

CUBS WORLD SERIES QUEST

Cubs kids just have nothing more to give as Indians near title

'Rosey' passes up World Series, by choice

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Are the Cubs kids out of gas?

Every lunging swing, every weak ground ball out and now some wild throws indicate the expiration date on the talented bunch's collective 2016 seasons may have passed. An increasing domination of the Cubs by the Cleveland Indians, displayed in a 7-2 beatdown in Game 4 Saturday night at Wrigley Field, is the end result of the learning curve and endurance issues giddy fans and media apparently forgot for their young matinee idols.

Now a pall hangs over the Cubs Universe with Jon Lester's postseason experience and grit the only thing standing in the way of a quick five-game Indians' World Series triumph in Game 5. Three games in an overflowing, welcoming Wrigley Field gave the impression of a robust march to ending the 108-year championship drought. Now it's turning out to be wishful thinking.

And White Sox fans could have the last laugh if the Cubs can't reverse form and win three more in a row extending into Cleveland and November. The 2005 Sox thus would remain as the only Chicago baseball champion since 1917.

Perhaps a history lesson involving other Chicago sports franchises is important here. The road to championships have been won in steadily advancing increments by teams on the come.

The Michael Jordan Bulls are renowned for winning six NBA titles in the 1990s. But starting in 1986 and 1987, the Bulls had to endure some playoff hiccups. They were educated in championship play by the Detroit Pistons in successive NBA Eastern Conference Finals in 1989 and 1990 before finally ousting the Pistons in the first of the six-peat seasons in 1991.



Kris Bryant (left) and Javy Baez may be just beyond the expiration date of their 2016 seasons.

Meanwhile, the Chicago Blackhawks got instant juice from rookies Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane in 2007. But they missed the playoffs in 2008 despite the upsurge. They had to change coaches from Denis Savard to Joel Quenneville early in the 2008-09 season, then were spanked by the archrival Detroit Red Wings in the Western Conference Finals. Finally the Hawks broke through to the first of their three titles in 2010 against the Philadelphia Flyers.

Go way, way back to the end of 1981. Proud Bears defenders petitioned George Halas to retain defensive coordinator Buddy Ryan amid the coaching change from Neill Armstrong to Mike Ditka. Halas complied. The defense began developing as Ditka tried to find an offense. An 8-8 season in 1983 represented progress, then the defense got nationwide recognition in an NFC Central title season in 1984. A solid upset of the Washington Redskins preceded a loss to the San Francisco 49ers in the NFC title game.

Cubs improved far faster than expected

The Cubs have improved quickly, faster than Theo Epstein and Jed Hoyer could have ever forecast even in their most optimistic projects. Signs of progress in an 89-loss season in 2014 exploded into a 97-win 2015 regular season, a wild-card playoff win and a stirring upset of the archrival St. Louis Cardinals in the NLDS. Then the (literally) cold dose of reality against the New York Mets in the NLCS. The logical uptick would have been about an 87-win season and wild-card contention into September.

A thoroughly dominating 103-victory regular season made the Cubs the World Series favorites. Hopes exploded in spite of the canary-in-the-coal mine statistic that baseball's winningest team most often does not capture the World Series. Things happen in the postseason.

Forgotten in the seemingly unstoppable march to the Commissioner's Trophy was the fact 2016 was the first full season for Kris Bryant, Addison Russell and Javy Baez, and a spectacular rookie half-year for Willson Contreras, who made his big-league debut June 12. They are still learning, and they've never played seasons this long ending in the pressurized atmosphere of the World Series. Only two years ago the kids went home on Labor Day. Now they're playing until Halloween and possibly beyond.

One final history lesson is taken from the sad post-game locker room after Game 7 of the ill-fated 2003 NLCS against the Miami Marlins. Noting losses by Mark Prior and Kerry Wood that gave up a 3-2 lead in the series, Cubs pitching coach Larry Rothschild said the pair had "drained their tanks" just getting the Cubs that far. Prior and Wood were cooked by Oct. 15.

Good, and great, pitching beats good hitting, to be sure. But the lack of a Cubs homer until Dexter Fowler's blast in the eighth inning of Game 4 was telling, factoring in pleasant October playing conditions and out-blowing winds at Wrigley Field. Bryant's power bat was quiet. Baez reverted to rookie bad habits by trying to cover 1 1/2 strike zones with his bat. Both Baez and Contreras came to screeching halts after hot NLCS outings.

Also, not getting the media play as factors in the postseason are two of Epstein's lauded free-agent deals of last off-season. John Lackey and Jason Heyward are playoff flops.

The 38-year-old Lackey did not come up big – in fact he went the other way – in the postseason outings for which he was hired. Following a monster flop of a regular season, Joe Maddon finally gave up to bench Heyward in the World Series (but Heyward did get two hits in a surprise Game 4 start). If the Cubs had not run away with everything, Heyward’s signing would be considered the worst since some turkeys of deals – Danny Jackson, Dave Smith, Candy Maldonado – in the early 1990s.

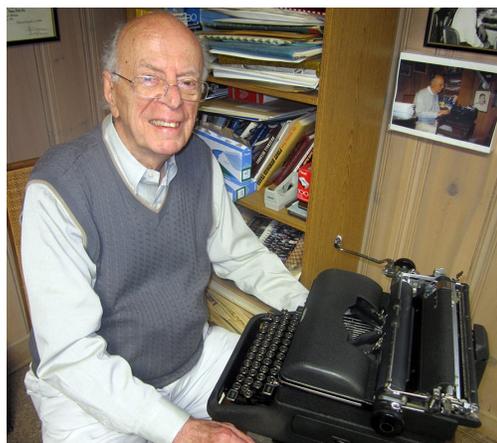
Maybe the Indians are the “Rodney Dangerfield” of teams, as noted on the Fox broadcast. Maybe they had a little bit more veteran leadership who could handle the extra workload than the Cubs.

Maybe we expected too much of the young Cubs. Their future is still ahead of them. Maybe it will come fast in three more World Series games. But maybe we have to exercise a little more patience with a mother lode of talent that is just learning how to play in prime time.

‘Rosey’ passes up World Series after being decades-long Wrigley mainstay

One of the two last remaining mainstays of WGN-TV’s golden age of baseball coverage is taking a pass on attending the World Series – even though he and late boss Jack Brickhouse totally missed out on October glory back in the day.

Jack Rosenberg, who celebrated his 90th birthday this year, is so well-connected he could have snared a World Series entrée at Wrigley Field with a couple of phone calls. After all, “Rosey” in his heyday as WGN’s sports editor helped line up interviews with John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan for the TV station.



Jack Rosenberg

But given the crunch of people descending on a jam-packed ballpark, Rosenberg opted to watch at home with his extended family. He would have had to arrive hours early to avoid the worst of the crowds, and “Rosey” was unwilling to test his stamina.

Rosenberg’s absence from Wrigley Field is like the “missing man formation” honoring a fallen warrior. His clattering manual typewriter in the background assembling pertinent material for airing while Brickhouse announced Cubs games was the

soundtrack of summer for Baby Boomers. He worked with Brickhouse from 1954 to the latter's retirement from play-by-play in 1981, then similarly assisted Harry Caray for much of the next decade.

Rosenberg and retired director Bill Lotzer, also 90, are the last living links to the telecasts that formed the basis of the fiercely loyal regional Cubs interest that was built to national appeal in successive decades by Caray and WGN's satellite-borne "superstation" status.

— *George Castle*