



## ***They print ‘Wild Thing’ legend – but Williams loaded the bases with hits in ‘89 Cubs opener***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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In an explanatory scene from John Ford’s “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance,” a pundit explained why James Stewart’s acclaimed title feat, which he didn’t do, was firmly entrenched in history.

Paraphrasing, the fellow said when faced with writing about facts or the legend, “print the legend.”

And so it was also with Mitch Williams in his Cubs debut on Opening Day, Tuesday, April 4, 1989 at Wrigley Field.



**Succeeding his former status as a dramatic ninth-inning pitcher, Mitch Williams now can hold an audience with his baseball storytelling.**

The grand entrance for lefty Williams “Wild Thing” act as closer by now features him walking the bases loaded, then striking out the side, in the ninth inning of the Cubs’ 5-4 victory over the Phillies. The walk on the wild side, then the trio of whiffs, simply comes off as more stylish and dramatic.

But through the decades, baseball events not only get embellished, they also somehow merge with other dramatic happenings. In this instance, Williams and Sam Jones’ ninth-inning escape acts, both against Pennsylvania teams, tend to blend together in the minds of too many Cubs’ fans.

On May 12, 1955, also at Wrigley Field, curveball specialist Jones did walk three Pirates in a row starting off the ninth while he had a no-hitter going. Jones, first African-American pitcher in Cubs history, passed Gene Freese, Preston Ward and Tom Saffel to load ‘em up for Dick Groat.

Cubs manager Stan Hack visited the mound. Jones then bit down on his trademark toothpick to catch Groat looking, rookie Roberto Clemente swinging and (the other) Frank Thomas looking for the first Cubs no-hitter in Wrigley Field since 1917.

### **Hits by Dernier, Herr, Hayes**

Like the 360-foot homer that inflates to 430 feet over the decades, and blending in with Jones’ high-wire routine, the walks Williams supposedly issued really were transformed in memory from three softly-hit singles by Bob Dernier, Tommy Herr and Von Hayes to load the bases.

Williams then did Jones two better in power, getting future Hall of Famer Mike Schmidt, Chris James (on a 3-2 pitch) and Mark Ryal all swinging for the first of 36 saves that helped the youthful, surprising “Boys of Zimmer” Cubs win the NL East title.



**Mitch Williams (left) and former White Sox outfielder John Cangelosi flank a decades-long Cubs fan: Mayor Joe Stahura of Whiting, Ind.**

Also lost in the historical mists were Williams’ equally “Wild Thing” entrance in that game – and not in the ninth. He was actually summoned by manager Don Zimmer with one out, none on and one run in, relieving Calvin Schiraldi, during the top of the eighth.

Williams walked Dickie Thon, balked him to second, and walked Ricky Jordan. Preparing for his date with history, he retired Steve Lake on fly ball to end the threat.

Williams’ catcher? Joe Girardi, as under-control of a man as existed in the majors, in his first big-league game, 17 years before he won the NL Manager of the Year Award.

“When you have the nickname ‘Wild Thing,’ everybody thinks that,” said Williams, a glib storyteller in his recent gig as guest speaker at the Pitch and Hit Club’s 68<sup>th</sup> annual banquet. He gets paid to do what he does, and not just at baseball events. Williams is a baseball analyst for MLB Network and Fox Sports.

“I did walk the bases loaded and struck out the side – it just didn’t happen on that day,” he said.

Twenty-five years have flown by like nothing. Typical of the colorful Williams – at 49 he still thinks he could get some lefty hitters out.

Like Babe Ruth with his “called shot” at Wrigley Field, Williams will play along with his legend. Starting with that base runners-filled 1 2/3-inning stint and fast-forwarding to Sept. 26, 1989 when he saved Greg Maddux’s 19<sup>th</sup> win that enabled the Cubs to clinch the NL East in Montreal, Williams cherished his abbreviated time in Chicago.

“I loved my time here,” he said. “The Cubs fans were unbelievable. They showed up every day. It’s a great town.

“When I first got traded, I felt ‘This ain’t going to be good.’ No. 1, my ERA in the American League (as a Texas Ranger) was over a run higher in the daytime than at night. I felt, ‘Oh, great, I’m going to (majority) day games. Then I’m going to a park that’s not built for all fly-ball pitchers.’”

### **Wild Thing, Popeye hit it off**

One of the keys to Williams’ success was a man not known for his prowess in handling pitchers. The lefty took a liking to Zimmer, and the feeling apparently was mutual from Popeye – unlike Williams’ eventual falling out with Jim Frey, the Cubs’ general manager and Zimmer childhood buddy in Cincinnati.

“The bottom line was ‘Zim’ gave me the ball and let me do my thing,” Williams said. “He saw I was going to get into trouble, but I was my own best chance of getting out of it. So he would leave me in longer than a lot of managers would in those situations.



**Mitch Williams was his own man at the Pitch and Hit Club Banquet. He changed from one pair of casual clothes worn on the flight from Philadelphia to his dinner "attire" pictured here.**

“I had my best year statistically that year. Not as far as strikeouts. But I never had that many save opportunities.”

So what was rattling around in Williams mind and body when he'd make Zimmer, Frey, Harry Caray and Cubs World nervous by putting men on base, then working his way out of the jam? He did it almost every game, with 52 walks and 71 hits given up in 81 1/3 innings for a mediocre 1.506 WHIP (walks-and hits-to-innings pitched).

“My bullpen coach in Philadelphia, Mike Ryan, said ‘Anyone who thinks Mitch Williams is wild doesn’t know the game,’” he said. “I didn’t have a real great secondary pitch my first few years. So if I knew there was a guy at the plate who could beat me or catch up to my fastball, he was going to swing at balls or he was going to walk.

“In the ninth inning, if you throw strike one, all you had to do is stay out of the strike zone, because every hitter wants to be the hero. If I had a guy at the plate that I knew could catch up, I was going to stay out of his nitro zone. The guy on deck, if I knew I could get him out, the guy at the plate wasn’t going to get anything to hit.”

Possessing such a philosophy, Williams was almost a kindred soul of Cubs teammate Maddux. Although they were at near-opposite ends of their masteries of control, Maddux also believed an occasional walk and pitching around some hitters to get at another batsman were strategically sound.

Williams developed his fearless athletic traits early on. In high school he wrestled, bowled and played quarterback, able to heave the ball 75 to 80 yards on the fly.

### **Gossage like a linebacker**

“It always was my favorite sport,” he said of football. “Goose (Gossage) was my idol. I wasn’t a real fan of baseball growing up. I loved to play it. Gossage was a guy when he took the ball and I looked at him and said, ‘That’s a linebacker standing out there on the mound with his mentality.’

“That’s how I approached every inning. I was going to throw it as hard as I could every single time and see what happens.”

Williams did have one wrinkle from his hardball wanderlust image – a crafty pickoff move.

“I always paid attention to who was on first and who was on second,” he said. “I never cared about third. I had a good pickoff move to first and second. Anytime I had a chance to get an out without a guy standing there with a bat in his hand, I took it.

“I never considered myself in a jam.”

Williams actually was the end result of Frey's year-long quest to plug up the gaping hole left by the Lee Smith trade to Boston at the 1987 winter meetings.

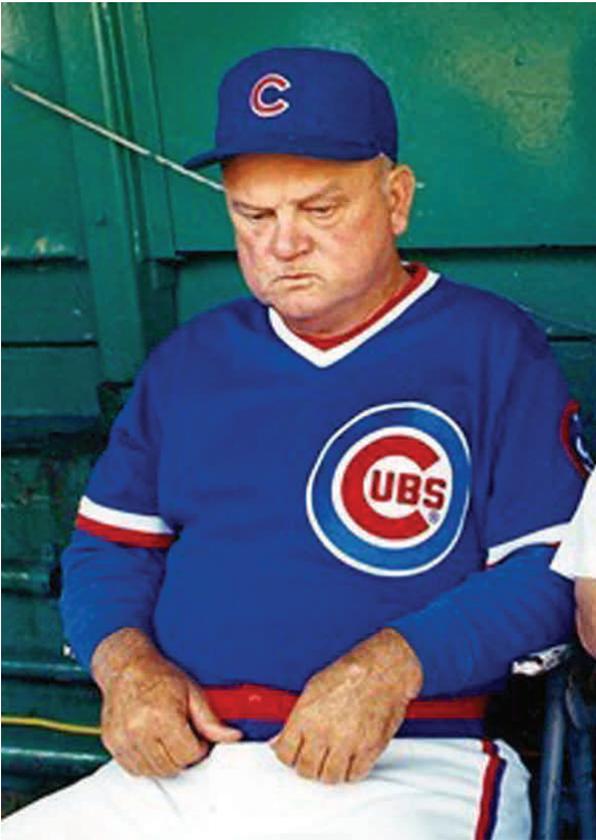
Growing to dislike Smith as a Cubs radio color analyst when the closer was in frequently foul moods in the '87 season, Frey quickly dispatched Smith to the Red Sox in a half hour, according to the late Cubs scouting guru Gordon Goldsberry. Interestingly Frey

later admitted one of his drawbacks was acting too hastily at times in player moves.

The Cubs received what appeared to be the first two players Boston GM Lou Gorman offered for Smith in return – Schiraldi and mediocre starter Al Nipper. Frey declined to hold Smith out in a baseball-wide auction when contenders like the Los Angeles Dodgers apparently craved his services.

Hard thrower Schiraldi was first projected as Smith's successor. But then Frey was told Schiraldi had been sweating bullets in 37-degree chill in tight spots in the 1986 World Series. He then traded Keith Moreland to the San Diego Padres for Gossage just before spring training 1988.

The move did not work out. Gossage was past his prime as a closer. His failures spun him out of favor with Zimmer as the Goose totaled just 13 saves for the 1988 Cubs.



**Cubs manager Don Zimmer came to rely on – and like – Mitch Williams in the memorable 1989 season.**

### **Relief woes lead to Williams trade**

So Frey had to go out on the market again after the season. This time he traded Rafael Palmeiro, fresh off a .308, 40-double first full season as a Cub, and lefty Jamie Moyer – also out of favor with Zimmer – in a big deal with the Rangers that netted Williams and lefty Steve Wilson. Gossage was cut by the Cubs near the end of spring training 1989 after initially projected as a setup man for Williams.

Palmeiro did not produce the power for which Frey hungered. Fifteen years later, he recalled of dispatching Palmeiro, “I wanted someone who could hit the (bleep) out of the ball.”

Palmeiro developed power four years after the deal. PED suspicions notwithstanding, he seemed legitimate for at least part of his 569-homer career. The Rangers got the best of the Williams deal long-term. But for 1989, it meant the world for the Cubs.

“I think Zim said it best,” Williams said. “There were a lot of questions about why you would trade Rafael Palmeiro. After we clinched in Montreal, Zim said if we had Rafael Palmeiro on this team instead of Mitch Williams, we wouldn’t have just won the East.”

Young-veteran Williams, along with old hands Andre Dawson and Ryne Sandberg, proved to be the veteran glue for a Cubs team that hadn’t had as many home-grown position players at the same time since the early 1960s. When Maddux started on the mound, the Cubs had six organization-developed performers in the lineup with Mark Grace at first, Shawon Dunston at short, NL rookie of the year Jerome Walton in center, rookie runner-up Dwight Smith in left and the catching combo of Girardi and Rick Wrona behind the plate.

Williams’ 1990 Cubs season was semi-ineffective due to a knee injury. He and Frey had a gradual falling out. But he thought he was set for his third Cubs season in 1991. Williams moved into his Chicago apartment. He sat down to dinner on the night of April 7, with the home opener two days away.

Then Frey called with the news Williams was traded to the Philadelphia Phillies for relievers Chuck McElroy and Bob Scanlan. An angry Williams bade his final farewell to Frey, collected his belongings at Wrigley Field early the next morning and hustled onto a flight to New York. He made it to Shea Stadium shortly before the first pitch and actually pitched 1/3 of an inning that afternoon.

Williams actually racked up a superb 43-save campaign for the Jim Fregosi-managed Phillies’ World Series team in 1993. But the dream season came to a crashing end in Game 6 when he served up ex-Cub Joe Carter’s Fall Classic-winning walkoff homer. Williams could handle the brickbats and blame from the tough Philly fans afterward a lot better than the winter-meetings trade to the Astros for future (brief) Cubs closer Doug Jones and Jeff Juden.



**Mitch Williams will be the first to tell you he'd never have expected to go into sportscasting years after he retired from baseball. Photo credit: [Melody Joy Kramer](#).**

## **Disenchantment with game as a business**

“That’s when the game became a business to me,” Williams said. “Mentally I was never the same after that. I never cared about the game as I did. I just had the best year (in saves) of my life and played on the best team I was a part of, and got traded. Mentally it wasn’t a game anymore. So I wasn’t having fun.”

A seven-game stint with the Kansas City Royals ended wrapped up Williams’ career. He dabbled in business in suburban New Jersey, near Philadelphia, before stumbling on his new calling.

“I did one 90-minute sports-talk show in Philadelphia, walked off the set and they offered me the pre- and post-game job for the Phillies,” he said. “That’s how simple it was.”

Williams eventually moved on to the MLB Network as a studio analyst. He also works about a dozen Saturdays as analyst on the Fox Game of the Week.

“I don’t try to dig into numbers,” he said. “I’m not a sabermetric guy. I talk about what I see. I know the game of baseball. I know how it works. I know the ins and outs of it. I’m trying to tell people at home things that aren’t obvious.

“I’m still close to the players. It’s poor journalism (if you don’t talk to players). The broadcasters I really despised were former players who would point mistakes out as if they never made it, and forget how hard the game is to play. I never wanted to be one of those guys. There’s certain times when you can question their thought process, but you don’t rip a guy for what he did.

“The pitch to Joe Carter was supposed to be a fastball up and away. I jerked it down and in. That’s a mistake. My thought process was right, my execution was wrong.”

Typical of Williams, he wants to be one of a kind on the air. He has no broadcast role models.

“I want to be just who I am, and be a guy who’s honest and not be condescending to the fans,” he said. “I want to explain the inside part of the game they don’t know. When you point out the blatantly obvious, you’re making the fans feel stupid like they don’t already know that.”

## **Character buildup needed for Cubs**

As an analyst with experience in Wrigley Field and negative close encounters with a failed GM like Frey, Williams had to be posed a money question: What has held back the Cubs from consistently contending?

“It’s talent, a mixture of veteran talent and youthful talent,” Williams said. “What you have to have is guys who know character. You have to be able to evaluate talent. But to go along with that talent, you’re not just buying the ability. You’re buying the character of the guy who comes with that ability.”

Williams endorsed the Atlanta Braves’ decades-long practice of putting character almost on an equal plane with ability, tolerating no bad apples in the clubhouse.

“Nine times out of ten, when you take the best there is, they’ve had smoke blown up their (butts) all their lives,” he said. “It’s like Stephen Strasburg. You don’t judge a guy on what he did in college or what he did in the minor leagues. You judge him by the first time a guy takes a 98 mph fastball on the black and hits it into the seats. How does he react then?”

So how much luck and good fortune will be needed for the Cubs?

“It’s going to be difficult, no question about it,” Williams said. “They’re going to have to be willing to spend money. And if Chicago fans are going to put up with losing for three or four years to get better draft picks, that’s what it’s gotta be. It’s always a risk. At some point, you have to start spending money.”