

CUBS BALK AT VINCENT MOVE

Team owner Tribune files suit to block division switch

By Steve McClellan

Major League Baseball Commissioner Faye Vincent pitched the Tribune-owned Chicago Cubs a wicked curve last week, ordering the team, and three others in the National League (Cincinnati Reds, St. Louis Cardinals and Atlanta Braves), to switch divisions. In turn, the Cubs charged the mound, slapping Vincent with a breach of contract suit that contended his action went beyond his authority as commissioner.

There was much speculation in the press that Tribune's main concern was the potentially negative impact the switch could have on the revenues of its superstation, WGN-TV Chicago. Tribune officials would not comment on the record about the lawsuit, but privately, executives downplayed that potential, stressing their main concern was the damage the Cubs would incur through the elimination of existing team rivalries and later game starts from the West Coast.

Vincent's order would move the Cubs and Cardinals from the Eastern division of the National League to the Western division starting with the 1993 season. At the same time, the Reds and the Braves would move from the West to the East.

The Cubs were the only team involved in the switch to cry foul. The Cardinals, Reds and Braves publicly endorsed the changes last week. However, broadcast rights holders to those teams said it was too early to tell what effect, if any, realignments would have on viewing and revenues.

Much depends on the formation of the 1993 National League schedule, which is still taking shape. The critical factor is how many games each team will be scheduled to play within its own division versus interdivisional play. If the National League adopts the American League model, it would be a roughly even split. However, the National League has traditionally scheduled teams to play more games within their division.

Broadcasters involved said last week if the National League schedules teams to play roughly the same number of games in each division, the

impact on coverage would likely be minimal. But if the teams end up playing significantly more games in their own division, the Cubs and the Cardinals would play many more games on the West Coast, resulting in later start times back home. In turn, the Braves and the Reds will end up playing significantly fewer on the West Coast, resulting in fewer late-night games broadcast in their markets.

It gets more complicated for WGN-TV because of the station's highly rated 9-10 p.m. newscast. If it has to delay the newscast frequently beyond prime time because of baseball, it could result in a significant drain on local news revenue.

The station could minimize the damage by pushing the news back an hour, when necessary, or even do a half-hour news before late games, without disrupting the rest of its schedule, sources said. Still, some revenue could be lost.

But while WGN-TV officials have gone out of their way to downplay their superstation status, it appears steps are being taken to market WGN-TV more aggressively as a national program source. In January the station signed an agreement with Nielsen to measure monthly the station's national audience (excluding Chicago viewership) as part of Nielsen's cable network measurement service.

According to market sources, WGN-TV has annual revenues approaching \$150 million. Between \$15 million and \$20 million of that is attributable to national ad buys, with the rest coming from local sales, sources said.

One agency buyer said last week: "Obviously they are planning to expand the national business they do. They were in here pitching me on the Cubs as a national buy. And when you sign on for national measurement, that does cost some money. But it also gives you instant credibility

as a national service that you don't have without it."

Tribune sources accused Vincent of trying to turn the dispute into a superstation issue because he and some team owners feel the superstations not only don't pay their fair share for rights, but also dilute audiences of local telecasts in baseball markets where they are received via cable.

"Baseball hates superstations. It's that simple," said a Tribune source. In its court complaint, the Cubs denied Vincent's claim that the team's opposition was due in large part to the "scheduling difficulties that will be experienced by superstation WGN-TV....

There was no such evidence to this effect before the commissioner, and the assertion is false."

Instead, the Cubs claimed, the realignment would cause "severe harm" to the team and its relationship with its fans by eliminating old rivalries with teams such as the New York Mets and Philadelphia Phillies, resulting in lower home game attendance, lower broadcast ratings "and thus lower broadcasting income



Baseball Commissioner Vincent reshuffles the Major League deck.

to the Cubs."

Stations with rights to the other teams downplayed the impact the changes would have on viewership and revenues. "Eighty percent of our Reds time is bought upfront by clients who pay the same rate for each game and want to be associated with the franchise," said Ned Paddock, acting general manager, WLWT-TV Cincinnati.

"We're still studying it," said Hal Protter, general manager of Cardinals rights holder KPLR-TV St. Louis. "We're having a good season—we're contenders, and I think for us that will continue to be the main factor."

In Atlanta, Kevin O'Mally, sports director, superstation WTBS(TV), said the changes will have more of an impact on the Braves than the superstation.

"They feel like they've been in the wrong division since 1966," O'Mally said. But for WTBS, "overall, I would say the impact should be slight. When the team does good, our ratings are good. If not, the ratings slide." ■