

VIEW FROM THE STANDS

FOR THE EDITOR OF THE CHICAGO CUBS FAN MAGAZINE, SPORTS JOURNALISM IS THE FIELD OF HIS DREAMS.

BY MATT PAOLELLI
(BSJ05, MSJ06)

MATT PAOLELLI IS THE MANAGER OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS FOR CATHOLIC EXTENSION, A NON-PROFIT FUNDRAISING ORGANIZATION BASED IN CHICAGO. HE IS ALSO AN ADJUNCT LECTURER AT MEDILL.

CHICAGO CUBS FANS HAVE BEEN WAITING more than 100 years for a World Series victory, and 2016 might turn out to be “The Year.”

A historic moment would be especially sweet for **GARY COHEN (MSJ08)**, editor in chief of Vine Line, a Cubs fan magazine. During his time as editor, Cohen has had a front row seat for the team’s transformation from a “lovable losers” punchline in 2011 to today’s all-star starting lineup that is cruising toward its second straight postseason appearance.

“It’s really rewarding to have gone from the depths of the rebuild to where it is now,” Cohen says. “There were times where we would go, ‘What’s our cover story going to be?’ Now it’s a totally different scenario. We’ve got cover stories for days.”

A lifelong baseball fan who grew up rooting for the Atlanta Braves and keeping an eye on the Cubs thanks to their regular appearances on WGN, Cohen nevertheless took a circuitous

route to sports writing. After graduating from the University of Texas at Austin, he came to Chicago to take improv classes and pursue a career in theater and television. At first, writing

was just a way to pay the bills. “I had always known how to write and was pretty good at it, so I conned my way into various magazine jobs,” he says. “By the time I decided to go to Medill, I had been doing writing as an avocation and acting as a vocation for a long time and figured it was time to try something different.”

After a brief sports writing stint in Los Angeles, Cohen returned to Chicago and enrolled at Medill to refine his skills and learn “the nuts and bolts of putting together a magazine.” He served as publisher for his cohort’s capstone publishing project that ultimately produced Better (later renamed Make it Better), a lifestyle magazine for Chicago’s North Shore suburbs that still exists today.

“The Medill experience helped me gain a knowledge that I probably should have had to be working in the business,” he says. “I learned a ton about the production and business side of magazines.”

Cohen also credits Medill with helping him find a magazine job in Chicago as editor in chief at Community Magazine Group, which gave him a crash course in the tools he would need to run Vine Line. He came on board in November 2011 just as the Cubs were embarking on a multi-year roster rebuilding effort led by new President of Baseball Operations Theo Epstein. The rebuilding effort required a few tough seasons in order to pave the way for the team’s current success, which led to some challenging decisions for Cohen and his staff, who had to factor team personnel changes into their monthly editorial plans.

“The major league team was relatively thin, and on top of that, we couldn’t cover the people who were not thin because they were all on the trade block,” Cohen says. “A lot of people aren’t willing to look at the minor leagues and see the plan in motion, they’re just looking at the major league team that is losing 100 games, so we would get a



“
**There were times where we would go,
‘What’s our cover story going to be?’
Now it’s a totally different scenario.
We’ve got cover stories for days.**

Gary Cohen

route to sports writing. After graduating from the University of Texas at Austin, he came to Chicago to take improv classes and pursue a career in theater and television. At first, writing

lot of angry letters saying, ‘You go tell Theo...’”

The magazine’s content tended to focus on the bright future of the Cubs’ minor league stars, several of whom are now among the most sought after players in baseball. Through thick and thin, Cohen says that the commitment and knowledge of Cubs fans makes managing Vine Line a powerful responsibility.

“We’re not going out to 200,000 people, but the people the magazine is going out to are really passionate about the Cubs,” he says. “I’ve always equated it to soap opera fans. If you’re in that bubble, the passion of the fans is pretty extreme.”

That passion was rarely more evident than last season, when Epstein’s rebuilding plans bore fruit a bit early: The long-suffering fans were treated to a postseason series victory over the rival St. Louis Cardinals at Wrigley Field. Cohen rates it as one of the best experiences of his career.

“Last year was a surprise to everybody,” he says. “This year the team had huge expectations and has thus far lived up to those expectations. If we’re sitting here two years from now and there still isn’t a World Series trophy, the fans are going to get restless, but for now everyone is just

enjoying the ride. There’s a lot of happy people at Wrigley Field these days.”

So is this “The Year?” Cohen is cautiously optimistic.

“If I were a betting man, I would put my money on the Cubs, but there’s so much randomness in the playoffs,” he says. “Your goal is to get into the tournament and then you see what happens from there.”

If the Cubs do soon break their 108-year streak of futility, Cohen will be covering it from his perch in the Wrigley Field press box, enjoying the view and a job that perfectly combines his strengths and interests.

“I’ve got the baseball knowledge, but I also know how to build a magazine, and sadly there aren’t that many people wandering around who still like print and see the value in it,” he says. “That all came out of Medill and my time there, so I wouldn’t be doing this if it weren’t for Medill.”

ABOVE: Gary Cohen at Wrigley Field on July 15, 2016. (photo by Stephen Green Photography)