

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Hype has blown up in Cubs' faces over the years

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Posted Wednesday, February 24, 2016

The entire Cubs franchise from the family ownership group on down needs the following historical primer, as institutional memory remains the weak spot in the organization.

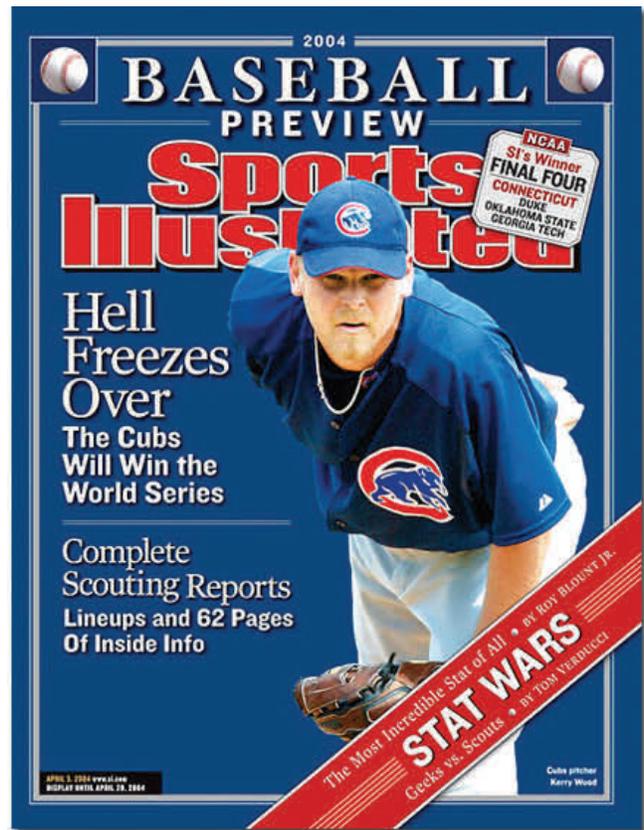
Manager Joe Maddon's "embrace the target" theme for 2016 is legit. But, at the same time, Maddon and his front office need to be on guard for challenges from within along from the inevitable brickbats from outside.

The Cubs have passed "go" in zooming from a 73-win rebuilding team to a consensus World Series favorite in just one season. That is hype equal or better to that of any other seasonal North Side entry. In addition to the press clippings, Maddon will inevitably deal with the elephant in the room – the-now 108-year championship drought that will be discussed throughout the upcoming season.

He'll need eyes in the back of his head. The potential dangers will come from behind closed doors in the clubhouse and trainer's room, if history is a guide.

The following is a chronicle of well-hyped Cubs teams that went awry during the past half century, in order of their impact:

- The 2004 wild-card collapse. Going into 2004, the Cubs seemingly were as hyped for their era as the present-day team. The near-miss World Series run in 2003 only boosted expectations. *Sports Illustrated's* cover headline "Hell Freezes Over" with Kerry Wood's



Sports Illustrated led the way in predicting a Cubs World Series in 2004. Photo credit [Jason](#).

image predicted the Cubs would win the 2004 World Series. GM Jim Hendry boosted a somewhat under-powered lineup with the additions of first baseman Derrek Lee and catcher Michael Barrett. The cherry on the sundae came as spring training began with the return of Greg Maddux to round out a dynamite rotation led by Wood and Mark Prior.

But...the train went off the rails, slowly but surely. Wood and Prior lost chunks of time in 2004 due to assorted injuries, a precursor to further declines in their Cubs careers. Also injured was closer Joe Borowski, forcing free-agent acquisition LaTroy Hawkins, one of the game's top setup man, into an ill-fitting ninth-inning role. Fundamentals like baserunning often went south. Sammy Sosa, likely physically deflated as PEDs testing became entrenched, slumped. Yet Sosa initially resisted manager Dusty Baker's attempts to drop him in the order, creating clubhouse turmoil. An overall positive clubhouse tenor in 2003 turned around 180 degrees with a number of players battling broadcasters Chip Caray and Steve Stone.

The Cardinals broke out to a 105-win season, leaving the wild card as the Cubs' only path to the playoffs. Even with the above-mentioned problems, Baker's crew was 87-66 – a better record than in 2003 – and possessed a 1 1/2 –game wild-card lead with nine games to go. But the Cubs went 2-7 with five one-run defeats to finish out of the money. Sosa's walkout from Wrigley Field -- leading to his trade to Baltimore -- on the sad final day was the absolute lowlight.

The team continued downhill over the next two years. Baker was fired, team president Andy MacPhail was forced out, and a free-agent spending spree commenced. The mega-millions spree temporarily boosted the Cubs through back-to-back playoff seasons in 2007-08, but on its back end led to yet another decline that the present regime is still fixing now.

- The 1985 decline. After the surprise 96-win NL East title in 1984, GM Dallas Green re-signed his Top 4 starters – Rick Sutcliffe, Steve Trout, Dennis Eckersley and Scott Sanderson. The Cubs were a consensus pick to repeat and finally reach the World Series.

But pitching injuries can be an epidemic. Even while the Cubs ran up a 35-19 record and four-game lead by June 11, ace Sutcliffe was sidelined with a partially-torn hamstring after running out a grounder in Atlanta. Sutcliffe tried to come back far too early and hurt his shoulder, pitching basically on one leg. From that season high point, the Cubs suddenly lost 13 in a row. They continued downhill as Trout, Eckersley, Sanderson and fifth starter Dick Ruthven also got hurt. At one point in August the entire five-man rotation was on the disabled list.

The end result was a disastrous 77-win campaign and the beginning of the end for Green's regime,



Rick Sutcliffe and Northbrook's Scott Sanderson were among a rotation-full of disabled pitchers in 1985.

mucked up by Tribune Co. meddling. The Cubs' farm system is only now recovering from the after-effects of the corporate politicking.

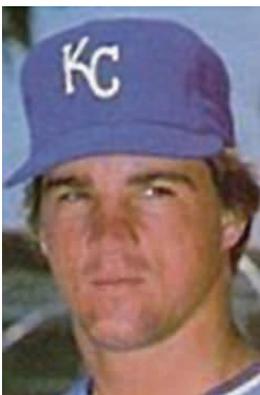
- Post-1969 hangover. Despite the infamous late-season collapse and Miracle Mets' surge, the Cubs continued to be picked as favorites to win the NL East as the 1970s began.

Beat writers and broadcasters along with the John Holland-led front office continued to rate the team's everyday lineup the best in the league. Pre-season predictions of a Cubs' first-place finish predominated. Unfortunately, all failed to consider the drag on the franchise from amoral manager Leo Durocher's autocratic manner and increasingly senile on-field moves. After a 35-25 start in 1970, the team lost 12 in a row, never regaining the mojo in an 84-78 finish. The time for Durocher's departure and a team makeover was at hand, but Holland elected to stand pat. The team again underwhelmed in 1971 as open clubhouse rebellion against Durocher broke out.

But The Lip kept his job for 1972 with Holland only making two significant trades. The roster aged as no position-player prospects freshened the lineup. Future American League stolen-base leader Bill North was nailed to the bench before he was traded.

Durocher was finally eased out at mid-season 1972 and the team temporarily revived under successor Whitey Lockman. But Holland still kept a geriatric core by baseball standards for 1973, tricked by the Pirates' tragic loss of Roberto Clemente. A 46-31 record and eight-game lead at the end of June quickly melted away in a massive collapse. Holland undertook a post-season housecleaning two to three years too late. The Cubs wallowed in mediocrity or worse for the next decade.

- Free-agent fizzle in 1991. When GM Jim Frey, voted recently by many fans as the worst in his job in modern Cubs annals, went on a free-agent buying binge in the off-season of 1990-91, many forecast a Cubs first-place finish following the 77-win downer season of 1990. The *Chicago Tribune* Sunday magazine even had predicted a Subway Series with the Sox coming off their 94-win season and opening up new Comiskey Park.



Danny Jackson's injuries help mess up the 1991 season.

The signings of outfielder George Bell, lefty starter Danny Jackson and closer Dave Smith supposedly filled all the holes and complemented stalwarts Maddux, Andre Dawson and Ryne Sandberg. But few looked at the newcomers' fine print. Bell was a head case. Jackson was brittle. And the 36-year-old Smith was cooked, his numbers looking better than they should have been pitching in the spacious Astrodome.

Only Bell, whom Harry Caray misidentified at least once as "George Bush," had anywhere close to a decent season in 1991. Jackson and Smith broke down.

The hype had extended to third-base prospect Gary Scott, projected as the next Ron Santo coming out of spring training. Scott could not hit his 175-pound weight. Meanwhile, the career de-

clines of outfielders Jerome Walton and Dwight Smith continued. Walton and Smith were 1-2 in the NL Rookie of the Year balloting in 1989. Walton in particular got too fat and sassy, while Smith fell out of favor with manager Don Zimmer.

For all the money spent, the Cubs improved not one game, again winning 77. Zimmer was fired in May. Frey and team president Don Grenesko, a Tribune Co. wonk, were swept out of office after the season. The only bright spot was Bell being flipped for the Sox's Sammy Sosa by Frey successor Larry Himes in spring training 1992.