



## ***Keeping Cubs sharp for NLDS is key to World Series victory quest***

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Posted Wednesday, September 28, 2016*

How can Joe Maddon strike a balance between resting his players and keeping them sharp – physically and mentally – so they can go into the National League Division Series on a high?

To get the answers, we queried another capable manager type – Jim Riggleman -- who probably could have done as well as Maddon if he had the talent back in the 1990s. We also checked with Ed Hearn, the backup catcher on the wildly dominant, swaggering 1986 New York Mets, which won 108 games and yet still needed the good luck of a ball slithering through Bill Buckner's legs to win the World Series.

After the Cubs completed their last significant regular-season series of the year against the arch-rival St. Louis Cardinals, Maddon had the equivalent of the end of spring training with seven games against the out-of-it Pittsburgh Pirates and Cincinnati Reds. Then the Cubs had four games off until the Division Series began against the winner of the wild-card game.

History hangs heavy here, and it has nothing to do with the Cubs' longest championship drought in pro sports. The five-game Division Series killed their last two postseason forays. Particularly egregious was the 2008 three-game sweep at the hands of the hot, Manny Ramirez-led Los Angeles Dodgers. The humiliation was so thorough, the pratfall so big due to nervous, jittery Cubs regulars that their regular-season accomplishment of 97 victories might as well not have taken place.

The sudden collapse was so stunning manager Lou Piniella later second-guessed himself, admitting he should have done more to take the pressure off his team.



**Jim Riggleman believes three at-bats daily for Cubs regulars will keep them sharp through most of the final week.**

But the '08 Cubs weren't alone in being swallowed up by the quick-momentum Division Series. No wonder many advocate the playoff round be expanded to a more level playing-field seven games. The LDS is literally a 100-win team killer. Remember the Moneyball Oakland A's of a young Billy Beane? They lost the ALDS four consecutive seasons from 2000 to 2003. In 2001 and 2002, the A's won 102 and 103 regular-season games, respectively. The '02 A's even won an astounding 20 in a row starting in August. None of it mattered when Oakland could not come through when it really counted.

Riggleman, who has watched the Cubs all season as Reds bench coach, suggests Madson will play his regulars just enough to retain their rhythm.

"I think they would play their guys and get them three at-bats, and then get them out of there," said Riggleman, whose five seasons piloting the Cubs from 1995-99 still is the longest managerial tenure since Leo Durocher.

"Or maybe give the regulars two days off of the last seven," he added. "You do not want to get anyone hurt on (the final) Saturday with four days off (after the season). The last weekend, my thoughts would play regular guys and get them out of there after three at-bats."

The historical track record does not suggest Riggleman's 1998 Cubs had any momentum going into their wild-card play-in game against the Giants on Sept. 28 at Wrigley Field.

After achieving a season-high 20 games over .500 at 87-67 with more than a week to go, the Cubs lost six of their last eight. Included was the infamous Brant Brown-dropped-fly game in Milwaukee. Chicago was on the outside looking in for the postseason until getting help from the Rockies via future Cub Neifi Perez's walkoff homer on the season's final game against the Giants.

Then, the Cubs got an effectively-wild starting performance from Steve Trachsel and a clutch homer from late-season sparkplug Gary Gaetti to beat the Giants. They had nothing left against a superior Braves team, which swept them three in a row in the NLDS.

There is no similar kind of "stress run" for the 2016 Cubs. They cannot do anything about the gap between the season's final game and the first NLDS contest, except playing some kind of simulated game (s).

"During the course of (the final) week, maybe you poll players if you want to fly in some Instructional League pitchers to work simulated games, or throw BP," Riggleman said. "Four days is long way to go, playing on Sunday and then not again 'til Friday like an All-Star break."

A manager and coaches can do so much. In the end, it's up to the players to provide the right framework and mental preparedness after having little to play for.

Hearn should know. The '86 Mets under manager Davey Johnson zoomed to a 10-game lead in the NL East by mid-June. They lead by as many as 22 games in mid-September. But they did not take their foot off the gas. The Mets won their final five regular-season games in a row in October.



**Ed Hearn said the players have the main responsibility to stay mentally sharp for the postseason.**

“Obviously the Cubs have a tremendous amount of talent,” said Hearn, who now gives motivational talks in the Kansas City area. “But talent alone is insufficient. It’s the intangibles.”

“I don’t see it being a manager’s job. It falls to the players. It comes back to a pride thing. When it comes to playoffs, it starts out with o-o. It’s the pride and respect for the team. If you have respect and responsibility, you have responsibility to turn it on.”

Are you listening, Anthony Rizzo? Sounds like the Cubs regular who has shown the most leadership potential while laying out his body playing defense at first base could do worse than emulating the cagey Keith Hernandez, perhaps the best defensive first baseman in modern times.

“Keith was very instrumental to guide the team into a more competitive mode,” Hearn said. “He was a tremendous leader. We’re flying into Houston in the playoffs. As the plane is about to touch down, Keith gets on the PA and says, ‘We’re here, We’re BACK!!!’ It was really a cool thing.”

Meanwhile, where Jake Arrieta belonged in the playoff rotation became an issue as he pitched sometimes like a third or fourth starter in the second half. Arrieta walked more hitters than usual and served up some ill-timed homers. He was not the invincible, better-than-Bob Gibson master of the second half of 2015. A seven-inning shutout performance against the Cardinals in the final home weekend restored some of that old mojo.

To Rigglesman, Arrieta can still place his reputation in the minds of foes, which is part of the way to winning the start.

“To the opposition, it’s still Arrieta,” Rigglesman said. “They’ll say, ‘Oh, boy, this is going to be some kind of challenge.’ He had a great second half of last year and first half this year. Jake will be fine.”

The manager can be a factor if a team gets into a jam in the postseason. The '86 Mets went down 2-0 to the Red Sox. Johnson told his team to simply stay away from the ballpark on a workout day.

“Davey made tremendous move,” Hearn said. “He said don’t go to the ballpark. Just blow it off and relax.”

The difference is the Mets had a full seven games to recover. And that included the infamous Mookie Wilson grounder between Buckner’s legs in Game 6 that prevented Boston from knocking out the superior team. That was the only break the Mets needed to force a Game 7 and win the Fall Classic.

The bottom-line answer: Do not fall behind 2-0 at home in the NLDS. Teams have come back to win three in a row – against the odds. How the Cubs re-start their season-long momentum after the better part of two weeks of meaningless games and enforced idleness will go a long way to determining if it all stops at 108 years.

### ***Riggleman endorses Maddon's BP ban, shorter clubhouse hours***

By nature Jim Riggleman is more conservative and traditional than Joe Maddon, the closest thing baseball has to an avante-garde manager.

But as a veteran of managing four teams, Riggleman sees plenty of merit in Maddon's twin programs of canceling mandatory batting practice through much of the second halves of 2015 and 2016, along with discouraging players from arriving many hours early for games.

Gaining more rest and avoiding shift-work disorder for the Cubs with their intractable, still-heavily daytime home schedule has been the greatest benefit so far. The 2015 Cubs had a 50-20 stretch from late July through the NLDS victory over the Cardinals. This year's team was 42-16 in the two-month period from July 27 to Sept. 27.

"It probably would have been radical," Riggleman said of the concept of cutting out batting practice under traditional-thinking Cubs president Andy MacPhail in the 1990s. The Cubs also did not have an indoor cage adjacent to the refurbished clubhouse, as was constructed this year in the space vacated by the cramped predecessor locker room.

"But Joe's got tremendous security (with a five-year contract)," Riggleman added. "He has a track record of success. His post-season appearances kind of validate what he does.

"Many, many people feel daily BP on the field is overrated. Joe, with his security, allows him not to do it. If you're a last-place club and the manager is not secure with his contract, you can't really do it."

A team has to be playing well in the first place to cancel BP.

"Ground balls have to be taken and fly balls need to be read," Riggleman said of the daily routine. "You need your regulars to be playing well defensively to (cancel BP)."



**Joe Maddon has backers for his policy of canceling batting practice and discouraging early arrivals in the clubhouse.**

Maddon also went to the great length of locking the clubhouse doors until late morning for a 3 p.m. Saturday game to prevent players from arriving too early in the morning. Rigglesman again viewed the move as meritorious.

“Clubhouses in years past through late 1990s were not the most comfortable in the world,” he said. “There were very few TVs, and you didn’t have the food or the (well-equipped and spacious) weight rooms. Now the clubhouses are nicer than your apartments. It’s oriented toward getting there early.

“We put in a long day as it is. Under their breath, the (clubhouse attendants) are pretty disgusted how early everyone gets there. They’re babysitting players and coaches. It’s an extremely long day for them after staying after the game doing laundry ‘til 2 a.m. Some players go to the park at 11 a.m. for a night game instead of going out for a nice meal at noon.

“If Cubs are coming in at 3 p.m. and doing their video work, and they’re in first place, maybe it says something about all this early stuff that’s going on, that it’s really not necessary.”

Rigglesman also has years of experience in player development when he was not working as a manager and big-league coach. He worked in administrative jobs in the perennially productive Cardinals farm system. Given the changes in the game, he is not surprised the Cubs have platoons of young players producing quickly and not suffering years of struggles.

“It doesn’t take as long in today’s world as it used to,” he said of the development process. “Back in the 1970s if a team was stuck below .500, they were probably going to be there for a few years. You can turn things around quicker now.

“We started our rebuild in ’15 by moving (Johnny) Queto, (Mike) Leake, (Mat) Latos and (Todd) Frazier, “We felt the pain in the first half, but we played .500 in the second half. Continue that pace and add to it, with two wild cards, you’re not that far from the playoffs.”

The trick is competing with good, young talent. The alternative is almost unthinkable.

“The flip side is, when you’re good and grow old as a team, it can fall apart quickly on you,” Rigglesman said of the Phillies’ former predicament. “As you watch Cubs last year with (Addison) Russell and (Javy) Baez and (Kris) Bryant and (Anthony) Rizzo, with (Willson) Contreras coming, this is good, young talent. It became apparent, if you try to compete with that team, you better have good young talent. You do not want to have good, old talent.”

— *George Castle*