

On the Road with . . .

Cubs Manager Joe Maddon

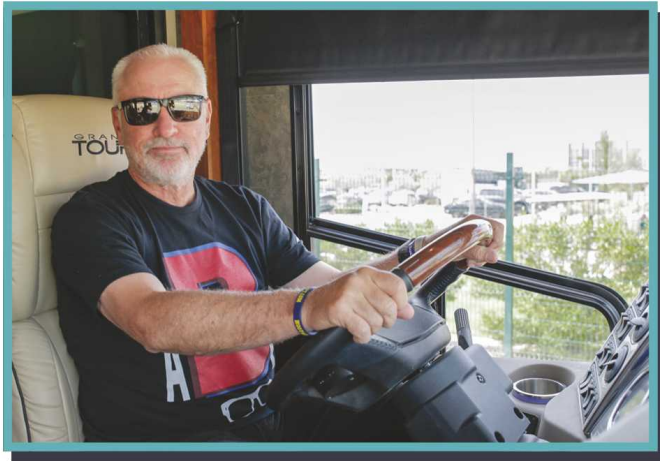
Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon loves the road. During the summers he travels across America, leading his team in themed road trips that have paid tribute to superheroes, the hit road film Easy Rider, and a “Man in Black” trip in honor of Johnny Cash. During the off-season Maddon can be seen tooling around Florida in his rockin’ Winnebago.

Chicago Cubs manager and RV/hippie van owner Joe Maddon has clear recall of the dusty road trips he took in 1977 and ’78 as a spare catcher for the Salinas Angels in the Class A California League. The charter bus would roll through Lodi, Modesto, Visalia, and other places that sound good in a country song but not in a baseball career.

Maddon would retreat to the back of the bus and settle down with a good book. And then he would find his moment.

“I loved riding in the bus,” Maddon said in an engaging conversation during the last week of the Cubs 2017 spring training in Mesa, Arizona. “I often talk to my children about how the struggle is the best part. On those bus trips as a minor league player, that’s where I learned how to read. I read books as opposed to playing cards. The back of the bus was a wonderful place to get your thoughts together and read—while you are with your group of people. We didn’t have the same kind of music ability with headphones and headsets of today, although we had some headsets on long trips.

“When I was at Lafayette College [in Easton, Pennsylvania] I was motivated by driving this strip between Hazleton [his hometown] and Easton. There was an area where the trees all turned colors in the



Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon has been an RV aficionado since 2013. COURTESY OF WINNEBAGO INDUSTRIES

fall. I had an art class and I still have this painting somewhere: about the trees in the fall, being on the road. I've always loved the road. The idea of the highway, the freeway. The road. There's an allure to that I can't get away from."

Maddon just liked saying the word and he said it again: "The road."

In the spring of 2017, Maddon was graduating to his fourth "Cousin Eddie" RV, named for the outta control Randy Quaid character in the National Lampoon *Vacation* movies. Maddon was waiting delivery on the Grand Tour, Winnebago's first forty-five footer. At the time, the price of the Grand Tour started at \$446,800. Maddon's latest rig has an electric fireplace, curved sofa, master bedroom, master bathroom, heated tile floors throughout, and five television sets.

"Actually, this will be 'Cousin Eddie 4.0,'" Maddon said with a laugh. "The first Cousin Eddie was a Winnebago Tour. Then we had a Monaco Dynasty that we had issues with. Cousin Eddie 3.0 was another Monaco Dynasty. And prior to the first Winnebago we had a Tiffin Phaeton forty footer. And before that was the Hurricane Thor. And the '76 Tradesman 200 [Dodge] Van is in Florida. It's all tricked out. It is really cool, man."

The highway is in Maddon's blood. He began his professional baseball career in 1976, hitting .294 in 163 at bats for Quad Cities in the Class A Midwest League. In 1977 and '78, Maddon stopped in Salinas before his playing career sailed away in Santa Clara, California, in 1979. His minor league managing career began in 1981 and took him through Idaho Falls; Salem, Oregon; Peoria, Illinois (back in the Midwest League); Midland, Texas; and finally Anaheim, California, where he broke into the big leagues as a coach with the Angels. It is little wonder that Maddon cannot get the road out of his system. He must wear number 70 on his jersey to remind him of speed limits.

Maddon learned to stay between the lines and live in the moment, not unlike John Steinbeck suggesting that *Grapes of Wrath* had many levels and that it was the responsibility of the reader to slow down and see as many levels as they have

in themselves. “I smile when I hear that [Steinbeck line],” Maddon said. “Every time we go into a high-powered situation, I try to get my players to understand to slow down in the moment, enjoy it and absorb it for what it is,” he explained. “That came to my mind in the 2003 All-Star game in Chicago [at US Cellular Field]. We were there with the staff of the [Anaheim] Angels because we won the World Series in 2002. You take team pictures in center field at the All-Star games. After the picture we were walking back to the dugout and I was looking at the ballpark and I said to myself, ‘Slow. It. Down.’ Understand what is going on. Because we all have a tendency to wish our lives away, which is absolutely insane. We’re always rushing to the next moment and not enjoying this one.”

Maddon’s sense of wonder explains why he is one of the most passionate RV-campers anyone could meet. As the World Champion Cubs embarked on their 2017 season, Maddon and his wife, Jaye, spent the last Monday of spring training awaiting the arrival of their new Winnebago. Their son-in-law drove it back to Florida from spring training in Arizona.

At the same time Maddon’s 1976 Dodge Tradesman van was parked at the Maddons’ Florida home. He had the brown van tricked out with Tommy Bahama–print vinyl and ostrich leather, along with a few acres of classic shag carpet. The

van also has a Blu-ray player, television set, and Dometic refrigerator. Maddon calls it his “Shaggin’ Wagon” and he has driven it to Wrigley Field.

In October 2014 Cubs president Theo Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer interviewed Maddon for his job in Maddon’s RV, parked at Santa Rosa RV Resort at Navarre Beach near Pensacola, Florida. That meeting changed baseball history.

“I don’t think they knew what to expect,” Maddon said. “They kind of liked it when they got there. I had a Winnebago Tour at that time. That was Cousin Eddie Number One. I had the first slot next to the little swimming pool. The back end of the RV was up against a small mini beach. Theo and Jed found it. It was about three o’clock in the afternoon. I was waiting for them. Me and Jaye took them inside and cracked open a couple of sixteen-ounce Miller Lites to get the thing rolling. They were surprised how nice it was once they walked inside. There’s a tremendous misconception about RVs, what they’re going to look like inside, is it going to be safe? I’m not saying Jed or Theo thought that, but they seemed surprised how nice it was. We talked a bit and took a couple of beach chairs down to this little beach. We talked about how the job was going to work. I loved the fact they were not concerned about intersecting with us at an RV resort in the Panhandle.

“It was the coolest interview I’ve had in my life.”



Joe and Jaye Maddon.

Maddon walked away with a five-year \$25 million deal to manage the Cubs.

How did Maddon enter the RV world?

“My wife was the perpetrator in 2013,” he answered. The Maddons wanted to bring their dogs Winston and Athena from Long Beach, California, to their home in Tampa, Florida. Winston is an English bulldog named after Winston Churchill. The late Athena was a Great Dane and has been replaced by Clementine, a dog named after Churchill’s wife.

At first Jaye wanted to rent an RV. “We started looking at the attempt to rent and it was very difficult to do, especially one-way from California to Florida,” Maddon said. “We looked into buying a used one. You find out the amount of money is amenable, but you’re going to get something you don’t necessarily want. Then we started looking into the new ones and you find out you can finance and with taxes be considered as a second home. Once it got to that level, we said, ‘Let’s buy a new one.’ And we did.”

Their first purchase was the thirty-foot Thor Hurricane.

“When we got it we thought it was the biggest thing in the world,” Maddon said with a laugh. “Intimidating. ‘Oh my God, I can’t believe I’m doing this.’ That same summer I already wanted something bigger. Then, Jaye got together with a rescue shelter, so part of it was a charitable situation where she drove the dogs out in this new Thor with her two sons, a Great Dane, and an English bulldog. That is how this all began.”

The twenty-seven-hundred-mile journey evolved into a fundraiser for Pet Pal Animal Shelter, a no-kill, nonprofit animal facility in St. Petersburg, Florida. Supporters pledged a penny a mile for the “Mad, Mad X-Country Drive-A-Thon.” The Maddons raised \$2,150 for the shelter.

Brian Hazelton, vice president/GM of the Motor Home Business at Winnebago Industries of Forest City, Iowa, said, “Joe is really into the RV lifestyle and for us Jaye is a big deal because more and more women are getting into camping. And Jaye kind of dragged Joe into it with the big dogs they couldn’t get on an airplane. RVs are important to them.”

One of Maddon’s favorite lines is “A mind once stretched has a very difficult time going back to its original form.” And that is applicable to RV culture. Maddon’s early hurdle in getting acquainted with a large RV was to keep an eye on

the back right corner of the rig. “You can see the left side from your [driver’s] side pretty well,” he said. “It’s all about the back right corner. I tried to make a right turn at my home in Tampa with the Phaeton and it high ended on a rock with ten thousand dollars’ worth of damage. My bad. Sometimes with the wind you really have to hold on. I learned I want to get most of my driving done in daylight. You have to concentrate more when driving such a large vehicle. At night, lights and mirrors—it can become more confusing.

“Moving forward from that, you can jump into a forty or forty-five footer with no problem once you understand your mirrors. Because when you look in the mirror the vehicle doesn’t look any bigger than when it was a thirty footer.”

Baseball mirrors a gypsy’s soul more than any other sport.

The path to the big leagues is filled with roadside diners, lost hubcaps, and lucky charms. No other sport encounters such a daunting map. Basketball and football are based on a collegiate feeding system, and while hockey has minor league teams, travel is in winter when the promise of the sun hides behind a charcoal curtain. NBA Hall of Famer Michael Jordan has had up to seven cars at one time. He does not own any camper vans or RVs.

“Ron Gardenhire [the new manager of the Detroit Tigers and former Minnesota Twins man-

ager] told me about RVs,” Maddon said. “Gardy was ahead of me with all this. He had a bigger RV when I started with the small one, so I started talking to him about it. I wanted to get by my intimidation factor, and he assured me it was no big deal. I’ve told other players if you don’t have a big family to bring with you, it’s the best way to do spring training.

“Another concept about RVs is that if you haven’t done it, you don’t realize that it is like you are in your own home. It’s not a foreign place. When I go back to an RV at night after practice or a game here in Arizona, I feel like I’m going home. I stayed in my RV for two spring trainings in Tampa Bay [with the Rays], and now this is my third year with the Cubs. So five years in a row now I’ve lived in my RV during spring training.”

RV sales are currently booming because baby boomers are getting into the game. Maddon was born in 1954; I was born in 1955. “What I was told a couple years ago was when the economy turned and people’s pensions became good again, there was more disposable income for recreational stuff,” he said. “With the adventurous component, there must be something about our age group. Maybe something fascinating from when we were kids. Going on vacations with our parents or watching other groups go on vacation. There’s a nostalgic feel.”

Maddon watched other groups go on vacation. His mother, Albina “Beanie,” worked at the 3rd Base Luncheonette in Hazelton, Pennsylvania (pop. 25,000) until she retired in 2015 at the age of eighty-three. Maddon’s father, Joseph Anthony Maddon, was the go-to plumber in the gritty coal town.

For nearly sixty years, Joseph, his four brothers, and their father, Carmen, owned C. Maddon & Sons Plumbing and Heating. The elder Maddon died in 2002, and Maddon still carries his father’s Anaheim Angels hat into the dugout. The Angels won the 2002 World Series. Maddon had his father’s cap in his back pocket during the Cubs dramatic win in Game 7 of the 2016 World Series. Memories of the road. “For me, having grown up in Pennsylvania, the ability to take an RV and park it on a beach is fascinating,” Maddon said. “And wonderful. You don’t have to worry about checking into a hotel, carrying baggage. All the different things that become annoying about travel are not annoying.”

The Maddons listen to a lot of music on the road, mostly through satellite radio. They install the full-range wireless Sonos speaker system in their rigs. “Lots of times the sound systems in RVs aren’t what I want them to be,” he said. “We have to bring our Wi-Fi hot spot so the speakers can work. We blast the Sonos through the iPad or Jaye’s iPhone while we’re driving. She’s in charge

because I don't want to be messing with that. Normally Sirius [satellite radio], sometimes Pandora on shuffle. I like rock 'n' roll. The sixties were the visceral component to my music listening. The seventies became a little more intellectual. Simon and Garfunkel, and I like [Bruce] Springsteen, the guy that ran me through the seventies. And then it gets back into country rock, the Marshall Tucker Band, the Allman Brothers. I love Motown. I'm all over the map."

Maddon said that he gets recognized, mostly when stopping for gas. "People come up and ask me to sign stuff," he said. "It just tells you how many people watch baseball."

Maddon is so deep into road culture he has become a spokesman for Winnebago and there has been talk about him writing an RV-van column. He is unsure of the commitment that

would take. "Once you get in there [his rig], all I'm looking to do is relax," he said. "You got the TVs, the satellite dish, the beach. I bring my bike along so I can ride on a bike path. Sometimes we bring one of our dogs. It's just a chill time. I'm not looking to do anything more. I really want to get back into reading. I keep saying that, and if I say it often enough I'll do it. This next off-season I really want to say no to everybody and do what I want to do."

"I want to get back to Key West. There's a place called Bluewater Key [RV Resort, fourteen miles north of Key West]. It's outstanding. I wouldn't even mind purchasing a little slab down there at some point. I believe when you're RVing in Key West at the southernmost tip of the United States, you actually are taking advantage of this ability to get away."