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## The Cub Century

Richard C. Crepeau  
University of Central Florida, [richard.crepeau@ucf.edu](mailto:richard.crepeau@ucf.edu)

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
The Cub Century  
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Cubs' fans are a hearty lot. Now only a year away from a "Century of Futility" one gets the strange feeling that two historical forces will collide next baseball season and the result could be of cataclysmic dimensions. Will the Cubs continue in their futility, or will they trump their own futility in a transcendent futility by denying themselves a distinctive badge of symmetric futility inherent in a perfect century of failure?

"One hundred years of heartbreak" sounds like a lyric fragment from a country song, or the title of a medieval epic poem for the ages. Perhaps the end of the streak would be too positive a development for Cubdom to absorb, or perhaps it would be seen as a crushing blow to the distinct achievement inherent in a "Century of Futility." Perhaps only Carl Sandburg is capable of capturing the kind of pathos that awaits the city of the big shoulders over the next twelve months.

Let us rather contemplate the present or more precisely the immediate past. This time around, the Cubs made the playoffs and then went quietly into the off-season, or at least into their locker room to say their good-byes to one another at the conclusion of yet another season that ended with a loss. It is the ninety-ninth straight time the Cubs have ended the season in this way; even 1994, that aborted World Series-less season, ended with a four game losing streak heading into the strike.

Losing is a *bona fide* Cub tradition. Only this time there were no strange circumstances: No black cats. No Steve Bartman. No Billy Goat. Just some futile baseball and questionable managing.

During the 1980s, the Cubs went into the playoffs twice only to be eliminated by the inability of their manager to get up out of the dugout and remove a pitcher who had clearly lost his stuff. In 1984, Rick Sutcliffe was left in too long when manager Jim Frey seemed bolted to the bench. That was in the same game that Leon Durham provided assistance to San Diego with a fielding error. In 1989 it was Don Zimmer who couldn't arise and remove Mike Bielecki from the game in the eighth inning until after Bielecki had walked the bases loaded in a tie game with the Giants.

This year the scenario was reversed. The biggest managerial mistake came in the first game of the series, not the last. This time it involved removing a pitcher too early rather than too late. Lou Pinella let it be known that he planned to use Carlos Zambrano as his starter in Game Four of the divisional series and so he would be watching the pitch count in Game One and try to limit Zambrano to 100-110 pitches.

If he was watching the pitch count, one can only wonder whose pitch count he was watching. Zambrano's pitch count at the end of the sixth inning was 85, and he was pitching a gem of a game. The score was tied at one. When the seventh inning began the wrong Carlos was on the mound. Zambrano was in the dugout and Carlos Marmol was on the mound for the Cubs. Marmol hadn't given up a run in twenty-three consecutive innings to end the season. He would almost immediately give up one run, and one that, you could argue, virtually ended the Cubs' season.

One of the cardinal rules of managing is that in an elimination series you cannot manage with an eye on a theoretical future game. How could a great manager like Lou Pinella do such a thing? It is a simple matter really. He is now wearing a Chicago Cubs uniform. Wrigley Field is where managerial careers go to die.

One must admit that Carlos Zambrano looked well rested and relaxed when the TV cameras offered shots of him in the Cubs' dugout throughout Game Three. He clearly was ready to take the hill in Game Four. The one consolation is that Cub fans know that Carlos will be well rested for opening day next April.

As always, the Cubs offered a tease, although it was hard to take it seriously after Chris Young hit the first pitch of Game Three to the Wrigley Field faithful in the bleachers in left. In those first five innings, Livan Hernandez was shaky. Despite all the walks and hits the Cubs amassed, they could not score. In three of those innings, they hit into double plays to take Hernandez off the hook. They added one more double play after Hernandez was in the dugout planning his victory party. Such futility was worthy of the moment and the streak.

Cubs' fans sat through it all thankful they only had to watch one game like this one at Wrigley. Of course, they are veterans of many more in seasons past. You could tell the true Cub fans as the cameras focused on them through the evening. They had that Cub fan look of resignation and bemusement. Only the very young looked surprised. For Cub fans, the only real drama comes

from not knowing how they will be eliminated for a World Championship, not if they will.

By the time they reach the age of reason most children born into Cub families know that the glass is half-empty. A few years later, they have accumulated enough scar tissue to fully appreciate the intricacies of tragedy. They understand the Greek tragedians intuitively and are intimate with all their subtleties. They are well equipped to study the classics at America's major institutions of higher learning. Indeed all Classics Departments ought to have a box to check on their application forms designating the applicant as "A Cub Fan," granting automatic admission: No GPAs, SATs, or Letters of Reference required.

I had thought that this time the end would come in a more theatrical manner. I had a vision of the Cubs winning both Game Three and Game Four in convincing fashion, sending the fans at Wrigley into rapturous mode. The bars and restaurants around Wrigley would be rocking through the night, as children, male and female alike, subsequently named Carlos and Aramis and Alfonso, would be conceived in the bleachers and in every venue of merriment on Clark Street, reaching all the way to Rush.

Then Game Five would be held back in the Valley of the Sun. A freak rainstorm would leave the roof closed for the game. And just before the first pitch was to be thrown a small figure of a woman, dressed in black and veiled in black, would come onto the field from the seats down the left field line. As the woman neared the infield and removed her veil, it would be clear that it was not a woman. It would be Steve Bartman. In drag! Carrying a black cat wearing a Mets cap nestled in the crook of his arm.

Before throwing the ceremonial first pitch Bartwoman would stare into the Cubs dugout directly at Lou Pinella for what would seem like several minutes. In fact, it would be but seven seconds. After throwing the pitch, he would release the cat and makes an unmistakable gesture intended for those Cub fans who have made his life so miserable for the past four years. The cat would race toward the Cubs dugout where Carlos Zambrano would be sitting on the bench looking rested and relaxed, ready for his next pitching assignment on opening day.

Yes, they still are the lovable losers and will remain so for at least one more season. There is stability in the universe and this offers considerable solace in our increasingly unstable world. The Cubs are still the Cubs. Long live the Cubs.

Wait 'til next Cub Century!

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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