

Spring Training Optimism

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The atmosphere at Spring Training is one of the special qualities of baseball in America. The optimism generated by fans and players alike tends to reach beyond reality. Rookies and career minor leaguers anticipate a breakthrough season. Veterans look forward to the dawning of a career year. Spring is the season of rebirth, hope and high expectations. The failures and disappointments of the previous season, or decade, or in one case, the previous century, are cast aside.

This spring the expectations for the Chicago Cubs are through the roof. For the last several days I have been in Arizona where Cub fans are swarming over Phoenix filled with an air of confidence. These are no longer fans imagining that moment in the coming season when the Cubs get eliminated from pennant contention. There are no visions of "black cats" or "Steve Bartman" stalking their lovable Cubbies.

For Cubs fans this is "next year." The frustration of being losers, even if lovable losers, a trademark of the Cubs for over one hundred years has vanished. Optimism, a quality foreign to Cubs fans, seems now to be the essence of their being.

Men, women and children of all ages and all shapes and sizes, draped in Cubs gear, now parade spring training sites and hotels with great pride. If you saw a peacock wearing a Cubs hat or jersey it would seem natural. Nowhere to be seen was that classic Cubs t-shirt enumerating the "The Ten Biggest Lies Told at Wrigley Field."

Last Wednesday I rose out of my seat for the singing of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" at Sloan Park in Mesa. Over the P.A. came the voice of Cubs Great Ferguson Jenkins to lead the crowd in

singing the song. Before he started to sing his booming voice rang out "This is the Year!"

The roar of the crowd was deafening. The doubters, if there were any, were buried by the sound wave that is still sweeping across the desert wasteland of Arizona. It was a moment of euphoria born of true belief. No doubt there were some in the crowd who wept while savoring the pure joy of the moment.

It was frightening! Not in that instant, but not long after the crowd finished with a mighty "at the old ball game." For many who have spent recent decades at Wrigley Field the voice of Harry Caray could be heard in their heads shouting in that raspy voice, "Let's get some runs." It became frightening in the next hours and days as I thought about what had transpired. Cubs fans are True Believers and optimists and that marks a shift in the time-space continuum.

Two things have haunted me since. First, what should happen if for the first time since 1908 the Cubs win the World Series? How massive would the celebration be? Would the fans burn down the city of Chicago or would the number of births nine months later overwhelm Chicago's medical facilities? Perhaps the city would go on a weeklong binge and all other human activity would cease. We know what happened in Boston after the long wait, but it seems likely that the Red Sox celebration will pale in comparison to what will be let loose in Chicago.

The other haunting thought is what happens if the Cubs do not win the World Series, do not win the National League pennant, or even win their division? What happens if they are out of contention by the end of June? Will Cubs fans just shrug and

walk away accepting it all with an air of inevitability? After all this is what has happened every year for over one hundred years.

I cannot imagine that Cubs fans would simply go back to being Cubs fans. I see two possibilities. The first would be an entire city settling into a deep depression. Streets would be either empty or filled with somber people wandering aimlessly. Wrigley Field, if it is allowed to stand, would be painted black and the ivy would be dead, a victim of poisoning by some distraught mourner.

The second possibility would be a riot starting with the destruction of Wrigley Field, followed by the demolition of the Tribune Building, and then an attack on anything associated with the Ricketts Family whose avarice would be blamed for bringing yet another curse on the Cubs by altering the charms of Wrigley Field.

These visions all have an apocalyptic quality reminiscent of W. P. Kinsella's short story, "The Last Pennant Before Armageddon." In this little gem Kinsella has the manager of the Cubs facing a choice involving a pitching change. If made it could lead to victory, a pennant, and the end of the world. The manager has been warned of this outcome in a series of six dreams that repeated throughout the season on a regular basis. If not made the Cubs would lose and the manager would be subjected to massive criticism as the Cubs failed again but time would not end.

I assume that Joe Maddon will not be faced with such a choice, although I do wonder what kind of choices he will face and if they will lead to the World Series; and if the Cubs should win

their first World Series since 1908 if that would bring on something akin to the apocalypse. Or is all of this pure fantasy as any Cubs fan knows in their heart of hearts that a World Series win is simply not in the DNA of Chicago's Loveable Losers.

Spring Training is indeed a time to dream and to hope.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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