

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Dusty rehash unneeded Cubs-Nats distraction in NLDS

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Posted Friday, September 29, 2017*

The upcoming National League Division Series between the Cubs and the Washington Nationals should be the crown jewel of the postseason.

Young stars like Las Vegas natives and youth-baseball contemporaries Kris Bryant and Bryce Harper will duel each other as former MVPs. Will a Madduxian craftsman like Kyle Hendricks be able to outpitch super-stuff practitioners like Max Scherzer or Stephen Strasburg? Wade Davis was 98 percent automatic in the regular season, and needs to continue that mojo without interruption.

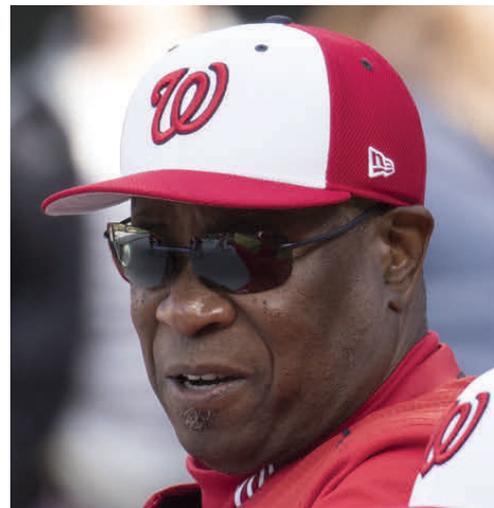
And all must be done quickly, as the five-game series is the playoffs' cruelest round with its abrupt elimination factor.

Too bad some unfinished Cubs business from 2003-04 will provide a sideshow: the Nationals' Dusty Baker managing against the team he elevated, and then supposedly allowed to disintegrate.

Both the Cubs and Baker have long moved on from the roller-coaster years of the latter's second, and most controversial, managing job. But Cubs fans and media filling time and space won't let it go, and Baker himself would be less than human if he did not feel an inner desire to prove himself against a team that built him up and tore him down.

Too bad the Baker storyline will take away from the dynamic angles of a Cubs team that gathered momentum at the right time against a Nats club that finally seems loaded for bear after several seasons of quick postseason exits. Some old stories will re-surface. So, to get them out of the way before the first pitch, let's separate truth from legend:

- Baker was not the prime guy to come out to settle down Mark Prior amid the post-Steve Bartman Miami Marlins rally in the 2003 NLCS, as many second-guessers have insisted. Baker pointed out that was a job for pitching coach Larry Rothschild. However, Baker did need to come out during the rally – to pull Prior a couple of batters earlier than actually happened. Prior was in his first full big-league season, and better to pull him a bit earlier than too late.



Dusty Baker would not be human without time-tripping to his Cubs days during the NLDS. Photo credit [Keith Allison](#).

- That said, Baker admitted then he had shortened his bullpen in the 2003 NLCS. He could only trust surprise closer Joe Borowski and, to a lesser extent, setup man Kyle Farnsworth. Almost all other Cubs relievers were inconsistent or worse. GM Jim Hendry simply did not shore up his bullpen in mid-season as he did with the lineup via the acquisitions of third baseman Aramis Ramirez and center fielder Kenny Lofton.

- Baker did not burn out Prior and Kerry Wood. The two flame-throwers had such good stuff they could never be economical in their pitch counts. Batters could not easily square up against the pair and fouled off tons of pitches. To protect Prior and Wood like China dolls, Baker would have needed to typically pull each after five innings and 100 or more pitches. And to accomplish that fact, he'd have needed a 15-man pitching staff. Carlos Zambrano ran up his pitches even faster than Prior and Wood, but no one complains since he did not go under the knife.

- In handling pitchers, Baker had a policy of gauging the number of stressful situations encountered in a game – multiple runners on in scoring position. Once the starter tried to work out of a third such situation, Baker typically began mulling a replacement. Such a stated philosophy did not get much publicity, perhaps because beat writers and broadcasters covering the team did not pull him aside one on one enough to ask the right questions.

- Baker was ripped for creating a bad atmosphere in the clubhouse that did not help team chemistry down the stretch of a 2004 wild-card-run-gone-bad. Perhaps the players themselves and Hendry-level management should accept the blame. In the cramped old clubhouse behind the home dugout, a series of recliner chairs were set up at one end of the room to make up for the lack of separate players' lounge. Media were told this area was somewhat restricted – against all access rules at the time. The baseball gods did not like the arrangement. Lefty reliever Mike Remlinger suffered a finger injury grabbing for a crank on his recliner.

- Sammy Sosa was an increasingly big drag on chemistry, first via his corked bat episode in 2003 that was just the tip of the iceberg of tampered bats on the premises. Slumping in 2004, he refused to be dropped down in the lineup, putting Baker in a dilemma in handling a player he privately deemed “sensitive and selfish.” Finally, Sosa left the 2004 season finale early, booking himself an exit from Chicago. No wonder a big chunk of Cubs took 40 whacks at Sosa's boombox after that game, not just Wood, as was popularly reported at the time.

- Baker's West Coast medium-cool style did not play well in the far more conservative, homerish Midwest when the Cubs had mounting problems. By his third season, he



Bryce Harper should be a focus of fan interest during the NLDS. Photo credit [Keith Allison](#).

was fielding racist mail. The inexcusable actions of a minority of fans certainly proved a drag on Baker's sense of well-being.

So, given all the above, here's wishing the focus is on two attractive teams playing in the fall of 2017 rather than ghost games and injured pitchers from 2003-04.