

The Cubs Quest

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The first step has been taken, but then it has been taken previously. Are we moving inexorably towards Armageddon? We will know in less than four weeks, and what we will know is not the results of the presidential election. We will know if the Cubs are about to end their long running March of Futility. Cubs fans around the world will remain focused on their team, rather than that other long March towards Armageddon.

One Hundred and Eight years is a long time. It represents at least five generations of Cubs loyalty and futility.

W.P. Kinsella, author of *I*, the novel that became the film, "Field of Dreams," wrote a short story titled, "The Last Pennant Before Armageddon." In it there is a dream sequence central to the story involving the Chicago Cubs, their manager, and the World Series played in a time of turmoil with the potential of nuclear annihilation. A Cubs World Series win against the Dodgers in the seventh and final game of the series is central to the fate of the world. The story ends in ambiguity as the Cubs manager decides not to bring in his ace reliever to nail down the final out. The inference is that by his decision the Cubs manager has saved the world from destruction.

So if the Cubs win the World Series, and we do not yet know if they will even get there, what might be the consequences? The world is not likely to end, nor will it usher in nuclear destruction. Still it will be an earthshaking event because the Cubs have been mired in over a century of futility and growing frustration.

It will also be the end to what has become the "Cubs Brand." This is a baseball franchise that has embraced losing and developed a reputation as the lovable losers. The cuddly little bear cubs, the team symbol, seems to fit them perfectly.

I have been an interested observer of this streak for a long time, although not since 1908. I went back to check my files the other day and found that I first wrote about the Cubs epic suffering in the fall of 1984. The Cubs had opened the NLCS, a best of five game series, with two wins at home against the Padres. The action then moved to San Diego where the Padres won the next two games. In game four the Padres scored twice in the home ninth for a 7-5 win. In Game Five the Cubs entered the 7th

inning with a 3-2 lead. Cubs starter Rick Sutcliffe was clearly out of gas. As the Padres pounded Sutcliffe, Cubs manager Jim Frey seemed to be either paralyzed or mesmerized by events and watched it unfold, coming to the mound to remove Sutcliffe only after the Padres had scored four times.

In 1989 there was an eerily similar situation with the Cubs facing elimination in the NLCS against the Giants. This time the game was tied 1-1 in the 8th inning. Cubs manager Don Zimmer, high school classmate of the aforementioned Jim Frey, sat and watched as his starting pitcher, Mike Bilecki, walked three in a row. Zimmer, apparently channeling Jim Frey, did not move out of the dugout to make a pitching change until it was too late. The new pitcher immediately dished up a three run single to Will Clark, thus ending the Cubs season.

These events led me to conclude that perhaps there was something to the curse of the Black Cat which originated in 1969 when the Cubs blew a big lead in the pennant race to the Mets. The Cubs collapse followed the appearance of a stray black cat passing in front of the Cubs dugout at Shea Stadium. The Cubs then went into a tailspin and ended their season in free fall.

It was only much later that the Curse of the Billy Goat became a common part of Cubs lore. Although the basic elements of the story are true and date from the Cubs last World Series appearance in 1945, the notion of a Billy Goat Curse apparently was put together much later by the legendary Chicago columnist Mike Royko and his drinking pals. In the last couple of decades the story seems to have taken hold.

Then in 2003 the belief in a Curse on the Cubs took on another potent layer. With the Cubs leading 3-0 in the top of the 8th inning with one out, Luis Castillo of the Marlins hit a foul ball down the left fieldline. Moises Alou seemed about to field it when a longtime Cubs fan, Steve Bartman, reached out and attempted to catch the ball. No out was recorded. Castillo walked and the Marlin tsunami began. The inning ended on a pop fly by Castillo. By then the Florida Marlins had scored eight runs and tied the series at three games each. The Cubs went quietly in the 8th and 9th inning without as much as a baserunner. The next night the Marlins completed the burial at Wrigley Field. One win and indeed, only a few outs away from a National League pennant and trip to the World Series, the Cubs collapsed.

Cubs fans were incensed at Bartman and were now more convinced than ever that there was a Curse, be it Black Cats, Billy Goats, or some other sort of bad karma. The loveable losers were destined to remain losers. The pain was particularly sharp as many fans had convinced themselves that 2003 was at long last the year of the Cubs. It was not. As it turned out it was not even their century. One hundred years, a century of futility, would be achieved and then some.

Will this year be different? Looking at the current edition of the Cubs it would certainly seem so. This is a team with very few weaknesses, a rotating cast of heroes, and solid pitching with the possible exception of middle relief. They won over 100 games and had the best record in baseball. Surely this is the year.

And yet, these are the Cubs, the Chicago Cubs.

For me there is one main critical difference. Having watched the Cubs closely since the mid-60s when I was living in a Brave-less Milwaukee, it seems that this year will be different. Over the next few weeks I will be away from television coverage and unable to watch their continuing quest to end the streak.

The Cubs will break the streak for the simple reason that I will very likely not see it happen. Yes, I am the key to the end of the streak. Save me some champagne. I'll celebrate later.

Of course if I do happen to see the last game or two of the World Series involving the Cubs, then all bets are off. As to Armageddon, be prepared.

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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