

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Cubs' triumph makes million-to-one oddsmaker look good

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These days, John Avello looks almost as good as the Cubs themselves.

The odds maven of Wynn Las Vegas once proclaimed the Cubs had defied million-to-one odds to avoid playing in a World Series between 1945 and 1992. Going forward, Avello suggests the Cubs are a prohibitive favorite to repeat at 3 1/2 -to-one odds in 2017.

In between, however, Avello and the Cubs Universe had to sweat it out. But as with odds themselves, baseball is a numbers game. The Cleveland Indians had to win four games to capture the World Series. They only won three, losing the final three in a row after going up 3-1 and thus making everyone wearing blue feel blue.

The Cubs' 8-7, 10-inning, nails-across-the-blackboard victory in Game 7 made Avello look really good. Impressed with the team's hiring of Joe Maddon late in 2014, Avello offered a 6 1/2-to-one prop bet that the Cubs would win the World Series in 2015, 2016 or 2017. Those were by far the lowest odds any prognosticator had assigned the Cubs before they amassed a winning season under the Theo Epstein regime.

So here is Avello, proved right with his very early confidence. However, not without his favored manager putting the entire scenario in jeopardy with his panicky handling of pitching the further the World Series proceeded

"Joe Maddon made two mistakes a couple of games in a row," said a now-composed Avello. "When you're as good a manager as he is, you're going to make some mistakes now and then. It all turned out well."

Avello had confidence in Maddon and the Cubs, but was prepared to see some of the oddball things that have enveloped the franchise in the million-to-one era. Odd, as in positive, not as in Sweet Lou's playoffs-killing Cubby Occurrences.



John Avello's odds for the Cubs to repeat are far, far lower than his computation of the Cubs avoiding a World Series from 1945 to 2016.

Turns out in Avello's view Epstein put even more of his old Red Sox stamp on the Cubs.

"My boss is a Cubs fan," Avello said. "I told him a month before if the Cubs win it, they'd do it in unorthodox fashion. They were in jeopardy down 3-1 in the World Series. But they won it. That's how the Red Sox won it. They were down 0-3 to the Yankees (in the 2004 ALCS), came back to win the series, and then won four in a row (against the Cardinals in the World Series)."

Along the way, Avellos said the Cubs needed the good breaks they did not get in the 1984, 2003 and 2008 postseasons.

"They got them this year, but not in the past," he said. "I never saw the (Kyle) Schwarber thing coming. Ben Zobrist is the ultimate professional. The local kid (Vegas product Kris Bryant) comes up big."

On a hunch, I had originally sought out Avello over a chilly weekend in Jan. 1993 while in Vegas to interview Greg Maddux, just after his free-agent defection from the Cubs, for the old Sport Magazine. The Cubs' then-endless walk in the postseason wilderness seemed illogical even then. So I asked Avello, "If you were setting odds in 1945, what would the odds be for the Cubs not to appear in another World Series through 1992?"

Avello's response: the odds would be off the books, almost infinitesimal...they'd be "a million-to-one." Certainly the bungling of Maddux's new contract a year earlier by the in-over-their-heads Stan Cook and hired-gun attorney Dennis Homerin played into the ridiculous numbers. I used "million-to-one" in the title of my 2000 book on the half century of foibles by Cubs ownership and front-office management.

The Cubs went on to play 23 more seasons through 2015 without making a World Series. Meanwhile, 12 of the 14 expansion teams entering MLB from 1961 to 1998 played in at least one World Series. Four of the newbie teams won two World Series.

The Cubs reached the postseason five more times between 1998 and 2015. In 2003, 2007 and 2008, they lost nine consecutive postseason games after being five outs away from reaching the World Series in Game 6 of the '03 NLCS. Yet so many other teams did not have their own versions of Cubbie Occurrences.

So had the odds inflated to 2 million-to-one when the Cubs stepped onto Progressive Field for the first time in 2016?

"No," said Avello."It would have probably been another 30 percent."

But when you get to such crazy figures, what's the difference in rating it 1.3 million-to-one?

The odds have come way, way down in the new championship era. Avello's early line for 2017 is 3 1/2-to-one. He could go down to 3-to-1. Cubs fans used to laying down



A team needs a number of breaks to win it all. John Avello never could forecast Kyle Schwarber's World Series appearance as one of those breaks.

good bread each pre-season may not want to bet as in past years. The potential return will be an all-time low.

And, if you look at the new era objectively, it is a good thing.

“I like the way it ended for them,” said Avello. “They’re in good shape. They’re really the team to beat.”