

# What's Baseball Got To Do with It? More than You Think!

by Dan Helpingstine

At first glance, a Major League Baseball team has little in common with a nonprofit. Major League sports is a high-profile, big-money proposition. Most nonprofits have smaller annual budgets than the lowest-paid member of a Major League team. But step back a minute, and you'll find the two have more in common than you might think. Let's look at a few similarities.

**Community spirit.** It helps any nonprofit to have a solid presence in the community. The nonprofit I work for, Chicago Lighthouse, has been in existence for 105 years, and its mere name helps the organization maintain its local credibility. The Chicago Cubs have a 100-year history, parts of which the organization would like to forget. Yet, the franchise has had a neighborhood presence that adds to the team's mystique and aura. A White Sox fan, who happens to live on the North Side, told me that the neighborhood was understandably worried when night baseball began in 1988. Although the night games added local excitement, residents fretted about intrusions and the risk that the area would be littered with trash. She said she was happy to see that the Cubs helped police the area after night games. In the morning, the neighborhood was relatively litter-free. "Sometimes the little things mean a great deal," she said. The Cubs community spirit made a difference. Similarly, community spirit may be among a nonprofit's most important assets.

**Forward motion.** Whether the home office is a huge stadium or tiny storefront, forward motion is essential to viability. At one point, baseball economics were largely dictated by the average fan digging into his or her pocket to attend four or five games a year. Today, the season ticket holder, skybox sponsors and TV revenue are the franchise's bread and butter. Nonprofits, like baseball teams, are influenced by changing political, economic, and social tides. Nonprofits that once relied on government contracts, a key foundation, or a few deep pockets may find funding sources drying up just as the competition for dwindling resources gets tougher. Baseball teams and neighborhood food pantries must continually look ahead to respond to these ever-changing pressures.

**Rethinking to win.** Consider for a moment the World Series-winning 2005 Chicago White Sox. From 2001–04, the team hit a staggering 893 home runs—an average 223 a year. The home run is a great crowd-pleaser. However, there were no playoff appearances during these four seasons. The team had not appeared in a World Series since 1959 and had not won one since 1917. Fans said the home runs were great, but where was the championship that had been promised? The team didn't have the raw dollars to buy the additional talent needed to grab a series, so they set about redesigning themselves for their market. They traded an expensive power hitter for a lower paid speedy base stealer. They signed a heavy hitting outfielder at a bargain basement price, convincing him they could be a contender. They got lucky when a young and inexpensive relief pitcher developed quickly. The result? A 2005 World Series championship, blossoming fan base, increased souvenir sales, and huge attendance.

## At a glance

Baseball historian and nonprofit staffer Dan Helpingstine notes surprising similarities between major league baseball and nonprofit organizations. Among both:

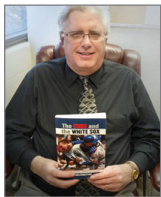
- Community spirit is critically important.
- Viability depends on forward motion—know where your market is going and meet it there.
- When the going gets tough, rethink how you're doing things.
- Mission is everything. People want to be part of something bigger than themselves.
- Teamwork matters, within the organization and across collaborations.
- Like many small-market teams, your organization can make up what it lacks in financial firepower with creativity, loyalty, teamwork, and reputation.

Nonprofits may not have the World Series, but their missions are even more important. Like the White Sox, mission success may mean rethinking your approach (your programs, fundraising, strategy, marketing and more) and then combining speed, clever execution, and careful timing to get the job done. Creative problem-solving can get you to your own World Series even when you don't have the big bucks to work with.

**Valuing the mission.** The White Sox were able to attract a key player and retain others with their strategy of redesigning to win. I work for a nonprofit that serves those who are blind or visually impaired. Our mission is truly important—so much so that we have had job applicants who come for our mission alone. We once had an amusing application from a person who wrote, “I know what nonprofits pay, but I’m applying for the job anyway.” For me, for that applicant, and for many people, the opportunity to make a difference is more important than money. Players and fans hung in with the White Sox out of loyalty and potential. These same attributes can be among your nonprofit’s strengths. Others may include generous vacation leave, family-friendly environment and so on.

**Teaming towards success.** On a baseball team, members specialize. It’s the combination of their talents and their creativity in working together that ultimately brings success. Team spirit makes a difference, too: On the best teams, when a player hits the inevitable slump or is injured, others step in and fill the void. So it is in a good nonprofit. Buoyed by the end mission (whether raising more funds or saving the world), nonprofit team members push beyond their limits to get the job done. They do this because they are comfortable with their roles and because their management sets high standards while trusting them to do the work. In teamwork, nonprofits have a distinct advantage over baseball teams. They can assemble teams of organizations, collaborating to fight homelessness, diseases, poverty, and more.

Of course, the typical nonprofit lacks the financial power of a major league franchise. But a nonprofit can have its own loyal fan base, motivating mission, forward motion, creativity, and team spirit. Like the Cubs and the White Sox, a nonprofit can succeed by figuring out what works in its environment, leveraging its reputation, getting the right people on board, and then executing a great strategy.



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