

Wrigley Field Strikes Out the Birds

By R.W. Delaney, Business Writer

Wrigley Field, home of the Chicago Cubs, celebrated its 90th season in 2003. Located at the corner of Clark and Addison Streets on Chicago's north side, the park has an illustrious past and present. Built in 1914, just two years behind Boston's Fenway Park, Wrigley Field is the second oldest ballpark in the major leagues. Legendary home runs bounced and still bounce onto Sheffield Avenue in the residential neighborhood outside Wrigley's right-center wall.

Wrigley Field got its name in 1926, when the Wrigley family of chewing gum fame bought the Chicago Cubs team. In 1937, the bleachers were added to provide more seating. The original scoreboard from 1937 continues to serve the ballpark, one of the last scoreboards in the majors where numbers are changed by hand.

With its ivy-clad outfield walls and usually lush grass, Wrigley Field has attained iconic status as a real baseball park - the way baseball was meant to be played, in an open, homey, comfortable, natural setting. The design of the stadium puts the fans close to the action, enhancing the sense of personal involvement.

Wrigley Field had no lights until 1988 - when the Cubs played their very first at-home night game.

Tradition and history embrace Wrigley Field and the much-loved Cubs team, whose diehard fans have always understood that the journey can be more important, entertaining and emotional than the outcome - especially during the Cubs frequent uphill seasons over the decades. When the Wrigley family ended its 65-year ownership of the team and sold the Cubs to the Tribune Company in 1981, no one dreamed of changing the name of the field. It's here to stay. But there was a new wrinkle in 2003.

As Wrigley Field prepared to play host to the usual array of National League champ wannabes, it also battled an unwelcome new pre-season rival: PIGEONS in its renowned upper deck.

Winning Series for the Birds.

It isn't only Cubs fans who love Wrigley Field. "Pigeons like to roost on the trusses that support the upper deck," notes Paul Rathje, Director of Stadium Operations at Wrigley Field for the last six years. "This causes problems for the people seated below," he says, tactfully understating the issue. Besides the lure of roosting in the structural beams, the pigeons are naturally attracted to the food purchased by the crowds of fans who fill the stands. A bird's delight; a stadium director's horror.

During the prior season, Rathje had tried a few tricks of his own to defeat the pigeons. "First, we tried using treated corn," he recalls. The kernels contain a substance that is supposed to annoy the pigeons by disrupting their equilibrium.

The effect, if any, was undetectable. Next, Rathje and his crew tried applying a sticky gel on the trusses to discourage landing. But, says Rathje, there were too many trusses and beams to get sufficient coverage. It was not a practical approach. They tried plastic owls to bother the birds - to no avail.

Now it was spring 2003, with the new season opening in May. Rathje concluded that it was time to call in the professionals to discuss a sonic device he'd heard about, manufactured by Chicago-based Bird-X, Inc., for deterring birds. Bird-X, in turn, referred Rathje to a bird-deterrence consultant, Kevin Connelly, General Manager of Premier Pest Elimination in Chicago.

Professionals At Bat.

"Food service and pigeon excrement don't mix," Connelly states bluntly. Health issues abound. "When 40,000 fans come to an outdoor venue and you have bird droppings, the probability rises geometrically that someone will be affected by contaminants," he elaborates. Also, he adds, the cost of cleaning up resistive bird residue on the seats and in the stands before and after each game is considerable.

Connelly met on-site with Rathje, just weeks before the season opener, to assess the situation. Speed was of the essence; so was efficacy. Connelly explained the options, including the installation of extensive netting in Wrigley Field's vast superstructure to restrain the birds from roosting.

This would require much longer than two weeks to install properly. Even more to the point, it would break Rathje's budget.

Rathje preferred Connelly's other proposal: installing ultrasonic devices to get the most bang for Wrigley Field's buck, and the most coverage considering the expanses to be protected. The two men worked out a plan to install seven Bird-X Ultrason X units and seven Super BirdXPeller PRO units in the trusses under the upper deck and in the lower deck corners.

Double Play Against the Birds.

The double whammy on the birds was deliberate and logical. As Bird-X President Ron Schwarcz explains, "The area to control was large enough to require several sonic units. We selected two different types of units to produce greater variety of sound. This would provide immediate results while helping prevent long-term acclimation, since birds don't like surprises and unpredictable changes."

The Ultrason X product uses ultrasonic sound waves to repel birds and other nuisance critters. The basic technology isn't new; Bird-X incorporated it into its product line 40 years ago to deter birds in enclosed areas like warehouses and loading docks, where walls and roofs could magnify the impact of the sound. In a recent breakthrough, Ultrason X is the first device to take ultrasonic sound OUT of doors effectively.

The second type of deterrence device, Super BirdXPeller PRO, pushes the sound much farther and is ideal for large, open areas. It works on the bird's psychological state, as Ron Schwarcz explains: "The machine incorporates the birds' own distress calls to repel the 'usual suspects' - pigeons, sparrows, starlings and other common pests. Then we added the sounds of two predators, knowing that these cries would scare all birds universally." For maximum effect, the Super BirdXPeller is programmable to produce random timing, volume and frequency.

Connelly concurs. With 15 years of pest control experience, he concludes that these two products work better together than either one alone. "Also," Connelly assures, "the devices don't hurt the birds. It's not an aggressive action." This keeps the peace with animal lovers.

Season Opener in the Upper Deck.

Connelly worked cooperatively with the union electricians on staff at Wrigley Field to devise a protocol for smooth supervision and installation. The big day came in late May 2003. When the Bird-X units were turned on, "The birds flapped out," Rathje says.

"About 90 percent of the birds left for good," says Connelly. It wasn't a total elimination, both men agree, but it forced the bird problem to fall within an acceptable tolerance range. That was the goal, Connelly says, noting that

realistic expectations and budgetary constraints are always factors in choosing solutions for large facilities.

"We're changing the habits of an animal," Connelly continues. And sometimes that involves reasonable compromise. For example, the sonic equipment at Wrigley Field is turned off during home games because it was felt that the audible portion of the sound would disturb the fans. Consequently, some pigeons return while the units are turned off. Immediately after the game, the units are turned on again, to good effect. It's a compromise that works for Wrigley Field.

Come Out Swinging.

Pigeon droppings in sports stadiums and other outdoor facilities are irritating, unsanitary, messy, smelly, repugnant, difficult to clean up, and a darn nuisance. Operations Director Rathje has advice for other facilities managers: Consider the various bird-deterrence alternatives, depending on the facility's architecture, where the birds roost, and the expanse of the space affected. Connelly agrees. "Then base your decision on the limits of your budget, the realities of the time needed for proper installation, and your tolerance level for effectiveness." He reminds directors that a 100 percent solution can be prohibitively expensive and often is not necessary.

From the professional's point of view, bird deterrence pays for itself rapidly in reduced clean-up costs; but, says Connelly, the benefits of bird control go far beyond economics

and into intellectual values of improved aesthetics,
environmental safety and positive public relations. You can't
put a price on those.

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