restaurants that spring to life on game days, Wrigley's atmosphere impresses on all of its visitors, whether baseball fans or otherwise, that they're participating in a cultural tradition.

Owing to its close integration into a residential neighborhood, local ordinances tightly regulate Cubs starting times. As such, all 2006 Saturday games begin between noon and 3 p.m.

A taxi from either O'Hare or Midway airports will cost \$30-\$40, though two bucks on the city's trains and buses will drop you right next to the park (www.transitchicago.com) and take just a few minutes longer.

If you're looking to capture the trademark Blues Brothers photo of Wrigley's marquee, arrive early (by 10 a.m.) to avoid the tour buses. Picture in hand, it's time for a beer. You've earned it.

Directly across the street stands The Cubby Bear, a 60-year-old venue commanding 30,000 square feet of prime real estate. Voted the seventh-best sports bar in America by Sports Illustrated, it's a popular pre- and post-game destination for both tourists and locals. Doors open at 10 a.m. on game days — plenty of time to brew a pre-game smile.

Two blocks away, at the corner of Waveland and Sheffield (and across the street from the entrance to Wrigley's bleacher section), sits Murphy's Bleachers, voted America's No. 1 Sports Bar by ESPN's "Cold Pizza." Side up to the open-air sidewalk bar for another pint.

If you're feeling a bit peaked after your early morning flight, a monstrously big slice of pizza should hit the spot. A hundred yards away, next to the train, stands Bacci Pizzeria, home of the jumbo slice. These four-buck pieces of pie, cut from a 24-inch pizza, should more than tide you over.

At noon, 20 minutes to opening pitch, you settle into your seats. You look about: The ivy-covered walls and old-fashioned scoreboard (still hand-operated) hark back to a long-ago era. It takes you only a minute to draw parallels to this atmosphere and feeling: Fenway. You immediately feel welcome and part of a tradition (despite a few jeers from fans who notice your Red Sox cap).

After the game, you file out into the bustling Chicago streets in search of the perfect post-game nightcap. Your choices are numerous: In the immediate area (within four blocks in any direction) sit no fewer than two dozen bars. Take your pick: Slugger's,

Casey Moran's, High-Tops, Yak-Zies (great chicken wings) — the choices are endless. If you're looking for a more sedate dining or drinking experience, within walking distance are Angelina's Ristorante (Italian), Matsuya (sushi), Thai Classic (inexpensive Thai) and Rick's Cafe Casablanca (French, Italian and Spanish) — among many others.

Of course, these are the choices in the immediate area. A short taxi or train ride away is Chicago's venerable Michigan Avenue, where the majority of the city's tourist hotels and restaurants are concentrated. You can comfortably extend your Wrigley visit into a long weekend or more.



A REAL GEM: Every baseball fan should visit Chicago's Wrigley Field.

But you can do this as a day trip too, arriving home well past midnight.

Days later you may find yourself watching your Sox on TV (or better yet at Fenway) and the scoreboard flashes the National League results. You notice the Cubs are

playing. The Cubs are down one and the cleanup hitter is at bat. For a brief moment, you forget the game at hand and find yourself rooting for the Cubs. "How can that be?" you ask yourself. "Who cares about the Cubs?" Funny how a day at Wrigley can do that to you.



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Maine

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CUBS TICKETS

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