

Night Game

by Robin L. Øye

It was a cold, late November Sunday, probably after Thanksgiving, as Leamholt and I were on one of our rambles through Chicago which highlighted my visits to the city in recent years. They were always over old ground, places from my past--or Leamholt's: old streets, old pavement, old buildings. We had just been walking from Lincoln Park, up Irving Park Road, past my old apartment building at 728, when we decided to go through some side streets, to Alta Vista Terrace, and then down toward Wrigley Field. I was often absorbed in my thoughts and memories on these walks, and often these thoughts and memories drowned out parts of conversations. That was certainly the case now, as we walked with the sounds of the "L" in the background, and our footsteps on the concrete, and long-ago walks down this street on the way to ball games on much different days than this one. The bits and pieces of Leamholt's talk wove in and out, between the many memories and thoughts, until finally I heard Leamholt say, "...we stayed overnight in Wrigley Field?". That place itself loomed in front of us as we came down Seminary Street.

"What!?" I said.

"Yeah, me and Pete Hoffman stayed overnight in Wrigley Field. You remember Hoffman? I haven't seen him in years, but I haven't really tried to look him up, either, come to think of it."

I said that I had some memory of Pete Hoffman, but that I hadn't thought about him much in recent years, either, but I'd never known him very well in the first place.

"So, how'd this happen?" I asked, as we turned left on Waveland, and walked along the wall of the left-field bleachers.

"It was like this," began Leamholt, "Pete and I'd talked about doing it for a long time. It was all a sort of fantasy at first, but then, after a while, we started thinking about it seriously. We knew we had to do it when the Cubs would have a couple of games in a row, so that we could get in and get out with the crowds. We knew that they kept the big tarps rolled up under the bleachers in right-center, and we figured that we could slip in there and hide out and sleep. We knew that we would have to be cagey about hanging around after the game, and that we would have to choose the right moment to 'disappear' into the tarp roll.

"So, we planned it out pretty well, and chose a day during a week day home stand. This would have been in '71 or '72, by the way.

We went down to the ballpark as usual (continued Leamholt), bringing our ball gloves and jackets, looking like we always did going to games. Those days, we liked to sit in boxes--they were only five bucks or so, maybe less--but we figured that the best thing to do in this case was to sit in the bleachers. It felt good sitting out there again, like we used to, and like I always did with family, or with other friends. The game was not terribly memorable; the Cubs got beat up by Cincinnati or Pittsburgh--you ever stop to think about the damage those Reds teams could have done if they'd played their home games at Wrigley Field? We enjoyed it, though, because we enjoyed great ball clubs, and the Reds and the Pirates in those days were truly great.

I don't know what was going through Hoffman's mind, but by the seventh inning, I was getting a little antsy. I was hoping that there wouldn't be too many hitches in the plan, though I figured that there'd be a few. After all, you can't think of everything. I went for another beer, and while I was at it, I took

another look around from the concession stand. I couldn't see very much, though. I came back with the beer, and Hoffman said, "Looks like nice weather, anyway". He'd found a piece of the *Sun Times* that someone had thrown away, and found the weather report. Idiots that we were--and we were king idiots--this is the first time either one of us had thought about the weather! Now, you are just about to say, "What difference would that make, since you're going to sleep under the stands?", but you'd be an idiot, too if you said that. The answer, of course, is nothing where the *night* was concerned, but if it were to rain the next *day*, we would be trapped in the ball park, because there'd be no game. Then, we'd have to sneak out of a closed ball park, with gates designed to open only on orders of P. K. Wrigley or the National League. Already, questions about the décor at the Halstead Street Police Lock-up were going through my mind.

Well, I gave a shudder at my own lack of good sense, and another one of gratitude for Hoffman's--good sense, that is, not his lack of it. I guess I remember so little about the game because I had a lot on my mind as the Cubs crapped out in the bottom of the ninth. Everyone started to go home, and we started stalling around, moving slowly down the stairs toward the exits, stopping as we went. We had to be careful, though, not to go too slowly, because the ushers would start noticing. I did have the presence of mind to have a camera along, and I started taking pictures of various things, justifying our presence a little more honestly. I "took" several after I'd run out of film, so to speak, pretending to photograph all sorts of things. I wish I'd had film for some of them, by the way.

We finally found our way to the bathrooms, and stalled around in there as long as we dared. Then, with only a few dozen fans and others in the area under the bleachers, we moved toward the tarps, and, at what turns out to have been the perfect moment, we ducked into the end closest to a wall. Another reason

that the predicted clear weather was helpful had to do with the tarps: they'd've wanted to roll them out to protect the field if it looked like rain.

Once in the big tube, we could see practically nothing, and could hear not a whole lot more. We freaked out every time a pair of legs went by the other opening (this wasn't too often, because there weren't a whole lot of reasons for anyone to go by either end), and we kept the conversation down until we started to hear a great many fewer footsteps.

Well, it started getting dark. We had the good sense to bring something to eat, deciding that it would be ridiculous to try and make a raid on the concession stands. We ate in relative silence, and occasionally felt brave enough to look outside. We could see to the street, and soon we realized that most of the steps we were hearing came *from* the street. After all, there is a lot of open wall space--these gates here (we were walking around the old edifice, and had come back to the bleacher gates) can be seen and heard through, as you can see. You don't mind going around again, do you?

(I said that I didn't.)

(Leamholt went on.) There was one set of footsteps we could hear that was closer--too close, in fact. We--stupid as we were--did not count on the existence of a watchman. Hoffman and I--and you, too when you were that age--were stupid beyond belief. Well, that put a real crimp in the program. At least, Hoffman thought so. I said--when I couldn't hear footsteps any more--that we would likely not see this guy except at regular intervals. You had game theory courses, I know, that would have told you "not necessarily", but this watchman was definitely from the regular rounds school, as we found out by midnight or so. I even got brave, and followed him back to his lair, which was in the vicinity of the Cubs' clubhouse over on the other side of the

ballpark. He seemed to keep to himself there, until it was time for another peregrination. So, if we kept an eye on the clock, we could talk quietly. We also figured that he wouldn't look out onto the field. Why would he? Only a mole or a woodchuck or something like that would get into the park that way. This being the case, we felt safe about our further plans, to get out and run around on the field. We decided to look at the field at night, though, and it was a good idea, as it turned out, because we could find out whether or not we could get the door in the right field wall open. We planned to go right after the next round of the watchman.

We *could* get through the door! The old grandstands loomed up in front of us, and the outfield wall seemed huge behind us. We knew it was only about twelve feet high, but looking right up into the basket at the top, it seemed larger than life, as the old expression goes. I stood there, unconsciously (at first) fingering the ivy leaves on the wall. The warning track under our feet seemed fairly narrow, and we wondered how much warning it really gave.

We didn't run around the field then: we decided to wait that for morning. We were getting tired, and so went back to our tube, where we started nodding off, and eventually we fell asleep. Actually, it wasn't much of a sleep. Waveland and Sheffield might be a quiet corner, and Sheffield itself, as you can see, doesn't get a lot of car traffic, even these days, but the "L" over there is pretty noisy (Leamholt yelled, over the noise of the passing train), and, besides, you can hear a lot farther at night, and all the sounds you hear are unfamiliar. You also are in a position to get your ass in a lot of trouble, trespassing on the Property of the Chicago National League Ball Club and all. The night noises filtered in and out of my brain, playing tricks on me, and mixing together in all kinds of strange ways: footsteps with thoughts of how we were going to get out of the roller in the morning; sirens with the thoughts of being discovered by the watchman;

and the "L" roaring in and out of my brain, just when I thought I was asleep. You don't sleep very much at times like that, but you *do* sleep more than you realize. It seems as though you only sleep about ten minutes all night: you must, somehow, have no useful sense of time at times like that.

It gets light pretty early in July, of course (Leamholt continued, as we began another circumnavigation of the old ball park) and at the earliest light that found us both awake, we got up carefully, checked for our friend, the watchman, and then went out through the door in the right field wall. The wall did not seem as high in the early morning light. We brought our gloves, jackets, and all, in case we got cut off. Our first instinct was to walk around along the wall. We went around the outfield wall, over toward the Cub bullpen. Right under a chair, we found a ball. We hadn't brought a ball of our own--knuckleheads--and so we were pretty happy to find a ball. We then ran to the infield, and did the thing we'd always wanted to do: run the bases. We did, and it was about as much fun as we figured it would be. We couldn't find any bats, of course, and we wouldn't have wanted the noise a bat would have made. What we did, though, was that I took first base, and Hoffman took short, and we played the old game of throwing grounders, fielding at short, and throwing back to first. We did this without saying much of anything, partly out of, well, a kind of awe, but I think a lot of it was because we knew that the less noise we made, the safer we would be.

It got to be about six thirty or so, and we thought we'd better get back to our hideout, and wait for the chance to get out and get into the crowds of the day.

Nothing like running around for getting us tired out. We got back into the tube, and we nodded very quickly. We woke up, and could hear a lot of activity. We looked out to see the various ballpark workers going about their business, and the noise of the first of the early bird bleachers crowd. We were afraid that we

might have gotten up too late, but, we hadn't. In fact, we were awake at about the right time--almost nine o'clock--to assess the situation, and fine-tune our plans--or get rid of them completely and punt, if you'll excuse the football metaphor in a baseball story.

What we'd hoped to do was based on some fairly intricate timing. There had to be enough fans in the park for us to mix in with, but not too many to make it hard to get out of the tarpaulin tube. We thought we'd be caught in the tube forever if the plan didn't work. There was another pressing consideration, and that, of course, was the need to find the washroom. Well, in time, they opened up the gates, and the fans started coming in--but much more quickly than we thought they would. We had completely forgotten the way the crowds came in and how fast. We were getting a bit panicky by this time. Then, I got an idea. I said to Hoffman, "Pete, wrap your glove up in your jacket!" "Why?" "Shut up and do it, man!" He saw that I was serious, and he did what I told him to do. I did the same thing, and took off my baseball cap--and put it on again, because my hair was messed up pretty much. I moved Hoffman out of my way, and looked out as well as I could, with all the people around.

"Follow me!" I said, after I had seen that there were no ushers or groundskeeping people around. Of course, people saw us. I helped Hoffman out, and as I did, whispered to him to look down at the tube, and kept his face toward the wall, so that he wouldn't be seen by anyone, because his look would give things away. After all, he didn't really know what I was up to.

I stood there, looking critically at the tube and the tarp for a few seconds. Finally, I said to Hoffman, "I agree with you. I think this tarp tube is probably in pretty good shape." I took out a pencil and a piece of paper, hidden in my jacket. "The Cubs can save a few bucks this year." I looked up at the one or two fans that were standing there watching, and said,

"you'd never believe it, pal, but even these things need an inspection from time to time. They rust out, even under here!", I said, sweeping a hand toward the ceiling. They walked on, nodding, and we walked to the washroom for a well-earned pee.

We went back up to the bleachers to watch batting practice with the other fans, and we looked out on the field with a new perspective, you might say. The stands were filling up, and ball players, coaches, and all the other kinds of people that do things on the field before the game were out there. Of course, being up in the bleachers means that you are higher than if you were on the field, but the stands did not seem as large as they did the night before. I think they look a lot bigger when they're empty, too.

Well, the game that day was, thankfully, short. Jenkins was pitching for the Cubs, and the hitters who were beating the Cubs up the day before must have been worn out, too. We were pretty bushed, and wished that we had more comfortable seats. We were almost happy to go home. We went to Hoffman's, had a couple of beers, and fell asleep.

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We crossed Addison just east of Clark, and turned to look at Wrigley Field's main entrance. Leamholt and I were looking fondly at the old place, with my eyes, as they often had done, looking at the overhang under which I'd stood so often while I had waited for busses taking me out to Lane Tech, when suddenly Leamholt spoke again.

"The old place is the last of its kind, Robbie," he said, "all the rest of the old ball parks will soon be gone. The only reason Wrigley Field stays is because the damned suits could successfully retrofit the place for their luxury boxes here where they couldn't anywhere else". We stood for a little while longer in the gloaming, now with snowflakes sticking to my

pea jacket. We turned down Clark Street in search of a liquor store for beer, and then to a restaurant.

We were about three quarters of the way finished with our dinners when I said to Leamholt, “you know, Neddy, I haven’t been to a game at Wrigley Field since early in 1977”.

“I haven’t been since the early eighties, and I don’t even have your excuse. I never moved. But, I don’t really mind. I haven’t much wanted to go after a while. It ain’t the same as it was. After all, the guys look like softball players with their long pants and no socks. And then the luxury suites (Leamholt assumed a sarcastic tone of voice as he said this). Everything is done for those bastards, and the TV people. It used to be that even poor buggers like you and me were then could go to a game, and even afford a box seat once in a while. I don’t think I’ll get into Wrigley Field again, but that’s okay, too. And then--the lights! Can you see me and Hoffman doing this with night games?”

I couldn’t, of course. “Sometimes, we’re better off with our memories, Leamholt. I think if I were to go to a ballgame now, I’d just be sad. I’ve got nothing against present-day players, or their salaries per se (though I think there is absolutely too much money involved all through pro sports) or anything like that, or against them personally, but something’s happened to it all. I like watching kids play more than watching the Cubs or anyone like that”.

“Me, too.”

The night had well and truly fallen by the time we got outside again. Without saying anything about it to each other, Leamholt and I steered ourselves along side streets in such a way as to walk back to his house without passing Wrigley Field. It took a little doing, because it was easiest to go up Clark Street, but we managed it, passing west of the Old Ballpark, and discretely averting our eyes as we crossed Addison.

Leamholt’s place off Irving Park had, in his long tenure there, acquired a Hot Stove League aspect, and was the scene of many such sessions around sports, politics, and other subjects of which we were of like mind. But, perhaps after the yarn he’d told during the afternoon, and the many times we’d walked around Wrigley Field, we talked of almost anything *but* sports that night. I’d be going back north again in a couple days, and so we caught up on gossip about friends before we went to bed. He’d be up in the morning and off to work, and I’d be left to my own devices again, a quiet morning cup of tea, a trip to...somewhere: a museum, another old friend’s...riding the “L”. I usually had some sort of errand to do when I came down to Chicago, too.

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