



'13 slumping Sox still had nothing on '99 crashing Cubs

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August truly is baseball's cruelest month.

For those teams not fortunate enough to sniff wild-card contention, for those who have long fallen out of the race due to terrible starts or mid-season pratfalls, the dog-day calendar means a long death march to season's end.

August is not September, with the finish line in sight but with some promise for the future via minor-league callups performing a sneak preview of next year's spring training, when all is new and fresh. August is a full 31 days, likely stocked with rain-makeup day-night double-headers, full of hot, humid weather and declining crowds for bad teams that really take a nosedive in the third week when the kids go back to school.

The above description certainly applies to the 2013 White Sox. Their season was ruined by a 16-45 stretch from May 27 to Aug. 4. A 24-24 record melted away to 40-69 via the American League's worst hitting and fielding that wasted some prime starting pitching led by Chris Sale.

But at least there were some brakes to the free-fall. The backslide, worst since 1976 and featuring 10- and eight-game losing streaks, ended when the Sox swept the New York Yankees at The Cell amid Alex Rodriguez's suspension-marred return. A rare, rare series win against the tormenting Detroit Tigers and the arrival of top prospect Avisail Garcia via trade from the Tigers at least made the August environs a tad more tolerable.



Jim Riggleman (pictured as Louisville's manager in 2013) believed the 1999 Cubs played on momentum from the previous season before reality set in. Photo credit, [Pat Pfister](#).

Looking at this city's baseball history, the Sox are still not in the class of the 1999 Cubs in horrific record or losing momentum. Aug. 1999 featured a 1 1/2-month slump entering the month that shifted into overdrive for the Jim Riggleman-managed team that had been the National League's surprise wild-card representative in 1998. The month symbolized the endless bummer of the hot season, a 6-24 record, worst in franchise history for August. And it wasn't over. By the time the Cubs reached the season's low point at 56-87 on Sept. 12, they had gone 24-64 since their high-water mark at 32-23 on June 8.

The Sox never were nine games over .500, coming off a postseason appearance. And they didn't have the tradition of collapses and massive slumps in Cubs annals, most famous being the 1969 September pratfall, but also extending back to 1952 and featuring a team 25 games over .500 in late June ending up at 81-81 in 1977.

And yet the '99 season was first among impressive examples of collapses. It was relentless and seemingly endless and didn't stop until it gobbled up Riggleman's job after five seasons, longest tenure by a Cubs manager since Leo Durocher's 6 1/2-year run from 1966 to 1972.

The massive march to the rear did not feature a double-digit losing streak like the '13 Sox. There were a pair of six-game skids and a few more five-game backslides. Riggleman's Cubs were good for about one win a week. At one point, they even won four in a row.



Even another 60-homer season wasn't enough to win more than an occasional game for the Cubs in the late summer of 1999. Photo credit [Sammy Sosa](#).

At first glance, 1999 should have been a promising season for the Cubs. They were led by Sammy Sosa, glorying in his MVP award and 66-homer season, a close second to Mark McGwire in a storied home-run-race that a decade later was tainted by PED accusations. The Cubs had taken a great leap forward from 68 wins in 1997 to 90 in 1998. Most of the players returned, and GM Ed Lynch apparently bolstered the roster with the new battery of right-hander Jon Lieber and catcher Benito Santiago.

But astute baseball people knew there were warning signs.

Brass got stories mixed up on pursuit of Ventura

The rotation took a huge hit in spring training when wunderkind Kerry Wood, who already had elbow problems at the end of 1998, blew out his arm early in spring training, requiring Tommy John surgery. The Cubs did not seriously pursue free agent third baseman Robin Ventura, who had departed the Sox. Lynch and team president Andy MacPhail offered conflicting stories whether they even approached Ventura's agent. Instead, they took the easy way out by re-signing 40-year-old third baseman Gary Gaetti, a late-season hero for the '98 Cubs after he had been released by the Cardinals.

Nevertheless, the Cubs reached their high-water mark, thanks to a 9-3 stretch through the first two victories in a three-game series at Arizona. Seeking to counter Randy Johnson in the rubber game on June 9, Rigglesman started an oddball lineup of right-handers that included subbing Gaetti at first for Mark Grace, Manny Alexander for Mickey Morandini at second and Jeff Blauser at third. The Diamondbacks jumped to an 8-1 lead, but the Cubs drove the Big Unit from the mound with a six-run eighth. Henry Rodriguez walked with two out in the ninth to put the tying run on against reliever Vladimir Nunez.

Then the play that symbolically triggered the collapse and represented a Cubbie Occurrence took place. Ex-Sox Lance “One Dog” Johnson, the regular center fielder sitting out against Johnson, pinch ran for Rodriguez. Nunez picked him off to end the game.

More strange things began to happen. After sweeping the Sox three in a row in the first inter-league series at Wrigley Field in 1998, the South Siders began to return the favor by taking the first two games of the weekend series in '99 at Clark and Addison. In the final game, a long rain delay emptied out the bleachers, save for some hardy Sox fans. Pitch-and-putt Sox shortstop Mike Caruso slugged a two-run homer off Cubs closer Rick Aguilera with two out in the eighth to give the Sox the eventual 6-4 victory. Caruso hit just one more homer the rest of the season, and he never played again for the Sox after '99.



Mickey Morandini was one of a gaggle of Cubs whose good 1998 performances melted away a year later. Photo credit [Dealphungo](#).

The D'backs and Sox losses were part of a 1-10 stretch that dropped the Cubs to .500 by June 20. On July 1, a 19-12 loss to the Brewers at home pushed the Cubs under a .500 mark they'd never see again that season.

“We rode some momentum early in the year from our success in '98,” said Rigglesman, now manager of the Louisville Bats, the Cincinnati Reds' Triple-A affiliate. “But, realistically, we weren't as strong. Everything happened. Early on, we got away with it. As the season went on, it became apparent that this was just not going to work.”

Closer Rod Beck, whose gutty 53-save performance in 1998 made him a near-folk hero in Chicago, had arm problems. Lynch traded for Aguilera from the Minnesota Twins to replace Beck. But Aguilera was past his prime.

Kevin Tapani, an 18-game winner in '98, had back problems, and eventually was shut down. Steve Trachsel, 15-8 in 1998 and winner of the wild card play-in game against the San Francisco Giants, went on to go 8-18 with a 5.56 ERA. Lieber was 8-3 before the All-Star break, but went 0-8 with a 5.71 ERA in his first 13 starts afterward.

Gaetti simply showed his age as an everyday starter, not a short-term sparkplug. Morandini slumped from .296 in '98 to .241 in '99. Santiago had not fully recovered from a 1998 car accident. He also clashed at least once with Rigglesman behind the scenes when he was slow to come out to the bench during a game he did not start.

Feeling of hopelessness sets in

“The players knew it,” Rigglesman said. “They knew we weren’t going to be able to turn it around. We weren’t going to try to fool them with any Knute Rockne speeches. This is really who we are. The 32-23 was really not who we are. We just have to face it and grind through it.”

“We were putting players out there...if I started naming names, you’d go, ‘Oh, yeah, I forgot that guy.’ We weren’t going to win games with those people. But we had to watch them to see and not make a mistake off the future in 2000. As we watched them play, we lost a lot of ballgames.”

Non-prime prospects like Cole Liniak at third and Jose Nieves at short saw heavy second-half duty. Neither stuck with the Cubs.

But, oh, the pitching. The staff might have been the worst in franchise history. Team ERA was 5.27. In a three-game stretch from July 1-3, the pitchers gave up 19, 14 and 21 runs, respectively. During the 24-64 stretch, the Cubs yielded at least 10 runs in a game 21 times.

The poster boy for the men-right-off-the-street quality of the '99 Cubs pitchers was lefty Micah Bowie, obtained in a trade-deadline deal with the Braves that dispatched veterans Jose Hernandez and Terry Mulholland to Atlanta. Beware dealing for young Braves pitchers. Bowie was 2-6 with a – this is not a misprint – 9.96 ERA in 11 starts. His WHIP (walks and hits allowed to innings pitched) was a staggering 2.191.

At different junctures, Rigglesman trotted out pitchers like Dan Serafini, Andrew Lorraine, Brad Woodall, Steve Rain, Bobby Ayala, Kurt Miller, Brian McNichol, Richie Barker and Doug Creek.

One pitcher who did not work a batter for the '99 Cubs yielded the most negative publicity



Jon Lieber went 8-3 before the All-Star break, but 0-8 in his first 13 starts after the break. Photo credit [terren in Virginia](#).

and also served as a symbol of a season gone horribly wrong. Then-scouting director Jim Hendry astoundingly selected Wichita State's Ben Christensen as the No. 1 draft pick. Christensen had beamed Evansville's Anthony Molina in the on-deck circle after Molina tried to time his warm-up pitches. Tragedy spread out in all directions. Christensen never got a whiff of the majors. In 2012, after years of vision problems from the beaming, Molina was charged with seven child molestation counts in the Quad Cities.

Trying to put a positive spin on the collapsing big-league team and the firestorm of the Christensen selection, MacPhail pointed toward a promising crop of homegrown players at Class-A Lansing (Mich.) in 1999 – center fielder Corey Patterson, first baseman Hee Seop Choi, third baseman David Kelton and catcher Jeff Goldbach. He did not mention an 18-year-old right-hander named Carlos Zambrano.

Frustrated Cubs fans called the Lansing ballpark to demand the fleet Patterson, in just his first pro season, be called up and put in center field in Wrigley Field right then. Rushed through the minors by MacPhail's front office, Patterson never became more than a journeyman outfielder. Choi fizzled out early in his Cubs career. Kelton just had a cup of coffee with the Cubs. Goldbach never rose above Double-A. Only the unheralded Zambrano had a long, productive big-league career before his own histrionics derailed it.

The rain delay without a drop of precip

More unusual events afflicted the Cubs as their record-breaking August proceeded. On Monday, Aug. 23, the Cubs were scheduled to play a night game against the San Francisco Giants at Wrigley Field. With radar showing heavy rain rapidly approaching, management delayed the scheduled 7:05 p.m. start. But not a drop fell as the clock ticked away. Wrigley Field was bone dry until almost 9 p.m., when the showers began and the game was washed out for good. Seeing six to seven innings worth of playable conditions, visiting Giants ownership members were incensed. They verbally ripped their Cubs counterparts.

So where did the rain go? WGN-TV weather guru Tom Skilling said at the time the precipitation took a turn away from Wrigley Field at the last second. A right turn around Western Avenue, the weather meister suggested. Cubs brass got more aggravation for their dry rain delay. The makeup contest was scheduled as part of a doubleheader on Aug. 25. The Cubs lost both games 11-5 and 6-5.

All bad things did come to an end, at least in '99. After they dipped to 56-87, the Cubs finished up 11-8, too late to save Riggles' job. He'd stay in the game through various managing and coaching jobs through the present, and a profile of his work in Louisville will be posted here as the next story on the Chicago Baseball Museum web site.

But the collapse did expose the weakness of MacPhail's baseball operations department, for which he spent less than parent Tribune Co. expected. From 1997 to 2002, the Cubs lost 94 or more games four times. That almost equaled the worst of longtime owner Phil Wrigley and acolyte GM John Holland in the 1960s.

There are lessons in Rigglesman's '99 experience for the Sox and Ventura, transformed from should-have-been Cubs third baseman to second-year South Side manager now under some fire.

"It's too bad after having such an eventual year in the year '12, the year '13 has turned out the way it is," Rigglesman said. "Now they've got to get ready for '14 and '15. Players know that. You can't fool them. You hope they realize every game on the schedule, people are paying to watch it, and you got to go give them the best effort out there. It can turn into a rewarding process because the work you put in the year '13 will pay off in the next year or two. But it's painful to go through it at the time.

"Robin's such a solid guy. He's beloved in the city. I think Mr. Reinsdorf has great confidence in him and will show patience. That was my fifth year. Patience was not going to apply. People were going to be patient the first two or three years. After that, it's enough, let's get someone else in here."

Baseball is renowned as a game of failure. You can fail big-time if the talent is off-kilter or just not up to contending quality. It's tough enough to craft a winning team record, a .280 average or an above .500 won-lost mark even with a sub-3.00 ERA. Just ask Chris Sale on the latter point.

So you can see how life on the field can snowball downward, be it 16-45 or 24-64. Every team isn't that far from being an adult version of the Bad News Bears.