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The 1906 Cubs and their Times: The Winningest Team in MLB History

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Among the less frequently discussed records being pursued across the diamond landscape these days is the single season wins record. Ninety-two years ago, in 1906, the Chicago Cubs, - yes, the Chicago Cubs - set the single season record for most wins at 116 games. The Yankees recent mini-slump has diminished their chances of reaching that lofty height but they still have an outside shot at it.

This Cubs team that won 116 and lost 36 had a winning percentage of .763 and won an astounding 55 of their last 65 games finishing 20 games in front of the New York Giants. Defying the notion that a strong finish is an advantage heading into the post-season, the Cubs then turned around and lost the World Series to the Chicago White Sox, the legendary "Hitless Wonders." It was the only all-Chicago World Series, the replication of which has been a dream of Chicago baseball fans ever since.

These Cubs are probably best known from the verse written by Franklin P. Adams for the New York Evening Mail in 1910 which featured the repeating line, "Tinker to Evers to Chance." Indeed these three players were key figures on the 1906 team, and Frank Chance, "the Peerless Leader," was a player-manager who conducted his on field direction from first base. Joe Tinker at shortstop and Johnny Evers at second base, known as the best double-play combination that never talked to one another, rounded out the poetic trio.

This may have been the core of the team, but indeed there were many other major contributors to this truly awesome baseball machine. Chancelled the league in runs scored, 103, and stolen bases with 57; Harry Steinfeldt, the third baseman, led the league in hits with 176 and RBI's at 83 and was second in total bases; Right-fielder Frank Schulte led the Cubs with seven home runs and led the league in triples with 13. The 1906 Cubs led the league in batting average at .262 and slugging percentage of .339, led the league in runs, walks, hits and triples, and had several players among the top five in numerous league batting categories.

Pitching was even more impressive. The team ERA was 1.76, the first time a team had gone under 2.00 since the mound

was moved back to 60'6" in 1883. Cubs' pitching led the league in shutouts with 30, strikeouts with 702, and allowed the least hits and runs. The pitching was supported by excellent defense as the Cubs had the fewest errors and best fielding average in the National League.

The leader of the staff was Mordecai "Three Finger" Brown whose league leading ERA was 1.04. Brown had a league leading nine shutouts, won 26 games, and held opponents to a .204 batting average. At age seven Brown acquired his "Three Finger" nickname and his pitching advantage when he caught his hand in a corn-shredder cutting off the two top joints of his index finger and paralyzing his baby finger. The corn shredder became a tourist attraction when Brown became a dominant pitcher in the National League.

Also leading this pitching staff was 20 game winner Jack Pfiester who was second in the league in ERA and opponent batting average in which he was tied with Brown. Ed Reulbach led the league in that category holding National League hitters to a .174 average, was third in ERA, and led the league in winning percentage with a record of 20-4. Orval Overall and Jack Taylor won 12 games each and had ERAs of 1.88 and 1.83 respectively. Carl Lundgren won 17 games and had an ERA of 2.21 and held opponents to a .217 batting average.

According to Total Baseball had such awards existed, Pfiester would have been rookie of the year, Brown would have won the Cy Young Award, and the MVP would have been Steinfeldt.

This team was a jugger-naught and much more than Tinker to Evers to Chance in this period known as Baseball's Silver Age. It was an age that featured its own legends and Hall of Famers like Ty Cobb who began his career in 1906 and left his indelible mark on the pre-Ruthian game. Indeed the game of '06 was the "inside game," what was called "scientific" baseball. The base hit, the bunt, and the stolen base along with excellent pitching were its marks.

On the pitching mound you could watch the legends, like Christy Mathewson and Cy Young, baffle the hitters with their talent. Or you could watch the likes of Ed Walsh and his spitballs mystify the batters, along with all those who doctored the ball in any number of still legal ways. It was

indeed a time that favored pitching with a style of game Johnny Evers called "push, poke, shove and chop."

In addition to Cobb, were the more established everyday players of that time who typified the Silver Age: Honus Wagner, John McGraw and Willie Keeler. Wagner was noted for his bat and glove, McGraw for his fierce competitiveness and managerial skills, and Keeler for the now legendary line, "hit 'em where they ain't." All were stars and contemporaries of the big winning Cubs.

It is fashionable to say that Tinker to Evers to Chance was really not all that prolific a double play combination, but they had their fair share for the times, says Bill James. They also invented the "rotation play" on the bunt, says James.

For all their dominance in the regular season the Cubs lost the World Series to the White Sox four games to two. After splitting the first four games, the White Sox won the last two when Cub pitching broke down as the Sox scored eight runs in each game. The White Sox hit a characteristic .198 for the Series while the Cubs managed only .196. As a result Sox pitching had a 1.50 ERA for the Series, while the Cubs more than doubled that with 3.40.

Yankee fans should heed the warning from this and other post-season flops showing that regular season records count for nothing when post-season play begins. If the Yankees fail, and especially if they go out early in a short series in the first round of the playoffs, it could be, not only a long off-season for Yankee fans, but it could also be a great argument for dumping the three out of five game format in the playoffs.

Ah yes, another reason to root root root for any team playing George Steinbrenner's New York Yankees.

Not that you really need any more.

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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