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Gilbert gives White Sox a lift

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Inside SOCAL

CHICAGO — Dennis Gilbert is known for once being the high profile agent of such players as Barry Bonds, Mike Piazza, George Brett, Bret Saberhagen, Curt Schilling and countless others.

He's known for donating more than a million dollars for the construction of a stadium that bears his name at Southwest Community College in south central Los Angeles for major-league baseball's RBI (Reviving Baseball in the Inner Cities) program.

He's known for being the driving force along with Roland Hemond and Long Beach's Harry Minor behind the creation of the Professional Scouts Foundation that has raised more than a half million dollars in a mere two years to assist retired scouts who have fallen on difficult times.

He's known for having one of the most successful life insurance businesses in the country that caters to many Hollywood celebrities, and his Gilbert-Krupin company in Beverly Hills has made him wealthy beyond his wildest boyhood dreams he had while growing him in modest circumstances in Gardena.

He's known for being a one-time minor-league center fielder nicknamed Go Go for his knack of stealing bases, and even played for Minor one season in Visalia.

But what isn't known about Dennis Gilbert is that he has played an important behind-the-scenes role in the remarkable rise of the Chicago White Sox, who make their first World Series appearance in 46 years Saturday night when they face the Houston Astros at U.S. Cellular Field.

The owner of the White Sox, Jerry Reinsdorf, hired Gilbert five years ago to be his special assistant, and says he speaks on the phone to Gilbert at least three times a day.

"Dennis has made valuable contributions to the organization and to me since he came aboard," says Reinsdorf, who's also the long-time owner of the Chicago Bulls and has six NBA titles rings from the Michael Jordan era. "He goes to all of the Dodgers and Angels games out in Southern California, and also is very helpful in contract negotiations."

It is the latter, of course, that is Gilbert's greatest asset, since he was on the other side for so many years working the angles to dredge as much money as he could out of management for his clients.

Gilbert knows all the tricks since he employed so many of them himself, and the White Sox have not fallen victim to the slick manipulations of shrewd agents like the one who the past offseason suckered the general manager of the Dodgers, Paul DePodesta, into overpaying for J.D. Drew (\$55 million for five years), Derek Lowe (\$38 million for four years) and Odalis Perez (\$28 million for three years).

It's not exactly a coincidence that the White Sox, at \$72 million, had the seventh-lowest payroll among the eight playoff teams, ahead of only the San Diego Padres.

"We're not a team with a lot of stars," says Reinsdorf.

But the team that did have a lot of stars, the New York Yankees, with their obscene \$220 million payroll, is on vacation.

And the team that spent about a third as much, the White Sox, will be attempting to win the franchise's first world championship since 1917.

There is no doubt the general manager of the White Sox, Ken Williams, has done an admirable job putting together a balanced team with all the necessary ingredients a proficient leadoff batter (Scott Podsednik), a trio of sluggers (Paul Konerko, Jermaine Dye and Carl Everett), a center fielder who covers a lot of ground (Aaron Rowand), three sure-fielding infielders who can hit (Joe Crede, Tadahito Iguchi and Juan Uribe), consistent starting pitchers (Jose Contreras, Mark Buehrle, Jon Garland and Freddy Garcia) and a reliable bullpen (Bobby Jenks, Orlando Hernandez, Neal Cotts, Luis Vizcaino, Dustin Hermanson and Demaso Marte).

There is also no doubt that Dennis Gilbert has played a role in the surprising emergence of the White Sox as an elite team.

He was involved in the off-season negotiations with Iguchi, an exceptional second baseman from Japan who signed with the White Sox for two years at \$4 million, with an option for a third year for \$3 million.

Contrast that with the inflated contract the New York Mets gave to another Japanese infielder named Kaz Matsui, who was given \$20 million over three years.

Because the White Sox were able to secure Iguchi at such a modest price, the team had enough money left over to sign El Duque Hernandez, who has become a valuable reliever.

"Like I said, Dennis has been of great value to our team," says Reinsdorf.

Ironically, the first time Jerry Reinsdorf met Dennis Gilbert came in 1985 when Gilbert was representing a young White Sox shortstop named Ozzie Guillen.

"Dennis and I immediately became good friends, and he's helped us in so many ways since he came with us," says Reinsdorf, a Brooklyn native who grew up in Flatbush and was a Dodger loyalist who attended Jackie Robinson's first game at Ebbetts Field in 1947. "Dennis is such a nice guy, and he reminds me of a Jewish mother. He's always concerned and worried about everything. He's very caring."

These are euphoric times for Jerry Reinsdorf, whose 25-year ownership of the White Sox is exceeded only by the team's founder Charles Comiskey (1901-1931).

"It always was big when we were in the NBA Finals because we had an Elvis Presley-caliber celebrity on our team in Michael Jordan," says Reinsdorf. "But the World Series is much bigger. I've never seen Chicago this excited. Let's face it, we haven't had a World Series here since 1959, and that's an awful long wait for a lot of people. Winning all those championships with the Bulls was great, but it would be the ultimate of my sports career if we win a world championship."

Jerry Reinsdorf received a call from Jeff Torborg, the one-time Florida Marlin manager, after the 2003 season, recommending Guillen to fill the White Sox's managerial opening.

"Ozzie had been a coach under Jeff with the Marlins, and Torborg told me Ozzie was ready to be a manager," relates Reinsdorf. "I knew Ozzie had a brilliant baseball mind and was a happy-go-lucky fellow. And so I had Ken Williams give him an interview. And Williams immediately liked Guillen, and hired him."

Of course, in the background, you can be sure Dennis Gilbert also was putting in kind words about Guillen to Reinsdorf.

"What I like so much about Dennis is that he knows all the scuttlebutt that's going on around our sport," says Reinsdorf of the man who lives in Hidden Hills West near Calabasas next door to Stevie Wonder.

And what Jerry Reinsdorf also likes about Dennis Gilbert is that Gilbert has a keen comprehension of the financial structure of the game, meaning the White Sox's success is especially satisfying to Reinsdorf since it has come without his having to pay out outlandish sums to his players like the owners do in New York, Boston and even Anaheim.