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The Cubs and the Rays

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The Cubs and the Rays
JULY 14, 2008

We have arrived at that moment in mid-summer when baseball takes a break for the All-Star Game. I read the other day that Wednesday will be the only day of the year in which there is not a major professional sporting event taking place in the United States. That is a fact worth some thought and contemplation and may lead to some conclusions about overkill and saturation. Rather than that, I would like to make a few observations about the current baseball season which I have found to be strange and maybe even portentous.

Every time there is an odd or strange weather pattern these days the subject of global warming comes up as a reflexive explanation for the departures from the norm. It seems then that this summer global warming is more than likely the explanation for the strange departures from the norm in baseball.

Have you noticed that the Tampa Rays have until yesterday been sitting atop the American League East and the Yankees are a distant third? Ever since the exorcism the Rays seem to have turned things around. During the off-season the Devil was driven out of Tampa Bay, logos were changed, colors were changed; only the dreadful television announcing team remains.

In late April the Rays began to display their new persona. They swept a three game series against Toronto in Orlando at Disney World. These were the first games for Evan Longoria the future star third-baseman, and it was just after former Blue Jay and former Red Sox Eric Hinske joined the Rays. He nearly hit for the cycle in one of those games at Disney, missing only the single.

From Orlando the Rays headed back home to "the Can" (Tropicana Field) and started a home field run that was nothing short of phenomenal. First they swept the Red Sox, and then the Angels, Baltimore, and the Cubs who had the best record in baseball coming into "the Can." Another sweep of the Red Sox followed. They also took three of four from the Yankees, the White Sox and Kansas City. In the process they were climbing to the top of the Eastern Division of the American League, a place with which they were normally unfamiliar after the third week in April.

"Are they for real?" people kept asking. And in fact as I traveled this early summer any number of people asked me that question, as if I had an answer. Well, in fact I do have an answer. They are for real. They have some very talented young players, sprinkled with a few veterans, good starting pitching, and a good bullpen. They also have a number of question marks in all these areas.

This past week saw the Rays lose seven games on a seven game road trip, but they still are for real. They stopped hitting, starting playing poor defense, and their pitching collapsed all at the same time. For most teams you would simply say they are in one of those slumps that all teams go through. Because of their history, there is a tendency to see this past week as a return to reality. Indeed, they looked like the Devil Rays rather than the Rays. Even if they never get back to first place this season, they are for real. The farm system is loaded with talent and the core of a very good team is already in place.

You may have noticed the phrase "the best record in baseball" a few paragraphs ago being applied to the Chicago Cubs. Indeed. And they still are, although they must share that distinction with the Los Angeles Angels, as both entered the break at 57-38 playing .600 baseball.

Given the history of the Cubs it is certainly necessary to ask the same question of them that is being asked about the Rays. Are they for real? It would seem so. However like the Rays they look like a different team on the road than at home. The Cubs are an unimpressive 20-26 on the road. They have, however, scored more runs than any other National League team, and only Texas has scored more overall, but the Rangers have allowed the most runs in the majors. The Cubs too have good starting pitching which just got better when they acquired Rich Harden from Oakland last week. Kerry Wood has been excellent as a closer, and their middle relief has been decent.

Still and all, it is only early July and those of us who have followed the Cubs for any length of time know that the "loveable losers" have a way of attracting bad karma. Several questions remain to be answered about the Cubs. Will Kerry Wood's arm hold up for the duration? Will the Cubs survive August, a month in which they often fade? Can the Cubs keep scoring runs at this torrid pace? Will the Cubs find some spectacular or bizarre way to miss the boat once again and begin a second century of futility?

For now Cub fans are pumped. There is discussion of a World Series on the North Side. There is even talk of an all-Chicago World Series as the White Sox too are having a very good year. Of course it could happen, but it is only early July and there is a lot of baseball left to be played.

Some people also seem to think that, just because it has been one hundred years since the Cubs won the World Series, it is somehow going to happen on this anniversary of baseball futility and frustration. If it does, prepare for the end of time. And if it should be a White Sox v. Cubs World Series or a Rays v. Cubs World Series the end of time might even precede the Series. At that point, global warming will simply be a hypothetical.

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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