The Court Archive:
Turning on the Lights at Wrigley Field

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Just a year after Thomas Edison patented the first incandescent light bulb in 1879, the first amateur baseball game was played at night under lights. Team owners eventually recognized the advantages of nighttime games, from the cooler weather to giving fans the opportunity to attend after their workday ended. By the 1930s, more than a dozen minor league teams adopted night baseball. The Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro Leagues even traveled with their own portable lighting system. In 1935, the Cincinnati Reds became the first Major League Baseball team to install lights, with ten other teams following by 1941. But Wrigley Field, home of the Chicago Cubs, did not embrace nighttime baseball until 1988, after years of public opposition, political maneuvering, and legal battles, including a case before the Illinois Supreme Court.

Cubs owner Philip K. Wrigley planned to install lights at Wrigley Field as early as 1942, but the attack on Pearl Harbor altered his plans. The day after the attack, he donated 165 tons of steel intended for the lights to the war effort. For the remainder of his ownership, he resisted night baseball. “We believe baseball is a daytime sport, and we will continue to play it in the sunshine as long as we can,” he said. Residents of the Lakeview neighborhood surrounding the ballpark supported his stance, fearing that night games would lead to excess noise, public drunkenness, and vandalism.

Some Cubs fans disagreed. In 1966, 27-year-old Chicago lawyer William Shlensky, who owned two shares of Cubs stock, filed a lawsuit in Cook County Circuit Court to force Wrigley to install lights. Shlensky argued that lights would improve the team’s performance and increase revenue. Wrigley, however, cited concerns about disturbing the nearby residents and the lawsuit was dismissed three months later.

In 1981, the Tribune Company purchased the Cubs and began exploring the possibility of installing lights. A community group called Citizens United for Baseball in Sunshine (C.U.B.S.) opposed the idea and lobbied the Illinois General Assembly to pass a law that prohibited lights at Wrigley Field. Governor James Thompson signed it into law. A year later, the Chicago City Council passed a similar ordinance, effectively blocking night baseball at Wrigley Field.

The Tribune Company threatened to relocate the team. Major League Baseball warned that the Cubs could be denied postseason games at Wrigley Field if lights were not installed, as night games generated higher television ratings.

The Cubs filed an injunction in Cook County Circuit Court, arguing that the state and local laws unfairly targeted their team. In March 1985, Judge Richard Curry rejected the Cubs' argument, ruling that both the state law and city ordinance would remain in effect.

The Cubs appealed the decision, and on October 3, 1985, the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the lower court's ruling in *Chicago National League Ball Club, Inc. v. Thompson*, 108 Ill. 2d 357 (1985). Justice Daniel Ward wrote that the laws passed by both the Illinois General Assembly and the Chicago City Council were reasonable and did not unfairly discriminate against the Cubs. "Simply, the Cubs have failed to meet the burden of showing the unconstitutionality of the legislative actions," Justice Ward concluded.

Despite the legal setbacks, night baseball finally arrived at Wrigley field three years later when the Tribune Company and the Chicago City Council reached a compromise. A new ordinance allowed the Cubs to play 18-night games per season at Wrigley Field through 2002. In return, the Cubs agreed to restrictions, such as no beer sales after 9:20 pm and no organ music after 9:30 pm.

The first scheduled night game on August 8, 1988, against the Philadelphia Phillies, was rained out after just 3 ½ innings. The first official night game was completed the next night, when the Cubs defeated the New York Mets, 6-4.

Today, the Cubs can play up to 35-night games per season, and the lights have even been upgraded to accommodate special events, such as nighttime concerts, which have been held at the ballpark since 2005.