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Electricity's in the air Fans soak up excitement at 35th and Shields

By David Haugh
Tribune staff reporter

July 16, 2003

As Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig walked into U.S. Cellular Field on Tuesday night, he had the same wish as any dad on Father's Day: Anything but another tie.

A year after the 7-7 All-Star deadlock many still consider a brainlock by Selig, he is hounded about that decision almost as much as he is asked about Pete Rose.

"You blew it last year, Bud!" a voice bellowed as Selig smiled.

Tom Dobry, a Cubs fan and apparently a Bud man, begged to differ.

"I went up to him and shook his hand to say I thought he made the right decision last year, and the right decision to make the winner get home-field advantage for the World Series," Dobry said as Selig signed autographs outside Gate 4.

Selig's reply?

"It was a tough decision," he said, "but the right one."

Most fans lingering outside the stadium agreed, including noted baseball historian George Will, who was soaking in the All-Star ambience like a Little Leaguer as he does every July.

"I'm all in favor [of tying the All-Star outcome to the World Series]," Will said. "Fox [Sports] wanted it and wanted it for the right reasons. It was the right thing to do."

Only the All-Stars themselves could answer whether playing for home-field advantage added to the intensity on the field, but anybody walking near 35th and Shields could feel the electricity in the air. The Midsummer Classic apparently still has magic.

It came from the sidewalks where hawkers gave away "I Still Call It Comiskey" T-shirts and "Clear Buck" buttons intended to get banned "Black Sox" third baseman Buck Weaver reinstated.

It came from the hundreds of fans clutching cameras and baseballs waiting near the players' entrance, hoping to start their day by getting an autograph and end it by watching a signature All-Star moment.

It also came from the parking lots where fans made a Tuesday night at U.S. Cellular feel a lot like a Sunday morning at Soldier Field.

"I'm breaking them into the tradition," said Steve Majkowski of Wheeling as he fired up a charcoal grill in a lot one block west of the stadium. His three children played catch as their father remembered attending the last All-Star Game on the South Side, in 1983.

"I can still see Fred Lynn hitting that grand slam," Majkowski said. "I was with my buddies, so it was an entirely different experience than this one will be."

What wasn't to like for Chicago's baseball fans? When the first pitch was thrown at 7:40 p.m., a Cubs manager sat in the National League dugout and a White Sox pitcher stood

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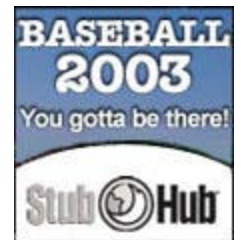
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on the mound.

For a few hours, nobody worried whether Sox manager Jerry Manuel would get fired or whether the Cubs' season would continue to die slowly this summer like a dry patch of grass.

"I'm hoping for face value, but I'd pay more," said Dave Piper, who drove 110 miles north from Princeton, Ill., without a ticket. "Hey, it's the All-Star Game in Chicago."

But, he was reminded, it's an All-Star game in Chicago without Chicago's biggest baseball stars: Frank Thomas and Sammy Sosa.

"Maybe that'll make it easier to get a ticket," Piper reasoned.

Doubt it: A half-hour before game time, a man who refused to give his name sold two \$175 seats for \$300 apiece.

For those inside, the price was worth it. "I can't imagine having much more fun than this at a baseball game," Molly Conneen said.

Even Mayor Richard M. Daley, a lifelong Sox fan showed up. On his way into U.S. Cellular, Daley smiled and shook hands like it was an election year as fellow Chicagoans cheered his every step.

"The All-Star Game is great exposure, and it's a great night for the city of Chicago," Daley said.

Only one way it could get better, he thought.

"I'm an American League fan," Daley said with a laugh. "So no ties."

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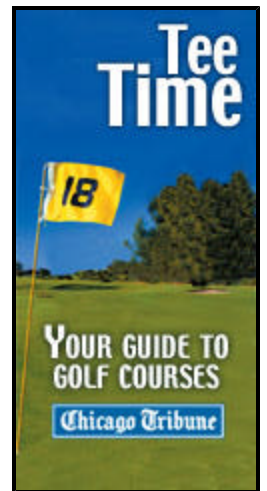
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