



Making predictions as hazardous as a hanging curve with game on the line

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The best advice came from a stout, cigar-chomping Runyonesque character who'd pull out a wad of \$1,000 in cash in Wrigley Field's right field bleachers in 1979.

A real character who used four different names, I'm sure he was a low-level bookie-type. After watching batting practice, about a half hour before first pitch, this bloke would go downstairs to relay something over the pay phone to an information-hungry recipient.

But the man of many ID's was the wisest of us all.

"Never bet on baseball," he said. "It's too unpredictable."

From then on, I never put money down on the grand ol' game unless it was a "sucker bet." Yeah, easy money from some overconfident, uninformed fool who did not have the facts you had committed to memory, and thus you beat an easy mark.

Even with the unpredictability quotient, trying to forecast the game's strange rhythms is too appealing. Everyone believes they can get a bead on a baseball team's fortunes this time of the year.



Few could have predicted a Sox World Series title in 2005. But when it was within sight, Paul Konerko and a stingy starting staff helped nail it down. Photo credit [Keith Allison](#).

Quick example was the 2011 White Sox. Following a 2010 season in which the South Siders contended into September, GM Kenny Williams decided to up the ante. The famous “All-In” campaign netted slugger Adam Dunn, long coveted by Williams, as a free agent. Paul Konerko and A.J. Pierzynski were re-upped. And despite growing internal tensions with Williams, Ozzie Guillen was extended as manager.

I liked what I saw. Going out on a bit of a limb, I predicted the Sox would win the World Series.

Crash!

By late July, with Dunn mired at .160 or so, that forecast was gone. So was Guillen with two games to go. Don’t believe the hype, but do we ever really learn that lesson?

I didn’t dare pick the Sox in 2012. In fact, I predicted the Kansas City Royals would dramatically improve and jump over them into second place behind the Detroit Tigers. The seer had a bit of truth, though. The Royals jumped the Sox all right, to the tune of a 12-6 record. Down the stretch, the Royals helped cripple their surprise bid for the American League Central title. Indeed, the Sox sneaked up on almost everyone to hold first place until the third week of September.

That’s how it goes. Teams you think will win end up collapsing. Teams you consign to the nether regions of the standings end up surprising with first-place finishes or at least strong runs.

Chicago baseball history is full of such extremes. Moral of the story is great expectations, by team executives, media members and fans, are often dashed by the game’s often-cruel twists and turns. Meanwhile, the teams you often least expect to achieve do so in astounding fashion.

Here are some examples of the two extremes over the last half century-plus:

Great expectations dashed

*1960 White Sox. History has proven Bill Veeck’s whirlwind series of moves to bag a second straight American League pennant were a long-term disaster. But at the time, the effort to bolster the ’59 Sox’s pitch-and-putt offense seemed reasonable. Veeck re-acquired fan favorite Minnie Minoso along with veteran bats Roy Sievers and Gene Freese.

Problem is, lineup beefing-up process cost the Sox promising youngsters Norm Cash, Don Mincher, Johnny Callison, Earl Battey



Norm Cash was perhaps the biggest future bat sacrificed in the failed attempt to make the 1960 Sox better. Photo credit [Prelinger Archives](#)..

and John “Honey” Romano. Double problem: The AL’s best pitching staff in ’59 took a step backward in ’60. It was too much to expect Early Wynn at 40 to have another Cy Young Award season. The Sox did make a run in ’60 to the delight of a Chicago-record 1.6 million fans, enthralled by Veeck’s new exploding scoreboard. But the team faded in September, finishing 87-67 in third as the New York Yankees’ dynasty re-asserted itself after a one-year break. Most costly were future seasons such as 1964 and 1967, when the bats of one or two of the group of Cash, Mincher, Callison, Battey and Romano could have made a difference in the pennant race for pitching-strong, power-short Sox clubs.

*1969-73 Cubs. Two straight above-.500 seasons under Leo Durocher in 1967-68 gave the prognosticators reason to begin picking the Cubs to unseat the St. Louis Cardinals. Even the most infamous stretch-run collapse in team history in Sept. 1969 did not discourage the optimists in Chicago media to continue picking the Cubs to win the National League East in the next few years. Cubs management was of the same mindset. Despite more late-season failures under Durocher, GM John Holland kept rating his core regulars at the top of their positions in the league, thus resisting a gradual housecleaning. Fergie Jenkins’ six consecutive 20-win seasons also were a security blanket.

Holland and Co. did not realize how much better the Pittsburgh Pirates’ “Lumber Company” -- with spiritual leader Roberto Clemente still in fine form --had become in 1970-72. The Pirates had the Cubs’ number, going a composite 34-17 those three seasons against Chicago. Holland kept the steadily aging, increasingly injured Santo-Beckert-Kessinger-Hundley-Hickman core too long through 1973. All showed their age at the same time in mid-summer. After staking a claim to first place with a 50-35 mark on July 6, the Cubs endured a 6-29 collapse that paved the way for the 82-win New York Mets to sneak in with a fluky divisional title.

*1973 White Sox. The stirring Dick Allen-led run at the eventual world champion Oakland A’s in the late summer of 1972 led to predictions of the Sox taking the next step to win the AL West in ’73. The acquisition of center fielder Ken Henderson from the San Francisco Giants and return of third baseman Bill Melton from a back injury furthered the optimism.

But in landing Henderson, the Sox traded effective starter and innings-eater Tom Bradley. The lack of starting depth cost the Sox in the long run. Even though he often pitched effectively on two days’ rest, knuckleball ace Wilbur Wood certainly couldn’t start every game. The coup de grace came when Allen and Henderson were hurt at mid-season, wiping out a promising 27-15 start on May 31. The franchise never recovered. Allen quit the team late in 1974. Sox owner John Allyn almost did not make his final payroll in 1975. And the Sox were under consideration for a move to Seattle before Veeck rode in at the last minute to buy them and keep the team in Chicago for 1976 onward.

*1984 White Sox. The Sox appeared ready to dominate after their 99-victory, “Winning Ugly” season. With a young-veteran core and Hall of Fame-bound Tom Seaver added to the rotation, the Jerry Reinsdorf-Eddie Einhorn ownership apparently had their pedals to the metal.

But even as Seaver won a team-leading 15 games, many of the '83 producers took steps backward or were injured. The Sox got off to a 6-13 start, never really got a head of steam going despite several recoveries to .500 or better, and were 17-33 from Aug. 9 on to finish 74-88.

*1985 Cubs. On the heels of the surprise 1984 NL East title team that came within three innings of a World Series, GM Dallas Green spent millions to re-sign his productive rotation – Cy Young Award winner Rick Sutcliffe, Steve Trout, Dennis Eckersley and Scott Sanderson. With MVP Ryne Sandberg an igniter of a strong offense that included run producers Jody Davis and Leon “Bull” Durham, the Cubs were expected to repeat in '85.

Yet if any team can monopolize over-long losing streaks and massive collapses, it's the Cubs. After reaching a 35-19 first-place mark on June 11, the team racked up a 13-game losing skein. The season never recovered. Starting with Sutcliffe, who came back too quickly from a partially-torn hamstring, the Cubs rotation, along with several position players, fell to injuries. At one point in August, the entire five-man rotation (including Dick Ruthven) was on the disabled list. The money spent on players in the whirlpool began to grease the skids for Green's eventual departure for his meddling Tribune Co. bosses.

*1991 Cubs. Green successor Jim Frey went on a free-agent spending spree at and around the 1990 winter meetings, the last ever held in Chicago. Frey snared left fielder George Bell, lefty starter Danny Jackson and closer Dave Smith. After a dip in '90, the prognosticators fingered the Cubs as NL East favorites for '91.

Hold everything. Bell had a good, but not great season, and his motivation was questioned. Jackson was repeatedly hurt. Smith, formerly protected by the faraway fences while closing in the Astrodome, was cooked. The Cubs blew some games in spectacular fashion. Manager Don Zimmer was fired, but replacement Jim “Clapper” Essian couldn't light a fire. The well-paid Cubs finished under .500, so Frey and team president Don Grenesko were deposed after the season.

*2001 Sox. On the heels of the 2000 AL Central title, new GM Kenny Williams pulled off his first monster trade, landing lefty David Wells from the Toronto Blue Jays. Boomer was supposed to solve problems and help the Sox win again, but he created more woes by his personality, mouth and injuries.

Wells was just 5-7 and was let go after the season. After amassing an MVP-quality season in 2000, Frank Thomas had only 68 at-bats with four homers. The Sox started 8-19, and were fortunate to finish 83-79.

*2004 Cubs. Kerry Wood and Mark Prior were on the cover of a Sports Illustrated that proclaimed the Cubs were bearing in on a World Series. GM Jim Hendry loaded up with Greg Maddux, Derrek Lee and Michael Barrett. This time, the Cubs would more than make up those five outs they didn't get in Game 6 of the 2003 NLCS.

Woops. Wood and Prior both went down injured to set the pace for the next three sea-

sons. A slumping Sammy Sosa at first refused to be dropped to sixth in the order, exasperating manager Dusty Baker. Losing closer Joe Borowski to a shoulder injury, Baker was forced to put miscast setup man LaTroy Hawkins in the ninth inning. Clubhouse intrigue and dissension, and player/manager conflicts with broadcasters Steve Stone and Chip Caray were daily stories. In spite of these handicaps, the Cubs had a 1 1/2-game lead in the NL wild card with a week to go – and blew that. Sosa walked out during the season finale, and the Cubs eventually told him to keep walking to Baltimore.

*2006 Sox. The entire pitching staff that worked a mass shutdown of opposing hitters through the 2005 postseason was back. Williams sacrificed center fielder Aaron Roward to get slugger Jim Thome, who slugged 42 homers. Jermaine Dye belted 44 homers. The Sox were 56-29 on July 6. Why not a second straight World Series?

What happened? The bullpen, so sharp in '05, was mediocre. The starters weren't as invincible. The Sox picked the second half to suffer a case of ennui. They didn't collapse as much as they glided slowly to a 90-72 third-place finish, wasting the chance to really impress a team-record 2,957,000 fans. Sox attendance has plunged by 1 million ever since.

Surprise achievers

*1967 Cubs. The disastrous 10th-place team showed some signs of improvement among its young players in August and September in 1966. But nobody expected a leap to first place at several junctures in July 1967, and a final 87-74 third-place record that buoyed owner Phil Wrigley's spirits and loosened his pocketbook. The Cubs finished in the "first division" for the first time since 1946. Manager Leo Durocher was the toast of Chicago, a honeymoon that would last two more years.

Fergie Jenkins had the first of six consecutive 20-win seasons. Ken Holtzman won the final four decisions in a 9-0 season pitching on weekend passes from his Army Reserve training. Adolfo ("Ole!") Phillips was a half-season sensation. Ron Santo was at his career peak. With the Sox going off WGN for the comparative invisibility of UHF-Channel 32 for the 1968 season, the Cubs established themselves as Chicago's baseball favorites playing off the '67 revival.



Sammy Sosa was centerpiece on both surprising and keenly disappointing Cubs teams three years apart. His failure on the latter led to his exile with the Baltimore Orioles, where he is pictured here.

*1977 Cubs and Sox. Mediocrity was the city-wide forecast for baseball in Jimmy Carter's first year in the White House. But amid a meteorologically sizzling spring through mid-summer, the Cubs and Sox provided dreams of a Subway Series by both holding onto first place simultaneously.

The Cubs zoomed to a 47-22 first-place record by the end of June, thanks to total team production and Bruce Sutter's tricky split-fingered fastball, still the best ever seen, to close out games. Paced by "rent-a-player" sluggers Richie Zisk and Oscar Gamble, the Sox were the ultimate good-hit, no-field or pitch team. Wearing the ugly softball-style uniforms concocted by Bill Veeck's front office, the Sox slugged like never before as the "South Side Hit Men."

Unfortunately, as the summer began to cool, so did both teams. Sutter, pitched too much, developed a sore shoulder as other Cubs slumped. The Phillies, who took over first from Chicago in early August, ended up 20 games ahead of the eventual fourth-place Cubs. The Kansas City Royals took Sox players' home-run "curtain calls" as an affront and blasted past the challengers in August. Despite the lack of pennants on either side of town, this season remains memorable and nearly beloved.

*1989 Cubs. Last place was a reasonable prediction for some pundits after a bottom-line-lusting Tribune corporate management cut payroll even as the first set of luxury suites were installed as part of the beginning of regular night baseball at Wrigley Field. The Cubs were going young and cheap. Projected left-field platoon to start out was Mitch Webster and Darrin Jackson.

But magic was sparked on Opening Day, after closer Mitch "Wild Thing" Williams struck out the side to nail down the win after loading the bases on three straight hits to start the ninth. A gaggle of home-grown kids led by 19-game-winner Greg Maddux and NL Rookie of the Year center fielder Jerome Walton responded to manager Don Zimmer's hunches. They became the "Boys of Zimmer" as they seized first place in August, then held on against a St. Louis Cardinals challenge in early September. The Cubs were swept aside 4-games-to-1 by the San Francisco Giants, but the kids' memorable ride is still fondly remembered.

*2001 Cubs. Coming off a pair of pitching-poor 95- and 97-loss seasons, nobody dared forecast a Cubs contender. But a good rotation – including back-to-back one-hitters by Jon Lieber and Kerry Wood – and a cohesive, fun clubhouse augmented Sammy Sosa's one-man gang, 64-homer, 160-RBI season.

The Cubs held first through July, when GM Andy MacPhail danced with the Tampa Bay Rays' Fred McGriff for weeks to get him to OK a trade to Chicago. Several Cubs of that year said the McGriff affair was the team's downfall as it broke up winning chemistry. Sure enough, the Cubs fell out of first in mid-August. Near season's end, there was a near-mutiny by pitchers angered pitching coach Oscar Acosta was fired. Jim Hendry, then MacPhail's deputy, had to rush to the clubhouse to persuade Wood to make his scheduled start after he initially balked, protesting the Acosta sacking.

*2005 Sox. The ultimate surprise, as few could have figured a team so manhandled, physically and mentally, by the tormenting Minnesota Twins could turn around to play Twinkies-type baseball to win it all.

But Kenny Williams' off-season sacrifice of power (Carlos Lee) for speed (Scott Podsednik) in a deal with the Milwaukee Brewers paid off handsomely. The Sox kept the lid on rallies through three closers, with rookie Bobby Jenks solid down the stretch. Second-year manager Ozzie Guillen almost used up a 15-game lead (on Aug. 1) before the pursuing Cleveland Indians finally faltered.

In true championship style, the Sox saved their very best for last in their pitching-fueled 11-1 postseason run. And that's a White Sox winner, deep in the heart of Texas.

Nobody could have predicted it. Few dare predict it will happen again. The advice is never-ending, but rarely heeded: don't make predictions. They rarely run to form.