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## On Sport and Society 01-07-2003

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SPORT AN SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
January 7, 2003

Cub fans are a unique species. Attachment to losing is taken to a level of religious fanaticism by the Cub faithful. Of course the charm of the Cubs is not simply that they lose, but that they are loveable losers. This is what inspires undying devotion in their fans. Indeed if the Cubs were to do the improbable, nay the impossible, and win a World Series, Cub fans would risk losing the essence of their Cubness.

Cub fans are everywhere and you never know where you might encounter them. A few weeks ago I had dinner with a family of Cub fans in Edinburgh, Scotland. The Craig Clan of Rockford were in the U.K. to visit their daughter Jeanne, herself a devotee of the Cubs, a devotion she inherited from her parents, Stewart and Sally Craig. After spending a delightful Cub filled evening with these Cub fanatics over single malt whiskey and haggis I am convinced that when Harry Caray said that a fan from Rockford caught that foul ball down behind third base, he must have been referring to one of the Craig Cub faithful.

I knew I was dealing with true Cub aficionados because when I started talking about a fourth of July doubleheader with the Expos on a brutally hot day in the mid-1970s, Sally interjected that yes that was the day that outfielder Larry Biittner had come in to pitch for the Cubs in the final inning with the Cubs trailing by some twenty runs. I had been trying to remember Biittner's name all week and Sally pulled it out of her Cub memory bank before I had finished the story. I was duly impressed and knew that I was in the presence of Cub mania.

And who else but a Cub fan and Wrigley Field regular could find both charm and nostalgia in those "troughs" that serve as urinals in the men's rooms at Wrigley? Stewart is absolutely eloquent when he describes in considerable and perceptive detail the wonders of this little discussed and yet strangely striking accouterment of Beautiful Wrigley Field. On a hot Chicago summer day the commingling of the aromas of stale beer, sweat, and urine can induce a state a near euphoria. Indeed the sophisticated student of democracy can not fail but notice this "democratic and American" feature of Chicago's finest ballpark.

From here the conversation went around to the varied and interesting ways in which the Craigs exercise their Cubness. Of all these my favorite is the highly amusing "Hundley Game." You can play this one both at home or at the ballpark. The object is simple. You need to predict before each at bat by Todd Hundley what he will do. The choices are 1) strike out 2) strike out looking 3) ground out 4) foul out 5) pop or fly out. Double prize money is awarded for predicting a Hundley home run, a prize no one has ever collected. If you predict that after striking out looking Hundley turns and stares at the umpire there is also double your money. The Craigs tell me that this game is particularly fun at the ballpark, especially when the Cubs are on the road. Cub refugees across the majors insist on being allowed to play along in the "Hundley Game."

As you may know since that evening in Edinburgh Todd Hundley has been traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers. Not to worry, a Craig insider tells me, someone else will most certainly step forward to fill Todd's empty and decidedly small shoes. There has never been a shortage of futility, individual or collective, where the Cubs are concerned.

The most interesting part of the evening came during a discussion of the Craig's plans for a celebration when the Cubs are eliminated from the pennant race in 2007 thus establishing a "Century of Futility." The 1908 World Series victory came because the now legendary "Merkle boner" facilitated the last Cub claim to glory by allowing them to win the National League pennant. There are those who believe that a curse has been on them ever since. (The date 2007 will be disputed by those who argue that the true date will come in the 2008 season, but as an authentic American event the first date will be the one celebrated)

The plan is both simple and complicated. When the Cubs are eliminated from contention for the World Series victory, be that in May or in October, the Craig family and those who share their millennial vision will be at the deciding game. The complications arise from the fact that this could occur in any Major League City in North America and that it could occur within a broad date window. The Cub Faithful will need to be prepared for the possibility of a lengthily and rigorous road trip. It could also require studying game results through the night, even on nights when the Cubs are not playing, to identify the magical conclusion to this epic century of futility.

The Craigs envision a Cub Caravan making its way across the major league landscape filled with anticipation of the moment. Hundreds if not thousands of the Cub faithful will be present to mark this milestone. The Craig family will lead this trek across this field of futility: "If they do it, they will come."

What sort of celebration does an event of this magnitude, this once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, require? What would be worthy of this historic moment? Certainly the traditional champagne would be appropriate with corks popping as soon as the team of statisticians render their verdict that the magic moment had arrived. A party stretching through the night at a major hotel would follow. Press conferences would punctuate the night air and on the following day the Commissioner of Baseball would arrive to present a trophy or plaque paying homage to failure on this grand and unprecedented scale. The only question is should a Cub game be stopped if the elimination comes while they are on the field. The answer is self-evident to true Cub believers.

Mention of statisticians points to the complex mathematical computations which will be required to ensure that the reverse magic number is properly calculated. Being in the financial field himself, Stewart Craig is no doubt well placed to find just the right team to handle this delicate task. Who knows, maybe Bill James will volunteer his services to such a worthy enterprise. In addition arrangements for transportation, hotels, and game tickets will require the skills of a traveling secretary.

The very thought of this historic Cub moment sends chills down my spine, and I am getting my name on the list for prime seats to participate in the Caravan whenever it forms in the penultimate season. I know you will want to be there too.

One caveat. Given Cub history one must be most cautious when making such plans. It would in fact be just like the Cubs to go and win the World Series in 2007 and ruin everything. Or, as is suggested by W.P. Kinsella in his short story, "The Last Pennant Before Armageddon," the world could end before such a thing is allowed to happen. Just to be on the safe side bring your ascension robes along.

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

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