

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## ***Cubs not at odds with history in Avello projection***

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If you're a Cubs fan, you've got to love John Avello.

Since Avello likes Joe Maddon, the Cubs' top management and the sparkling collection of talent already on the roster and still yet to arrive, he gives the star-crossed franchise as good of odds as anyone to win the World Series in 2016 or 2017.

"At the beginning of the year," said Avello, director of racing and sports at Wynn-Las Vegas, "I put up a proposition: Will the Cubs win the World Series in '15, '16 or '17? The odds of them doing that were 6 1/2 to 1. That's all.

"I saw what they had coming back. I saw the manager. I saw the top management. That's going to continue to happen.

"It's pretty good odds. I wouldn't put anybody lower than that. Maybe (before the season) the Nationals or Cards. The Giants because they won three World Series in five years. But anybody else, most teams would have been higher (in odds)."

And after the Cubs embarked on their hottest second-half run in memory, won the wild-card play-in game and the Division Series against the Cardinals before hitting the Mets' brick wall, Avello's odds may tilt even more favorably.

"I'll put up something similar," he said. "Maybe 5 1/2 or 6 to 1 again, but now it's only for two years. That goes to show you the Cubs are in the top 15 to 20 percent of baseball teams now."

Why are we talking to John Avello and why is he breaking down odds every which way involving the Cubs?



**John Avello of Wynn-Las Vegas gives the Cubs as good of odds as any other team to win the World Series the next two seasons.**

## Maddux expedition produces near-infinite odds

Back in January 1993, a particularly low point in Cubs history, I happened to contact Avello, then working at sports-book manager at Bally's in 'Vegas, when I came to town to interview Greg Maddux for the late *Sport Magazine*. Mad Dog had just defected as a free agent to the Braves in the biggest front-office botch job in Cubs history. The patrician Stanton Cook, nearing 70 and long overstaying his welcome at Tribune Co., had simply allowed his home-grown ace of aces – who pitched well enough to win 25 games in 1992 -- to walk out the door. GM Larry Himes, beholden to Cook for his job, was not going to wrest the \$2 million or more out of his sponsor to retain the future 353-game winner and Hall of Famer.

As an aside to chatting with Maddux at his home and being driven back to Bally's by the pitcher and a buddy, I contacted Avello. Maddux's departure after never wanting to leave Chicago in the first place had made the Cubs' bad situation worse, and certainly impacted the team's then-incomprehensible championship drought. The Cubs had gone 47 years without making a World Series. I didn't even compute the lack of a world championship since 1908.

I asked Avello to put himself in this scenario. If he was making book in 1945, after the Cubs had dropped the World Series in seven games to the Detroit Tigers, what would be the odds against the team not making another World Series through 1992?

The idea was hard to compute, both numerically and psychologically.

"It's infinitesimal," Avello said then. "It's got to be a million to one. It would be off the board.

"That's a long time to go without appearing in a World Series. You'd figure a team would have a lot of chances to make a World Series in 47 years."

Maddux himself, just getting used to seven figures as a payout in his Braves deal, did not go as high as Avello in his miss-the-World Series odds when I posed the same question to him. His father, Dave Maddux, had worked in a 'Vegas casino, so numbers were in The Master's training. In his deadpan style, the then-26-year-old Maddux responded, "About 200,000 to 1."

### Apt title for a book

Still, "million to one" stuck in my mind through the rest of the 1990s, until I got a deal with the South Bend, Ind.-based Diamond Communications to write a book looking at the grand sweep of Cubs history over the past half century. I titled the 355-page,



**In 1993, Greg Maddux figured the Cubs had defied 200,000 to 1 odds by not appearing in a World Series since 1945. But those odds' paled to what John Avello had computed.**

155,000-word monster *The Million To One Team: Why The Chicago Cubs Haven't Won a Pennant Since 1945*. Plugging the book on the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that last Fall Classic appearance in October 2000, I explained in a remote pickup from near the Cubs' home dugout to *CBS Early Show* host Jim Nantz in New York why the Cubs were off golfing or starting off-season jobs at this juncture annually.

Three years later, the Cubs would fail to make the World Series leading 3-0 with five outs to go, up 3-2 in Game 6 of the NLCS. No more details are necessary. A 97-win Cubs team that swept through the NL in 2008 was jittery, nervous and totally off-kilter in getting swept three games in a row by the Dodgers in the Division Series. Finally, this year's Cubs, with all the downhill momentum off a 46-19 regular-season finish and four wins in five postseason games in the wild-card play-in contest and the Division Series, simply ground to a halt against the Mets.

Enough time and comparisons had passed to re-visit the helpful Avello. Now director of race and sports at Wynn, he'd be pitched to re-calculate his 1993 numbers when asked what additional odds on the Cubs not making the World Series through 2015. He didn't give me 2 million or 3 million to 1, but he startled me nevertheless.

"Let's start with a fresh year (1994)," he said. "At that time, they're probably 50-1 to get to the World Series, like everybody else. So, 22 seasons to the 50<sup>th</sup> power.

"That's pretty incredible. That's a big number."

We discussed the heavy-day game schedule, Shift Work Disorder (see accompanying feature on the CBM web site), meddling management and the pressure from extending the longest championship drought in sports history. Avello said the Cubs should have beaten the odds at some juncture.

"It's just mind-boggling why they haven't won it," he said. "They have had all kinds of opportunities to win it. There's all kinds of theories why. To me, it's just very unfortunate they haven't had a world championship.

"It's just unfortunate."

In the same breath, though, Cubs teams he has rated highly going forward should not be weighted down by the near-infinity odds. Each year is a clean slate.

"The players and managers who are there now have nothing to do with the previous teams," Avello said. "They know the Cubs haven't won since 1908, but there's not that type of pressure on them. Maybe when you get to the World Series or NLCS. But not in the regular season."

Factored in the good odds for 2016 and 2017 is Maddon. To an oddsmaker, a savvy manager does make a difference. Avello believes the Cubs have just the right man at the helm.

"The Rays were dropped 10 points because Joe Maddon left," he said. "That goes to show you what he's worth."

## **What goes up, must come down, and conversely...**

This historian's oddsmaker's side figured that the longer the Cubs and ace Jake Arrieta were hot from August through the NLDS, the more chances they'd both go cold at the wrong time due to the cycle of baseball. After all, Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak could not keep going on forever. A 50-20 overall record including the postseason was bound to suffer a hiccup. Ditto with Arrieta going 18-1, including two postseason wins, since he was 6-5 after a 6-0 loss to Cleveland on June 16. In the last win of his run against the Cardinals in the NLDS, Arrieta began to show some wear and tear. That was magnified in his loss to the Mets in the NLCS.

"Arrieta did not look comfortable in that game," Avello said.

A similar reversal of fortune took place in 2003 in that infamous Game 6. The Cubs had gone 24-11 overall from September 1 onward, coming from behind to win the NL Central, capturing the NLDS against Maddux and the Braves, and going up 3-1 over the Marlins. Again, the game's cycle projected they were due for a letdown. Again, tough timing.

Conversely, all bad things have to come to end, right?

"If I'm going to look at anything as an oddsmaker, I'm going to look at the positive that it'll turn around," Avello said. "Because I see in my business I see customers not winning games, then go on 10- or 15- game winning streaks. To me, everything turns around at some point. It is all about the timing of when you hit your stride and what time during the year you'll hit it. It's nice to have both of those factors (hot and you're a very good team)."

Good manager, good baseball management, good team. Avello is counting on the fact sooner, rather than later, good fortune will graft itself onto the Cubs to play past Halloween.