

Such a deal: Hemond, Veeck stoked fire at '75 winter meetings

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When the annual winter meetings begin in Indianapolis today, the local clubs will be hard-pressed to match the final frantic days of the 1975 edition, which saw White Sox general manager Roland Hemond and owner Bill Veeck become the talk of baseball.

In the final three days, the White Sox pulled off six trades that involved 22 players and did much to build the so-called South Side Hit Men of two years later.

“Those were different times,” Hemond told the Chicago Baseball Museum recently. “General managers went to the winter meetings to be active traders, and it wasn’t unusual to see them make the rounds in public. They have player agents and other business to tend to now, so they spend a lot of time in their suites.”

When Hemond arrived at Hollywood, Fla., he was on a one-way ticket. White Sox owner Arthur Allyn was financially spent, and the future of the franchise was in doubt. A group of Seattle investors had made a bid for the franchise, fully intent to move it to the Pacific Northwest. Meanwhile, former White Sox owner Bill Veeck led a rival group that planned to keep it in Chicago.

On Wednesday, Dec. 10, the American League club owners approved the bid of the Veeck group. Intent to improve the team, which finished in fifth place with a 75-86 record the previous season, Hemond completed a pre-arranged deal that sent pitcher Jim Kaat and shortstop Mike Buskey to the Philadelphia Phillies in return for outfielder Alan Bannister and pitchers Dick Ruthven and Roy Thomas.

Hemond and Veeck had only started to warm up, it turned out. “Our goal was to improve the team and create some excitement back in Chicago while we did it,” Hemond said. “Bill told me to leave no figment of my imagination unturned.”

In the lobby of the Diplomat Hotel, where the winter meetings were being held, traffic was rather brisk in the lobby. Why, of course, Hemond thought. What better place to conduct business? So he moved a table aside, pulled up a few chairs and displayed a sign. “Open for Business,” it said in big, bold letters.

Some of the purists weren’t impressed, but as Hemond said, “It served our purposes. Even now, people still ask me about it. They give me credit for the idea, but if Bill Veeck wasn’t my boss, it never would have happened.”

The majority of general managers didn’t mind at all. Hemond scheduled conferences with several interested parties at 15-minute intervals. Before the day

was over, the White Sox acquired first baseman Jim Spencer and outfielder Morris Nettles from California Angeles in exchange for pitcher Steve Dunning and third baseman Bill Melton, who had sought a move to the west coast.

Come Friday, the final day of business, Hemond and Veeck had added a telephone at their table. "We called it the White Sox Hotline," Hemond said. As only he could, Veeck took the idea a step further. He instructed public relations director Buck Peden to make telephone inquiries in the secret role of rival general manager in his room. "He's one of our best players, you know," Veeck would play along in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear around him. "But if you would like to make an offer . . ."

A few hours later, Hemond received a phone call from Veeck, who had returned to his room to rest his prosthetic leg. "Bill told me, 'We got them where we want them,'" Hemond recalled. "'They're weakening.'"

Before the smoke cleared, the White Sox acquired outfielder Buddy Bradford and pitcher Greg Terlecky from the St. Louis Cardinals, shortstop Larvell Blanks and outfielder Ralph Garr from the Atlanta Braves, second baseman Jack Brohamer from the Cleveland Indians and pitcher Clay Carroll from the Cincinnati Reds in four separate trades.

When Hemond and Veeck returned to Chicago the next day, Mayor Daley had a band greet them at the airport. "We received a hero's welcome for our efforts," Hemond said. "We must have done pretty well." Three days later, it was announced that Veeck had purchased 80 percent of the franchise.

The flurry of activity did not have the desired effect in the 1976 campaign. Bannister, Brohamer, Garr and Spencer cracked the line-up, but the White Sox finished in last place with a 64-97 record, nonetheless.

One year later, however, the deals began to pay dividends. With Bannister, Garr and Spencer in lead roles, the White Sox won as many as 90 games (90-72) for the first time in 12 years. They were atop the West Division as late as Aug. 19 before they settled in third place.

"A big part of our '77 team was acquired at the winter meetings two years earlier," Hemond said. "You don't see that done very often any more. It's the free agents that generate the most interest now."