

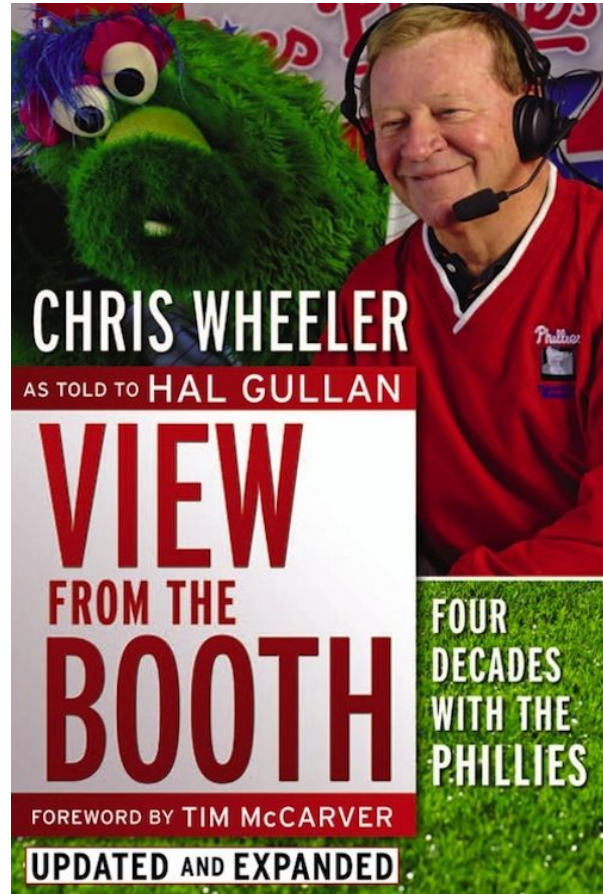
## View from the Booth

Four Decades with Phillies, Updated & Expanded

Chris Wheeler as told to Hal Gullan

### Foreword by Tim McCarver

If I believed in reincarnation I might think that in his first lifetime Chris Wheeler was a nineteenth-century ballplayer, learning about baseball from its infancy on. Perhaps “Wheels” Wheeler would have been “Wee Willie” Keeler, the five foot, four and a half inch outfielder who had 200 hits in nine consecutive seasons, once batted .424, and knew baseball inside and out. If Chris wasn’t Willie, and didn’t retain his knowledge of the game, then perhaps he has been channeling him and other baseball immortals since he became a Philadelphia Phillies broadcaster in 1977. That might explain how this bright personality has been able for more than thirty years to give startling insights into the game without having actually played it, at least on the professional level. Ask the players. They will tell you that quite simply, “He gets it.” The fans of Philadelphia have been so fortunate that Chris has been a part of their lives. I have been fortunate, too. Playing baseball and broadcasting baseball are similar in that they are extremely difficult crafts that when done well seem almost effortless. Most fans watching games on television



think that the players they see and broadcasters they hear are doing something so easy that they could do it, too, if someone handed them a glove or microphone. That's one of the game's accessible charms. However, there have been an infinite number of players with talent and announcers with potential who never made it because they didn't receive the right training. I can say with experience that I wouldn't have played for 21 years in the majors if I hadn't received terrific instruction when I was starting out in the St. Louis Cardinals system from Eddie Stanky on catching (and life), George Kissell on the fundamentals, and George Crowe on hitting. I can also say with certainty that I wouldn't have had an even longer career as a baseball broadcaster if Chris Wheeler hadn't taken time with me at the very beginning.

I officially retired as a player with the Phillies in 1980. At the age of 38, when most men are at the pinnacle of their professions, I was starting anew as a rookie broadcaster for Philadelphia. Like most ex-jocks, I was an individual with single-vocational skills and a lot of self-doubt. I knew that I had accumulated a great deal of knowledge about baseball from the vantage point of the catcher's position and from talking endlessly with some of the craftiest players, managers, and coaches the game has ever known. But was I going to be able to communicate that knowledge of the game to the fans? I wanted to apply the same diligence as an announcer as I did as a player, but I didn't even know how to get started.

Bill Giles, then the Phillies' vice-president for business, informed me that I would be paired with Chris Wheeler for about 30 games in 1980 on PRISM, the team's cable outlet. Poor Chris was handed the job of tutoring me over the winter so that I wouldn't go up in flames. We did our work in a tiny cubicle over at Channel 17. The first time we sat there, Chris

put on a video of a game from 1979, minus the sound. Then he waited for me to start describing the action as if I were broadcasting to people in their homes. After a minute of silence, he said, "Go ahead." I stammered, "Go ahead and *what?*" I was experiencing sheer terror. Chris helped me relax and I started to find my voice, both figuratively and literally. Most of the time what I said that day was inane gibberish, but Chris was encouraging whenever I came up with anything remotely analytical. More comfortable, I was eager to proceed. It was a tedious three-month process, but by spring training, having absorbed so much from the man on my side, I was confident enough to move into the booth.

During my time with the Phillies I continued to learn on the job just by being with Wheels. From him I learned that a broadcaster has the responsibility to be informative and stimulating, prescient and provocative. I realized that his biggest gift was that he always went beyond the obvious, finding unique, interesting ways to communicate what was happening in a game. He showed that during its ebbs and flows there is time for humor, serious thought, and real analysis. He also knew exactly how to mix commentary with visuals. Just as he educated me on the inner workings of a broadcast, he taught the fans how to understand baseball without being didactic. He believed that elucidation leads to anticipation, which makes it more enjoyable (by the way, he also taught me what "didactic" means).

All these years later, Wheels keeps on rolling. He is still one of a kind. He has an uncanny ability to blend together his exhaustive game-by-game research and knowledge of the players with the *now* of a telecast. And it's all done seamlessly. Admirably, he has never allowed his being a lifetime Phillies "phanatic" to interfere with his calling every

play in every game with accuracy and professionalism. And, of course, wit.

Those same traits can be found in this book. Its pages are labors of love, and significantly allow his fans, the fans of the terrific Phillies franchise, a chance to get a close-up view of one of our most underrated broadcasters, who just happens to also be one hell of a guy. So, pay attention and enjoy.