



Ventures

The Off Season

Can one enterprising sports fan mint a fortune with a catchy slogan?

THE CUBS BROKE a lot of hearts last season. They broke mine twice.

It began one summer morning near the start of the season as my wife and I drove to work. I was blathering on about the Detroit Pistons cult hero Ben Wallace and the T-shirts celebrating his massive coif: "Fear the 'Fro," the shirts proudly proclaimed. "I bet the guy who came up with those is rich now. We should do something like that," I said to my wife, who was doing her usual ignore-Joel-and-read-the-paper-as-he-drives-us-to-work shtick. I mumbled a few lame ideas like "Kerry's Krusaders" and "No Prior Restraint." More silence. Just when I thought I'd lost her for good, she came out of nowhere with "What's that big Korean first baseman's name? Choi? How about 'I'm Pro-Choi?'"

I didn't say anything for a second, stunned at the brilliant simplicity of her idea. "That's it," I finally said. "That's our ticket to riches."

In my mind, I instantly parlayed this simple slogan into hats, a Web site, a Hee Seop Choi fan club, and countless other lucrative tchotchkes. Choi, the lefty first baseman with the sweet swing, was well on his way to becoming a Wrigley cult hero—an Asian Mark Grace with more power and a tamer social life. I pictured Choi and me singing into a mic together at his favorite karaoke club, both of us wearing goofy grins and "I'm Pro-Choi" hats. This was going to be the next Pet Rock.

We spent \$550 on a preliminary order of 144 white T-shirts emblazoned in Cubby blue and red. We shelled out an extra hundred bucks to add "Hee's on first" to the

back. What Cubs fan could resist this double dose of cleverness for only \$20 a pop? Then it was off to City Hall to plunk down \$75 for the requisite street vendor's license. With shirts and permit in hand, all we needed was the right opportunity. I remember one evening listening to the radio, and my ticket to riches came up to bat. The chant of "HEE SEOP CHOI!" nearly drowned out Cubs announcer Pat Hughes. When Choi singled to drive in a run, I beamed like a proud father.

But before we could capitalize on the frenzy, Choi collided with Kerry Wood during a Yankees game and went down with a concussion. There was a period of recovery, a recuperating stint in the minors. By the time Choi returned, first baseman Eric Karros was hot and my ticket sat unused at the end of the bench. He still had that sweet lefty swing but he couldn't hit a curve ball with a tennis racquet. "The Cubs aren't going to trade

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him, are they?" my wife asked testily. "No no no. They'll never trade him," I assured her. Then the team picked up Randall Simon and sent Choi back to the minors. "Are you sure?" my wife asked again. "Noooo, no way," I replied, informing her that the Cubs' general manager, Jim Hendry, loved him. Sure enough, on November 25th, Hendry traded Choi to the Florida Marlins for Derrek Lee.

So now I'm stuck with two massive boxes of T-shirts celebrating a player who's no longer in town, and a lifetime of "I told you so's" headed my way. My wife insists that this is the end of our foray into DIY capitalism. But once you've tasted possibility . . . "Holy Moises!" kind of has a ring to it, doesn't it? **-JOEL REESE**

(Postscript: Since Choi got off to a hot start with Florida, I put the T-shirts on eBay. After dropping the price from \$15 to \$12 to \$10 to \$8, I finally sold one shirt to a Marlins fan in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. One down, 143 to go.)

ILLUSTRATION: CHRISTOPH NIEMANN