

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS



(From left) Paul Popovich, Clyde Beck and Fotsie Blair weren't exactly lineup hot spots for the Cubs in 1969 and earlier.

Will '16 Cubs be one-of-a-kind team?

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If you have followed the Cubs for the majority of their unprecedented championship drought, you scarcely have any points of reference or comparison about their astounding start this season.

“I have never seen a start like this,” said three-generations-long Cubs fan Lenny Rubenstein, a Chicago native now living in Indianapolis. “They are playing like they can win every game. That is highly unlikely, but (Tom) Ricketts, (Theo) Epstein, (Jed) Hoyer and (Joe) Maddon, etc. have changed everything and it’s all possible.

“With luck, that means if injuries happen, they can play through it and have success. I have watched 70 seasons and this one seems the one with the best chance since Frank Chance!”

Well put, Leonard. He’s getting to the point: when has there been a better-looking Cubs team than the 2016 edition? Dexter Fowler is enjoying an MVP-level season as leadoff man. Almost every time the Cubs have an effective No. 1 hitter, they end up in the post-season. Even without Kyle Schwarber for the season, the Cubs play few close games with top-to-bottom production, nice lefty-righty balance and incredible depth.

In the modern, post-dead ball era, has there ever been a deeper lineup one through eight?

Comparisons suggest the above analysis is spot-on.

Start with William L. Veeck's 1929-30 Cubs, featuring Hack Wilson, Rogers Hornsby, Gabby Hartnett, Riggs Stephenson, Kiki Cuyler, Woody English and Charlie Grimm. Notice an angle with those names? Grimm was the only left-handed hitter, an issue which would come up negatively at other times in Cubs postseasons.

Hornsby batted a team-record .380 in 1929 while Wilson set the all-time RBI record with 191 in 1930. But both teams did not go eight deep.

In 1929, Hartnett missed much of the season while backups Zack Taylor and Mike Gonzalez filled in behind the plate. Norm McMillan, a .275 hitter with five homers, played third base.

Then, 1930 was perhaps the greatest offensive seasonal output in history with the entire National League hitting .303. Wilson astounded the game with his 56 homers and RBI-machine production while Hartnett came back with a vengeance with 37 homers.

However, an injured Hornsby – appointed player-manager near season's end – was limited to just 120 plate appearances. Fotsie Blair filled in at second with 42 extra-base hits, but at .273 was no Hornsby. Productive leadoff man Woody English moved over to third from shortstop. His replacement at short was .213-hitting Clyde Beck. So even with the thunder in the middle, there were lineup soft spots.

'69 Cubs usually went 6 deep

Move ahead 39 years. The most beloved Cubs team in history in 1969 went only six deep in the lineup most of the way, and maybe by today's standards not even that much. Slap hitters Don Kessinger (miscast as a leadoff man except this season) and Glenn Beckert set the table for Billy Williams, Ron Santo and Ernie Banks. Randy Hundley batted sixth much of the season.

Then the Cubs sported a revolving door in both right and center fields. Leo Durocher and his fill-in managers eventually employed nine different center fielders, including utility infielder Paul Popovich. Billy Williams shifted to right in late spring for a long stretch to allow iron-gloved Willie Smith to play left. Right field stabilized in August when Gentleman Jim Hickman got hot with 10 homers for the month. Unfortunately, Hundley and Banks were fading badly by this point. The infamous September collapse had its roots in these dog days of shuffling lineups and exhausted regulars.

A case can be made for the 1984 NL East champion Cubs being comparable to this year's team. Bolstered by the spring-training trade that landed 2/3 of an outfield in Gary Matthews and Bob Dernier, the Cubs had six players amassing 80 or more RBIs, including MVP Ryne Sandberg.

The lineup hole was a crater – shortstop Larry Bowa with just 17 RBIs and a .223 average (.274 OBP). Once again, the old bugaboo was left-handed hitting with just Bull Durham and switch-hitter Bowa. So a slight advantage, at least, goes to this year's Cubs.

Yet another Cubs team had almost as much World Series hype as this season's edition. The 2004 team, five outs away from the Fall Classic the previous year, was bolstered by trades for slugger Derrick Lee with 32 homers at first and Michael Barrett (16 homers, .285) at catcher. Aramis Ramirez came into his own with 36 homers.

But GM Jim Hendry did not figure Sammy Sosa would go backward in both production (just 80 RBIs and .253) and attitude before walking out on the depressing final day of the season. Moises Alou's career season of 39 homers was not complemented by center fielder Corey Patterson's 168 strikeouts that dampened the outwardly good stats of 24 homers and 32 steals. Shortstop was a hole with an Alex Gonzalez who never got started and replacement Nomar Garciaparra's sub-par output after the trade deadline. The only other lefty hitter besides Patterson was second baseman Todd Walker, spelling regular Mark Grudzielanek.

On paper, they should have matched the 2016 Cubs. But the '04 version proved that paper victories are hollow.

'08 Cubs too right-handed, again

Meanwhile, some of the same characters returned for the 2008 Cubs, who had one of the most dominant regular seasons in team history along with the 1929 group. The '08 Cubs scored 855 runs while allowing 671 in setting a franchise attendance record of 3.3 million.

Matching the 1958 Cubs, five players – all right-handed hitters -- had 20 or more homers. Geovany Soto was rookie of the year behind the plate with 23 homers. Mark DeRosa became a folk hero with his clutch hitting. Even slap-hitter Ryan Theriot stung like a bee with a .307 average and .387 OBP.



(From left) Sammy Sosa and Kosuke Fukudome steadily became lineup holes for the Cubs in 2004 and 2008, respectively.

Two-third of the outfield was questionable, though. The ballyhooed Kosuke Fukudome was an April sensation in right, but his fade was season-long from late spring onward. Felix Pie flunked his final Wrigley Field test in center, forcing Hendry to acquire old

Cubs killer Jim Edmonds as his replacement. Edmonds had his moments with 19 homers in 2/3 of a season. But neither Fukudome nor Edmonds was effective come playoff time with the righty power shut down by the Dodgers. The Cubs once again went on a quest – disastrously when Hendry read Milton Bradley wrong – for their elusive reliable left-handed punch.

One more historical angle is worth noting. All the previously-mentioned Cubs teams had at least some semblance of production through the majority of the batting order. The most hollow entry was the 1965 Cubs. Williams, Santo and Banks each had at least 100 RBIs for the only time in nearly a decade as a slugging trio. The threesome each had 28 or more homers.

The rest of the lineup? No other regular hit more than .239. No other Cub had more than six homers, outfielder Don Landrum's total. Fittingly, the '65 Cubs were no-hit twice in a three-week period, by the Reds' Jim Maloney on Aug. 19 and by Sandy Koufax with his perfect game on Sept. 9. How the heart of the order each reached the century mark in RBIs is still a mystery 51 years out.

Our colleague Al Yellon at BleedCubbieBlue.com doesn't want to make such comparisons. It's still too early, he has said. And he wants to enjoy the ride. Very logical. But as Lenny Rubenstein said a few minutes ago, you have never seen anything like this.

Past is usually prologue in baseball. Exceptions exist, though. Running the numbers through the decades, there is no lead-up in history to what the 2016 Cubs are accomplishing.