

The Cubs' postseason exit

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Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The Cubs' postseason exit
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It has been a brutal week as Americans have watched helplessly as the stock market went into freefall. Those with 401K's tried to joke about not retiring until they're in their eighties. Pensions were drying up. Bailout and rescue plans were passed without any impact. No one really seemed to have any idea of how to stop the hemorrhaging. The entire country was beginning to resemble a deer caught in the headlights.

If you are a Cubs fan, there is an upside to all this. You haven't even noticed that we are all in freefall into the porcelain receptacle. You haven't noticed because you have been in such deep shock and depression that nothing happening in the known universe has any meaning to you at all. When it will is difficult to say, but when Cub fans discover what is happening to the economy they will simply regard it as a sign of an extension of the Cub curse.

The Cubs were swept by the Dodgers. I repeat the Cubs were swept by the Dodgers. The first two games were in Wrigley Field where the Cubs have been nearly unbeatable the entire season. The last game was in Dodger Stadium where it looked as if the Cubs were still back in Wrigley Field. They didn't show up.

No need to think about the 401K? The only K's the Cub fans were thinking about were the strikeouts that suddenly infested Cub bats. Twenty-four strikeouts in three games, many in key situations, all symbolic of the futility of this display of baseball.

The Cubs had six runs in the three-game set, matching the six runs they scored last year in the three game sweep by the Arizona Diamondbacks. The latter were a better team than this year's Dodgers, while this year's Cubs were a much better team than the last year's versions of the current not so "loveable losers." Lou Piniella seemed astonished by the fact that his Cubs had been swept twice in two years of playoff baseball, scoring only six runs each year. Apparently he still doesn't understand his own fate. Wrigley Field IS where managerial careers go to die.

This year was not supposed to be like all those other years. From the start of spring training Cub fans and baseball pundits

were predicting that the curses would end. Cub fans seemed to buy into this notion that somehow 100 years was some sort of terminus for curses. I had a t-shirt in Cub colors with the year "1908" on it, as if this was the year for the curse to end. I wore it to "The Can" in St. Petersburg where ominously I saw the Cubs get swept by the Devil-less Rays. No problem. Alfonso Soriano was injured at the time. Cubs fans made up half the crowd at "The Can" and all were optimistic despite the result. They saw the date on the t-shirt and shouted, "This is the year." You bet!

There was thought to be something magical about the 100th anniversary celebration of futility. We now know there was. It could go on until the 200th anniversary. It has reached 101 and counting. Only 99 more to go. After going one for fourteen at the bat in this playoff and striking out for the final out of the series, and then claiming that the Cubs were the better team, Alfonso Soriano asked that Cub fans be patient. Who does he think he is? Alan Greenspan? Patience has been served on tap at Wrigley Field for over a century.

Soriano was not alone in contributing to the collapse. It was a team effort. Ryan Dempster had been nearly unbeatable at Wrigley Field this season. This was the major reason that Lou Piniella chose him to start the first game rather than Carlos Zambrano. Dempster couldn't get out of the fifth inning and was chased by a grand slam by James Loney. It not only decided the game early, but perhaps even the entire series. Dempster gave up only four hits, but he managed to walk seven, something that defies rational explanation, one of those terms you don't use when discussing the Cubs.

The second game continued the pattern of the unprecedented, another term that should probably never be used in conjunction with the Cubs. This time it was the fielding that fell apart. Each of the sure-handed infielders managed to commit an error, several of which contributed to the disaster. Carlos Zambrano pitched a fairly good game, certainly one that would normally (yet another prohibited term in Cubspeak) have produced a win. Zambrano gave up only three earned runs and six hits in six plus innings while striking out seven. Unfortunately the Dodgers scored seven runs off Zambrano and added three more in final two innings.

Last Saturday in Los Angeles Dodger pitchers scattered eight hits, struck out nine Cubs, and the Cubs left nine men on base for a grand total of twenty-three over the three game sweep. In

the final game the Cubs produced a zombie-like performance and there was anger in Wrigleyville after the mighty Soriano had struck out.

Have we reached the point after over a century that the "loveable losers" are no longer lovable? Say it isn't so.

More to the point, what can be done? In the case of the Cubs I have some suggestions.

First, all those who think that there is no curse must give up that fiction. There are curses and they have to be faced down. In the matter of the goat it may be necessary, and I know it is not a happy thought, to have goat night at Wrigley Field. Or perhaps the Cubs need to have a goat mascot who could be kept in the bleachers where it could live on all the junk the Bleacher Bums bring to the games.

Then there is the case of Steve Bartman. Cub fans need to atone for their sins. To destroy a man's life because he tried to get a foul ball during a playoff game is over the top. Bartman's behavior may be seen as thoughtless or nerdy, but it certainly did not require the destruction of Bartman's life. So I propose Steve Bartman night at Wrigley Field at which time a plaque is placed on the Bartman seat commemorating and celebrating the event. Bartman should be given this as a lifetime seat for Cubs' games.

These gestures might be a start. And let's face it: times are desperate. It has been over a century. I don't want my "1908" T-Shirt to be useful for another hundred years. Time is running out on the "loveable losers," and if the Cubs become simply "losers" again, those afternoon September crowds of the mid-60s that seldom exceeded double digits could return to the Friendly Confines.

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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