



Mea culpas, hindsight always too late when prize Cub escapes – and gets to Hall of Fame

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(Editor's note: Also check out the 2009 interview with Greg Maddux, recorded when his No. 31 was retired at Wrigley Field, on "Vintage Radio Interviews" on the CBM home page. The podcast was scheduled to be posted on Monday, Jan. 13, 2014.)

Minutes after he was overwhelmingly voted into the Hall of Fame, Greg Maddux was magnanimous in crediting a whole platoon of baseball people for his 355-victory, psyching-out-hitters mastery. And he thanked the baseball writers who elected him.

You wonder, though, if he also silently gave kudos to Larry Himes and Stanton Cook for his easy entrée into Cooperstown.

In the teleconference from his Las Vegas home, Maddux said one of his prime goals when he became a free agent in 1992, was to play for a World Series team. He implied the Atlanta Braves, which won his services over the New York Yankees after the Cubs blundered him away, were a better franchise at the time than the Bronx Bombers. The Yankees actually offered Maddux more than the Braves' \$28 million spread over five years.

He was right. The Braves were on the come, having appeared in two straight World Series with a slew of home-grown hitters and pitchers filtering their way onto the roster. The Yankees' dynastic run of the Joe Torre era was still a few years off, and the franchise still felt the effects of too much George Steinbrenner interference.



Greg Maddux never wanted to leave the Cubs in the first place. But his decision to go to Atlanta might have clinched his eventual Hall of Fame election. Photo credit [EyeTunes](#).

The Cubs? The team that drafted Maddux in the second round in 1984 couldn't have been in the same ballpark as far as near-future projected success. Already, the clubhouse was tense and off-kilter throughout 1992 due to Himes' new rules and regulations in his first year as general manager. A stickler for fitness and nutrition, Himes did not endear himself to the traditionalists and, well, some shirkers on the Cubs. Maddux surely picked up on the steadily bubbling anti-Himes sentiment that would only get worse the next two strife-filled seasons through the baseball strike. He got out while the getting was good, even though his first and likely second choices were to stay with the organization to which he was loyal and pitch in a Wrigley Field he claimed played bigger than the Astrodome when the wind blew in.



Stanton Cook (left) and his hired-gun attorney set up the eventual Greg Maddux exit by pulling a \$25 million contract offer to which Maddux had agreed, and had made an important concession. Cubs GM Larry Himes (right), beholden to Cook for his job, had to take the subsequent bullets for Cook for the debacle.

The process by which Maddux was lost to the Cubs actually was set on its disastrous course before Himes moved into his office above the Wrigley Field marquee. Team chairman Stanton Cook, a former Tribune Co. CEO, had screwed up the Maddux contract during a front-office power vacuum going into the winter of 1991-92. Himes takes much of the blame for the greatest loss of a home-grown talent in Cubs history – greater than that of Lou Brock, as the eventual Hall of Famer was not a finished base-stealing and hitting product when traded in 1964. Maddux was a freshly-named Cy Young Award winner when he signed a Braves deal that was in essence just \$500,000 more person than the Cubs had originally offered him.

Himes revives ‘what if?’ talk

Shortly after Maddux's teleconference on Hall of Fame election day, the retired Himes, 73, appeared on the “Boers and Bernstein Show” on 670-The Score, Chicago's top-rated all-sports radio station. He issued a mea culpa about losing Maddux, in the same way former Cubs head coach Bob Kennedy hindsighted in the late 1990s he should have run Brock more in front of Billy Williams and Ron Santo 35 years previously.

But all Himes did was continue to take bullets for the patrician Cook, nearing 90, who declined to comment on his Cubs days when contacted at his Kenilworth, Ill. home several years back.

“You always look back on things you wish you would have done,” Himes told The Score. “Maybe you get a little wiser the older you get. I knew what Greg was. Greg was a No. 1 starter on the staff.

“Now, looking back, I'd probably should have reached a little further and maybe gotten Tribune (Co.) to put in a little more money and kept him as a Cub. I understand the Cubs fans feelings (as angry listeners blamed Himes in texts to the show). I can't run away from those...I wish it would have been different.

“I would have still been there if we signed Maddux.”

That’s the ultimate in revisionist history. Although Maddux certainly would have made the rest of the pitchers and the Cubs overall better, he would have worked for a team still tethered to meddling Tribune Co. control, and incompetent oversight, through the mid-1990s. After the 1993 season, for instance, Cook ordered Himes to slash payroll in anticipation of the strike. Several key producers, such as 15-game-winning lefty Greg Hibbard, were cut loose. Himes also said later he could not rebuild the Cubs with young players because of the negative effect on Tribune Co.-owned WGN-TV and Radio’s ratings and advertising.

Cook was in charge as the worst kind of corporate viceroy possible. When he reached 65 in 1990, Cook was forced to give up his CEO post at Tribune Co. But he refused to retire and take his golden parachute back to tony Kenilworth. The company, according to a key source, decided to lateral Cook to what they figured was the smallest corporate division possible – the Cubs. He became chairman.

When a free-agent spending splurge flopped in 1991, Cook cleaned house. He demoted GM Jim Frey to scout, while moving team president Don Grenesko back to a corporate financial job at Tribune Tower. He eventually hired Himes, cashiered more than a year earlier as Sox GM due to personality clashes that chairman Jerry Reinsdorf could no longer tolerate. A couple of years later, Himes admitted he was not a “people person.”

Himes had worked at Wrigley Field as a scout with multiple team affiliations in 1991, then delivered a voluminous resume to Cook, no doubt impressed by Himes’ draft record of Jack McDowell, Robin Ventura, Frank Thomas and Alex Fernandez. Cook, though, ignored the internal problems of the Himes Administration at old Comiskey Park.

Filling the GM vacuum -- badly

Cook and hired-gun attorney Dennis Homerin basically took care of the big contracts in the transition from Frey to Himes. The priority above all else was signing Ryne Sandberg, the franchise icon, to baseball’s richest deal. Maddux’s contract had to wait for Sandberg’s to be settled. Interestingly, in the summer of 1991, Maddux told this writer if his contract would be taken care of the following winter, he and wife Kathy – both lifelong Las Vegas residents -- would buy a home in the Chicago area.

Eventually Cook and Homerin offered Maddux a five-year, \$25 million contract. No doubt despite uber-agent Scott Boras’ objections, Maddux wanted to stay in Chicago so badly he dropped the no-trade clause.

But Maddux and his family went on a vacation. Cook and Homerin slapped a deadline of 5 p.m. on a Friday for Maddux to accept the deal. Since he was away, he did not make the deadline. When Maddux came home, he contacted the Cubs to confirm his acceptance. Sorry, he was told, the offer was no longer on the table.

Maddux and Boras thus stiffened in their attitude toward the Cubs. The blame was now dropped in the lap of Himes, who was beholden to Cook for rescuing him from underemployment. Contract negotiations at the All-Star break in 1992 fell short of a deal. Himes looked elsewhere for free agents after the season. Maddux tried one last time after the season to rekindle talks, but Himes told him he had already spent the budget on the likes of pitcher Jose Guzman and relievers Randy Myers and Dan Plesac.

Cook should have known better, after overseeing the Cubs under the Dallas Green regime from the time of Tribune Co.'s purchase of the team in June 1981. He was on the field during the first press conference of the new ownership in Sept. 1981. Even with a modicum of baseball knowledge, the former production director of the Chicago Tribune should have realized you could only develop your own ace, not overpay for one in free agency.



Uber-agent Scott Boras proved with simple numbers the Cubs were big winners with Maddux, but losers without him. Photo credit <http://www.flickr.com/photos/misschatter/>

7 homers served up in 268 innings

At one point in the contract talks the top brass belittled Maddux, claiming prior to 1992 he had not won 20 yet. But the right-hander amassed a season for the ages in '92. He was 20-11 with just a 2.18 ERA, second lowest for a Cubs starter (after lefty Dick Ellsworth's 2.11 in 1963) since World War II. He served up just seven homers in 268 innings, an astonishing feat of keeping the ball in the ballpark in Wrigley Field. To be sure, 1992 was an abnormally cool summer, influenced by the volcanic eruption the previous year of Mt. Pinatubo in the Philippines. Still, the inability of batters to square up the ball against Maddux should have registered even to the hardest-headed suit.

Boras showed Maddux's positive effect on the Cubs since his breakout 18-8 season at 22 – his first full season as a starter -- in 1988 via a free-agent prospectus in 1992. The prospectus is preserved in the Jerome Holtzman Library, now part of the Chicago Baseball Museum's archival holdings.

Maddux was 87-57 for a .604 winning percentage in his first five full Cubs seasons. The rest of the pitchers were 315-349 for a .474 percentage. Maddux also pitched 1,255 1/3 innings, more than twice the nearest competitor in Mike Bielecki (600 2/3 innings). Maddux's 3.01 ERA over the period was second-lowest of any Cubs starter (Las Vegas buddy Mike Morgan had a 2.55 ERA in just one season in 1992). Only three other Cubs pitchers had ERAs under 4.00 during that time.

But beyond the statistics, Maddux was a towering baseball intellect and de facto assistant pitching coach. Cubs management truly did not know what it had, and allowed to get away.



Greg Maddux called pitches for Frank Castillo (left) and Mike Morgan (center) during their 1992 starts, resulting in good seasons. Castillo and Morgan confirmed the sign system along with Cubs manager Jim Lefebvre (right), shown discussing Olympic baseball in 2008 with President George W. Bush.

At age 26 in 1992, he called pitches from the bench through a secret set of signs often relayed through the catcher, frequently future manager Joe Girardi, for Morgan and Frank Castillo. Morgan had the lowest ERA of his career. Castillo had a decent first full season with a 3.46 ERA. Maddux always denied the sign system, but it was his word against four – Morgan, Castillo, Cubs manager Jim Lefebvre and hitting coach Billy Williams, all of whom admitted the ace's assistance. Morgan even showed off the signs several years later.

Two days after Maddux's election, Morgan -- now a recreation director in Park City, Utah -- confirmed even more information about the Maddux signs. He mentioned starter Shawn Boskie and reliever Bob Scanlan as additional '92 Cubs pitchers who received signals from the bench-bound pitching shaman. But when Morgan was asked if even more members of Lefebvre's pitching staff were helped, he stopped. The old code of the clubhouse kicked in. Suffice to say, every '92 pitching teammate of Maddux surely benefited from his presence and advice, if not actual sequences of pitches.

There was one important difference between Maddux and his fellow pitchers. "You've got to be able to execute the pitches," Morgan said. "Execute pitches" was a term Maddux used often, and was a practice at which he excelled better than anyone else in baseball for many seasons.

Morgan's memory did get more specific with the passage of 21 1/2 years. He recalled getting the signs in his final two starts. The animated Morgan told of hitters repeatedly fouling off his best offerings, unable to be put away. At that point, the magician wearing No. 31 put his two cents in via the signs to help chum "Mike Mo."

Maddux adhered to the code of the clubhouse. He waited until Rick Sutcliffe left as a free agent to assume leadership. When he returned to the Cubs in 2004, he was often seen sitting next to fellow starter Matt Clement to give him primers.

He had a “second sight.” Maddux would watch hitters’ feet like a predatory hawk for their placement or even their very readiness in the box. Outfielder Doug Glanville wondered why Maddux quick-pitched him for strike one. He then realized he hadn’t gotten set in the box, so Maddux took advantage.

“It probably started with (pitching coach) Dick Pole in Double-A,” Maddux said of watching hitters. “I was fortunate enough to have him again in the big leagues (starting in 1988). And being around Rick Sutcliffe. He kind of brought it to my attention as well.

“Hanging a lot around the veteran pitchers, and kind of learning to teach yourself, I think is the big key in that. You’ve got to trust your eyes and trust what you see. You talk to as many guys as you can, including the hitters. Listen to what the hitters say between at-bats, the guys on your team.”

In his mind, never a finished product

Maddux never stopped trying to improve. Even as he rounded into form in the early 1990s, he was not satisfied with his total portfolio. When he asked if he had anything more to work on, he responded, “My stretch mechanics.”

He would soon perfect a nearly unhittable pitch – a running fastball that started out boring in straight at left-handed hitters, then diving over the inside corner for a strike. Master batsman Tony Gwynn, who racked up Maddux early in his career, finally admitted there was not much a hitter could do with that pitch but take it, and hope the next offering was further over the plate.

“I always had that pitch,” Maddux said. “That’s just my normal fastball. I was told you can’t throw that against left-handed hitters. A couple of coaches told me that along the way coming up. It seemed every time I threw that by accident it worked. So I tried to start throwing it on purpose. Being able to cut the ball inside before you throw that pitch kind of sets that pitch up a little bit. It’s going to be effective, but it’ll be a lot more effective if you can cut it in on their hands as well.”

In his escape from the Cubs, Maddux recorded some all-time control feats as a Brave. He walked just 20 in 232 1/3 innings in 1997 and 23 in 209 2/3 innings in 1995. And yet on several occasions, Maddux said it was strategically correct to work around a hitter, or even walk him. Bases on balls were not the ultimate sin – just another way to psychologically overpower hitters.

“One of the things he had was poise under pressure,” Himes said in an understatement on The Score. “(He was) able to always hit the outside corner on the black...inside corner on the black.”

Unfortunately, Himes’ knowledge of that skill did not translate into an intra-office pitch to Cook to keep Maddux under wraps. Petty corporate politics trumped good baseball decisions. Still, that never darkened Maddux’s heart, as he not only returned to the Cubs as a free agent in 2004, but also worked for two years as special assistant to GM Jim Hendry late in 2009.

“I was in Chicago for about 11 years and in Atlanta 11 years,” Maddux said. “I kind of split my time with the two teams. Chicago’s a special place. I would love to see them win a World Series here shortly. It would be awesome.”

It would have been even more awesome with Maddux starting Game 1 of a Fall Classic for the Cubs, just another stop on his way to Cooperstown.