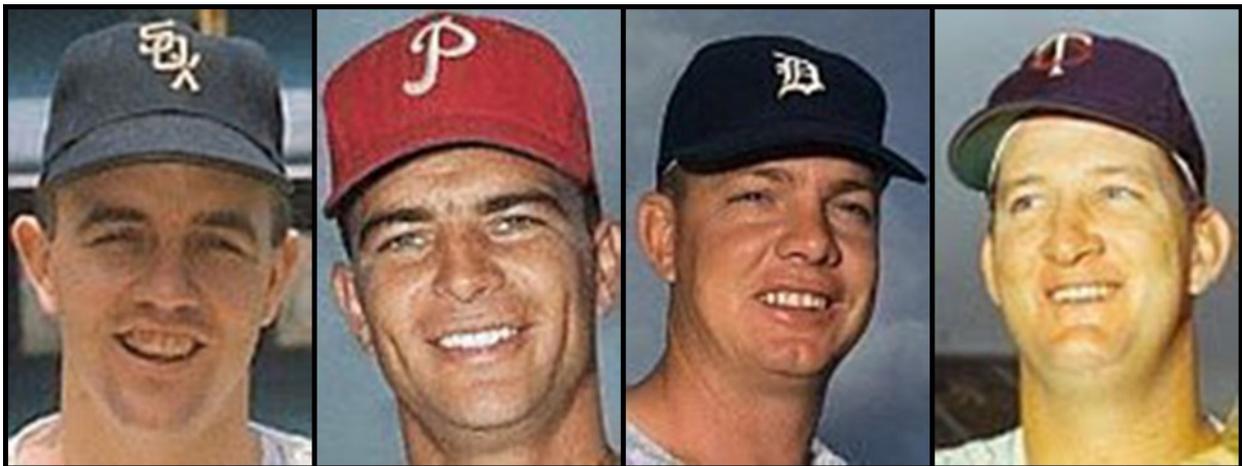


BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

'64 Sox, '70 Cubs lead roster of near-misses

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Pete Ward (far left) could have been complemented by any one of (from left) Johnny Callison, Norm Cash and Don Mincher to win the 1964 pennant for the Sox. But the latter three had been traded away in deals that killed the Sox.

The Cubs are more likely than not playoff-bound, unless a late-season Cardinals surge totally shocks them and puts past collapses to shame.

The White Sox are among the game's disappointments, frittering away a 23-10 start and dropping far out of the wild-card race before the July 31 trade deadline.

So fans of both teams can gear themselves mentally for different viewpoints in the last third of the 2016. Happiness on the North Side, abject discontent on the South Side.

At least the rooters know where they stand. But when their teams appear locked and loaded to win, and just missed the postseason, many of the fans needed counseling. The sense of disappointment, even betrayal, was keen.

Popular belief states the 1967 Sox and 1969 Cubs are the top near-misses in history. But both teams merely generated the most publicity in the spotlight.

We'll pick out two representatives from the post-World War II era that led the pack in disappointment. The 1964 Sox won 98 games, yet finished second in the then 10-team American League. Meanwhile, by a Bill James measuring stick, the 1970 Cubs should have won 94 games and won the NL East by five games. Instead, they won just 84 and were runner-up to the 89-win Pittsburgh Pirates.

Outfielder Johnny Callison had interesting connections to both teams.

Here's a look at the near-misses:

1964 White Sox

The Al Lopez-managed team was the best of the bevy of runner-ups to the New York Yankees and Cleveland Indians in the "Go-Go Sox" era that lasted from 1951 to 1967. They were brought together three decades too soon to take advantage of the wild-card system that enables second- or even-third place prodigious winners to still have an avenue to reach the postseason. See the 2015 Cubs for a team that benefitted as such.

On Sept. 16, 1964, the Sox were tied for first with the Baltimore Orioles. Each had 88-61 records. The dynastic Yankees, who were showing their age throughout the '64 season, were ½ game back. All three teams had played tag around the top all year. But from this point forward, the Yogi Berra-managed Bombers astoundingly won 11 in a row.

That was simply the Sox's bad luck. In 1959, they had taken advantage of an uncommon "off" season by the Yankees to win their first pennant in 40 years. During the "Go-Go" years, the Sox commonly won in the high-80s to low-90s range, but still weren't good enough to overhaul the Yankees. The Indians were the only other team to push aside the Yankees, and it took an out-of-the-blue 111-victory season in 1954. Interestingly, the Indians were swept four in a row by the Willie Mays-led Giants in a World Series in which Jack Brickhouse had the play-by-play call of Mays' fantastic catch against Vic Wertz.

The frustration only heightened for the '64 Sox when they won their final nine in a row to finish just one game out. But the overall timing was horrible. They lost three of four from Sept. 18 to 22, falling four behind as the Yankees' streak commenced. The 98 victories were the most of any "Go-Go" Sox team. The frustration spilled over into 1965. The Sox won 95, but finished second, seven behind the AL champion Minnesota Twins.

As usual, the Sox rotation was just about the best in the AL. Lefties Gary Peters and Juan Pizarro won 20 and 19, respectively. Right-hander Joel Horlen was 13-9, but had a stingy 1.88 ERA. Knuckeballer Hoyt Wilhelm had 12 wins, 27 saves and a 1.99 ERA as baseball's most dominant closer.

And, typically, an under-powered Sox lineup sabotaged some of the pitchers' best efforts. Third baseman Pete Ward was the only legit run producer with 23 homers and 94 RBIs. The Sox landed ex-Yankee Moose Skowron to play first, but the Chicago native slugged just four homers in 73 games. Floyd Robinson's .301 (.388 on-base percentage) season in left field was accompanied by just 11 homers and 59 RBIs.

"We felt that we were going to win it," said Ward. "We were right there to the end. We certainly had respect for the Yankees who had great players, but we thought we could play as well. It was a lot of fun going out to the ballpark every day under those circumstances. When we wound up a game short, that really hurt."

The '64 (and by extension, '65 and '67) Sox suffered the most due to the post-1959 trades that dispatched all the offense that could have easily put them over the top against the Yankees. Home-grown young hitters like Callison, Earl Battey, Don Mincher, Norm Cash and John Romano had all been traded in Bill Veeck's attempt to repeat the '59 pennant.

In 1964, the above quintet combined for 110 homers for the Twins, Detroit Tigers and Philadelphia Phillies. Callison had his best season with 31 homers and 104 RBIs. Many Sox veterans – led by the late Billy Pierce (who played for the first 11 seasons of the "Go-Go" era) – of those times had long proclaimed they just needed one more run producer in the lineup to win the pennant. One can see a trade of two or even three prospects. But all five prime young batsmen being dispatched around the same time proved fatal to the Sox for much of the next decade.

First runner-up to the runner-up: 2006 Sox. Should have made the postseason two years in a row. A 57-31 record at the All-Star break should have been a springboard. But the team lost steam in the stretch to finish 90-72.

Second runner-up to the runner-up: 1967 Sox. A pitching staff (2.45 team ERA) arguably better than the Koufax-Drysdale Dodgers went totally to waste. With an entire unproductive lineup – Ward was RBI leader with 62 – the Sox had no finishing kick after holding onto first place into early August. Thus a shocking sweep by the lowly Athletics of a double-header in Kansas City near season's end should not have been crippling.

1970 Cubs

The follow-up version of the famed '69 Cubs should have been the team to finally break the post-1945 World Series drought. But this team's nuances prove that James-led analytics sometimes are inaccurate.

The Pythagorean number for the Cubs had them winning 10 more games than their actual record. And if the little things had been right for the team, they indeed would have won 94. But sabermetricians don't take into account things like a bad bullpen, inability to manufacture runs in the late innings, the related issue of lack of speed, and an increasingly senile manager.

The '70 Cubs had all these drawbacks. They drew the inflated Pythagorean number because of their impressive run differential -806 to 679. The power-laden team could absolutely bludgeon opponents to death in blowouts, then lose a frustrating one-run game the next day.

Leo Durocher's lineup amassed 20 games in which they scored double digits in runs. They were 33-17 in blowout games, in which they won by five or more runs. Yet they were just 17-21 in one-run games and 4-6 in extra-inning games.

The numbers often provided conflicting conclusions. Billy Williams enjoyed his greatest-ever season: 42 homers, 129 RBIs, 137 runs scored and a .322 average (near .340 early in September). Jim Hickman, profiled frequently on this site, had his dream clutch season with 32 homers, 115 RBIs, a .315 average and a .419 OBP. Despite a mediocre first half and conflicts with



(From left) Billy Williams, Jim Hickman and Ron Santo each had 114 RBIs or more, but the little things and poor managing by Leo Durocher did in the 1970 Cubs.

Durocher over being dropped to No. 7 in the lineup, Ron Santo had 26 homers and 114 RBIs. Callison, acquired in the off-season in what turned out to be an unnecessary trade, added 19 homers.

But the Cubs were slow, stealing just 39 bases. Durocher used first-base types Hickman, then late-July acquisition Joe Pepitone, in center field. Even second baseman Glenn Beckert, no speed demon, made a start in center. If the Cubs had to push three singles together in the ninth inning, they were eminently incapable.

The Phil Regan-led bullpen was so unreliable Durocher allowed his starters to complete 59 games. When Milt Pappas was acquired in a mid-July deal, the Cubs had a fine Big 4 with Fergie Jenkins (22-16 after a 3-7 start), Bill Hands (18 wins) and Ken Holtzman (second consecutive 17-win season). But Regan, overworked by Durocher after being acquired with Hickman from the Dodgers early in 1968, finally crumbled for good

as a reliable ninth-inning man. The sinkerballer-spitballer, never a strikeout pitcher, was 4-1 with 10 saves near mid-season; he finished 5-9 with 12 saves and a 4.76 ERA with a WHIP near 1.50. A series of late-inning homers off Regan (hello, Bill Sudakis) hurt the Cubs in the second half.

This team got off to a 35-25 start. For no good reason other than maybe angering the baseball gods, they then lost 12 in a row as Durocher had to give up his nightly talk show on WIND-Radio. They never got a full head of steam going in the second half. Just one game out after the Pittsburgh Pirates' Matty Alou dropped a routine fly ball with two out in the ninth to trigger an impossible Cubs home win on Sept. 13, the team did not have another hot streak left, going 6-8 before the not-so-prime-time Pirates eliminated them with three games to go.

First runner-up to the runner-up: 2004 Cubs. Up 1 1/2 games in the wild-card race with one week to go, the Cubs miserably flopped in a final homestand, capping a dissension-filled last two months in which players were at odds with broadcasters Chip Caray and Steve Stone. On paper, the Cubs had far better talent than the 2003 team that fell short five outs from the World Series. But as with 1970, little things added up negatively.

Second runner-up to the runner-up: 1973 Cubs. An easy NL East title was somehow avoided when the Cubs, 50-35 and in first place in early July, collapsed spectacularly over the next six weeks. The aging, offensively-challenged team could have played a lousy 10 games under .500 from their season high point and still won the division. But they far underwhelmed even this potentially modest achievement with a 77-84 finish, allowing the New York Mets to finish first with a then-record-worst 82-77 record.