



Goats of human -- but not animal – kind on field, in front office for Cubs in July 1973

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You haven't been paying attention if you've lived in and around Chicago, and are unaware of the Billy Goat curse on the Cubs.

The story traces back to 1945. West Side barkeep William "Billy Goat" Sianis brought Murphy, his horned mascot, to Wrigley Field for Game 4 of the World Series against the Detroit Tigers. In the tradition that would reverberate into another century, the goat either was denied admission outright despite Sianis having purchased it a ticket or was kicked out in mid-game by persnickety ushers.

There were several versions, but after the Cubs lost in seven games Sianis apparently put a curse on the Cubs that they would never again appear in a World Series. "Who stinks now?" Sianis wired Cubs owner P.K. Wrigley, getting even for charges that the goat's odor offended ticket buyers, hence its ejection.

Sianis pulled off a nice publicity stunt with the help of friendly sportswriters who were regular patrons of his Billy Goat watering hole near the old Chicago Stadium. But over the next generation, the tale was lost to history even as the Cubs wandered aimlessly in the second division of the National League, which would have given rise to the curse angle.



Billy Goat owner Sam Sianis has brought several generations of goats to walk on Wrigley Field. Here, he parades a beast with a Cubs hat in the 1980s (Photo courtesy of Billy Goat/Modine Marketing Group).



The Cubs continued to occasionally let in Sam Sianis and his goat. Here's a more recent view as Sianis and goat walk down the right-field line. None of the goat's appearances has lifted the supposed World Series hex from 1945 (Photo courtesy of Billy Goat/Modine Marketing Group).

The late Jack Kuenster, later famous as editor of *Baseball Digest*, worked as a beat writer covering the Cubs throughout the darkest days in the 1950s and early 1960s. He did not recall ever hearing the 1945 curse-tale brought up and rehashed to explain away 10 consecutive sub-.500 seasons from 1953 to 1962, and even more before and after this time period.

But by 1970, Billy Goat regulars Mike Royko and David Condon resurrected the old fable in their columns in the late *Daily News and Tribune*, respectively. They had heard of the curse during long, besotted nights at the bar, now relocated on lower North Michigan Avenue by the two major newspaper offices.

And when the Cubs started collapsing annually down the stretch in 1969 due to mis-management by Leo Durocher and his front office, Royko and Condon had a humorous explanation for the flops of a team annually predicted to win the National League East. Never mind the real reasons for the ill-timed slides. Let's just laugh and pour another one as the clock ticked to 25, 26, 27 years since the last World Series at Wrigley Field.

Still, the curse of the billy goat was just an ancient story that did not stick to the Cubs – until the promotional genius of his uncle rubbed off on new Billy Goat owner Sam Sianis.

Sam Sianis' big plans for Socrates

William Sianis died in 1970. Less than three years later, on July 4, 1973 (and long before John Belushi popularized Billy Goat on "Saturday Night Live"), Sam Sianis tried for a star-spangled home run. He hired "Fabulous Howard," a celebrity chauffeur, to transport his own goat, Socrates, in a limousine to the Cubs-Phillies game at Wrigley Field. Problem is, he did not get clearance from the promotion-lacking, moss-covered Cubs management to admit the animal to the ballpark and bring them good luck.

Remember, this was an era when P.K. Wrigley simply sold sunshine, Frosty Malts, smokie links and \$1 bleacher seats amid Wrigley Field's daytime lure. The only regular ballpark promotion was Ladies Day, a carryover from the 1920s and the brainchild of Wrigley's father, William Wrigley, Jr., and then-Cubs president William L. Veeck, Bill Veeck's father. There were no bat days or other giveaway afternoons. The first "old-timers' game" would not be played until 1977, after P.K.'s son, William Wrigley III, had taken over after the old man's death.

So when Sianis attempted the ruffles and flourishes of the limo arrival and the red carpet, the Andy Frain ushers and Burns security guards simply blocked his path. Interestingly, if Sianis had contacted Cubs star Billy Williams, he might have found a back door into the ballpark for the goat. Williams said he would have even smuggled the goat in a catcher's bag to bring the Cubs good luck in this writer's alternate-Cubs history E-book, "Alou Makes the Catch," available at Amazon.com. No giving away the outcome of the goat walking around Wrigley Field in the E-book. Check it out for \$2.99.

In the real timeline, the Sianis attempt to get into the ballpark would have been a forgotten sideshow. Condon wrote a column on Socrates on Friday, July 6. That same night, the Cubs began a nine-game West Coast road trip. Center fielder Rick Monday slugged a fifth-inning grand slam while Fergie Jenkins pitched a complete-game 10-hitter in an 8-5 victory over the Padres in San Diego. The Cubs had held first place since the early days of the season, building up an 8 1/2-game lead on June 29. On this night, they led by six with a 50-35 record.

What happened at mid-summer '73 would give the billy goat curse legs it never previously possessed. And the rational, real-life reasons for Cubs flops, which had centered around Durocher since Sept. 1969, would move into the comical, even the metaphysical, world.



Billy Goat tavern was boosted by Mike Royko and David Condon columns about the supposed 1945 curse, and then grew even bigger thanks in part of the goat's forays onto Wrigley Field. Photo credit © 2006, Jeremy Atherton.

Cubs revived after Durocher left – but with a caveat

Going into 1973, the coast seemed clear for a long-delayed NL East title. Durocher and his tyrannical ways had been banished at the 1972 All-Star break. Managerial successor Whitey Lockman seemed a breath of fresh air. He'd rest the regulars, use the bullpen far more than Durocher and would not use an us-against-them style. And the Cubs seemed to respond to Lockman. They finished the 1972 season 39-26 (after slumping to 46-44 until Durocher's departure). The winning continued unabated in '73 as the Cubs took advantage of the decline of a Pittsburgh Pirates team thunderstruck by the tragic death of Hall of Famer Roberto Clemente in a New Year's Day plane crash.

John Holland was in his 17th season as a mostly unsuccessful Cubs general manager in '73. He kept his job due to two-way loyalty with P.K. Wrigley. Holland and assistant Blake Cullen made the determination they still had the NL's best players at their positions, even as key Cubs moved into their 30s in the 1970s.

Despite media and fan calls to start infusing the lineup with younger players, Holland kept the core of left fielder Billy Williams, third baseman Ron Santo, shortstop Don Kessinger, second baseman Glenn Beckert, catcher Randy Hundley, first baseman-outfielder Jim Hickman and ace starter Fergie Jenkins. Some new blood was infused with outfielders Monday and Jose Cardenal, who quickly became a P.K. Wrigley pennant, along with right-handed starters Rick Reuschel and Burt Hooton.

In the cool of the spring of '73, that old core generally played well. Williams' production was down from his near-Triple Crown season in '72, but Santo batted well over .300. As summer approached, old bones began slowing up and infirmities spread. Holes began springing up in the batting order. Holland opted to try to get one more year out of first baseman Joe Pepitone in '73, even after he quit the Cubs early the previous season before begging to be re-instated. Pepitone was slotted in as the cleanup hitter between Williams and Santo. When he was traded in May to the Braves for young first baseman Andre Thornton, Holland tapped former Holy Cross linebacker Pat Bourque to play first and bat cleanup. Bourque was the early '70s version of the Cubs' top power prospect.



Ron Santo was one of the top Cubs producers of the spring of 1973 who slumped badly as summer heated up.

The left-handed hitting Bourque had a two-week hot spell. Then the NL caught up with him. Lockman resorted to the aging Hickman and part-time trumpet player Carmen Fanzone to unsuccessfully fill the hole at first. Cardenal, best as a No. 2 hitter, saw service in the middle of the lineup. Beckert, who had an early 26-game hitting streak, left the lineup due to a bad heel.

Even as the Cubs held first into July, they began scuffling for runs. They pulled several games out with walk-off homers, Randy Hundley with a two-out, three-run ninth-inning shot to beat the Mets 6-5 on July 1, and the .318-hitting Santo with a one-out, two-run shot in the 10th to edge the Phils 3-2 on July 4, hours after Socrates cooled his hooves outside the ballpark.

Family trip to West Coast backfires

Going on the nine-game West Coast swing starting July 6, the Cubs had a new angle to the trip. The players' families were invited, an unusual move for '73. Perhaps several Cubs had consternation with that arrangement, as that curbed opportunities to engage in baseball Babylon. The media of the era suggested the families were a distraction. But dimming, aging talent, always strained by the shift work disorder present with the abrupt body-clock shift to Pacific Time, faltered on its own. After the eight-run outburst in Jack Murphy Stadium, the Cubs scored just 18 runs in the next seven games on the trip. The team came home with a 2-6 record, still in first place, but provoking panic.



Contributing to the Cubs' mid-summer 1973 downslide, Fergie Jenkins had his first off-season after six consecutive 20-victory years.

The slide intensified as July wore on. The Cubs fell out of first place in the first game after the All-Star break on July 26. An 11-game losing streak commenced in Montreal on Aug. 4. The Cubs scored as many as four runs only twice in the nosedive. The good start was a distant memory with a 56-64, fourth-place standing, 5 ½ games out on Aug. 16. Jenkins was so disgruntled after he was hammered by the Braves at Wrigley Field he emptied part of the bat rack onto the field upon being pulled by Lockman.

With the Cubs vacating their advantageous position, the NL East was up for grabs. The Mets, given up for dead on Aug. 20 with a 55-67 record, good for last place and seven

games out, staged an 1969-style September rally. The New Yorkers ended up winning the division with a record-worst 82-79 record, rubbing it into the Cubs by clinching in a rain-makeup game Monday, Oct. 1, a day after the regular-season ended, at Wrigley Field.

The Cubs could have still played abominably – 10 games under .500 – the rest of the season from their 50-35 vantage point and still won the division. Somehow, they underwhelmed that bottom-feeding standard and finished 77-84, in fifth.

A couple of years too late, Holland was ordered by Wrigley to clean house. Most of the old favorites were traded after the 1973 season, including Santo to the White Sox after he vetoed a trade to the Angels. The Cubs did not have enough capable young players as replacements. A decade of mediocre-or-worse baseball ensued.

And now a few wags connected the barred billy goat with the greatest Cubs collapse to date. The curse story gained traction. Subsequent pratfalls, such as a 47-22 late-June first-place record that melted to a final 81-81 in fourth place in 1977, gave rise to more belief in other-worldly explanations for Cubs failures. The billy goat curse was as good as anything offered up.

Tribune Co. invited goat onto the field

Finally, the yoke of incompetent Wrigley family ownership was overthrown in June 1981 through the purchase by deep-pocketed Tribune Co., a de facto co-owner of the Cubs through the decades with its sweetheart WGN broadcast-rights deal. In a symbolic throwing away of the discredited past, the new owner invited Sianis to bring the goat onto the field for the home opener in 1982. Sianis and friend also walked onto the field during the home NLCS games in 1984. But the bar owner claimed he couldn't complete the curse-lifting by not being able to bring the goat to San Diego, where the Cubs shockingly lost three in a row to blow the pennant.

Other goat forays took place periodically over the next few decades. Most famous was a group of Wisconsin seminarians who tried to get their own goat admitted to Wrigley Field on May 4, 1994, to break a 12-game home losing streak. Eventually they appealed to Ernie Banks for help as he was leaving the ballpark. Mr. Cub used his pull to get the goat admitted through the wagon-gate in deep right field. The animal and a growing entourage of camera operators walked across the ballpark on the warning track before turning toward home plate. They aggravated right-hander Steve Trachsel as he warmed up.

“I was upset when they brought him (the goat) by...where I was warming up,” Trachsel told Toni Ginnetti of the Chicago Sun-Times. “It was kind of a distraction. The goat was kind of in my way. It was more laughs for the fans than anyone else. If they believe that's the way it is, they should have him sit in the first row.”

Interestingly, a peeved Trachsel took it out on the Reds, winning 5-2 to snap the home skid.

Goats graze in too many Cubs-oriented minds

The goat's place in Cubs history simply grew from there, beyond more Sianis processions onto the field. The animal ended up in a beer commercial. Dead goats ended up draped on the Harry Caray statue and in an attempted delivery to Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts at the ballpark.

Fans who are in the know realize the goat is a nettlesome distraction from the real Cubs issues.

“The so-called goat curse (note, no capital letters) was a complete fabrication; while the goat incident clearly did happen -- was witnessed by many -- it didn't become a ‘thing’ until some late-1960s sportswriters decided they needed a reason for the Cubs' 1969 collapse that would sell papers,” said Al Yellon, a 50-year Cubs fan and editor of the popular BleedCubbieBlue.com blog.

“In that sense, it's identical to the ‘Curse of the Bambino,’ supposedly the reason the Red Sox didn't win for decades; that one was also invented by a sportswriter (Dan Shaughnessy) in Boston.

“These days, the goat thing is brought up by lazy national writers and broadcasters who can't bother themselves with actually doing some research on why the Cubs have lost over the years. It's a combination of bad management and bad luck at the worst possible times.

“The goat thing really needs to be retired. I'm sick of it.”

But until Theo Epstein somehow defies the odds still stacked against him – remember, the Cubs have to win three postseason rounds to be World Series champions – that unique animal will get everyone's goat annually.

Sam Sianis? He's hardly finished as badly as the Cubs. Billy Goat now has expanded from its subterranean dive to become a popular chain throughout the Chicago area.

Some nay-sayer Sianis turned out to be. And he can thank an all-time Wrigley Field pratfall with very human originations in the Watergate summer of '73 for his prosperity.