



Jenkins, Hands, Holtzman, thrilled for World Series-winning Cubs descendants

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Fergie Jenkins, Bill Hands and Ken Holtzman combined for 58 wins for a 1969 Cubs team that endured an epic collapse.

But now the threesome know they exist in a truly big tent, thanks to Anthony Rizzo.

“I got so much into the culture of the Chicago Cubs that every single person who has worn this jersey I feel has won the World Series with us,” Rizzo said at last week’s Grant Park victory rally.



Bill Hands (left) with sons Billy III and Alex at their car-repair shop in Orient, N.Y. Hands (right) was a 20-game winner in 1969.

Hands, 76, should be introduced to Rizzo some day. Rizzo would truly understand the impact of his words.

“It’s great Rizzo said that,” Hands said.

Many Cubs like Jenkins, Hands and Holtzman were World Series-worthy over the decades. There just weren’t enough of them at the same time.

But the Big Three of what is now the second most-beloved team in Cubs history never had to worry about their appeal to the masses, then and now.

Jenkins teamed with fellow Hall of Famer Greg Maddux, with whom he shared Cubs uniform No. 31, to throw out the first pitch before Game 3 of the World Series at Wrigley Field. Hands’ phone “blew up” when the Cubs won it all. He, son Billy III and grandson Alex – who all team to run a car repair shop at the eastern tip of Long Island in Orient, N.Y. – accepted a blizzard of congratulations from gracious Mets and Yankees fans.

But the greatest effect of the once-in-two-lifetimes World Series feat is the monkey is off the back of all the 1969 Cubs. Although their failure down the stretch created a perma-

ment hole in the hearts of Baby Boom and older fans, no one has to continue to second-guess the actions of players and manager Leo Durocher.

If that burden was not bad enough, the mysticism that envelops the Cubs put people in the spot of explaining the unexplainable.

The black cat curse belonged to '69, the feline dashing by Ron Santo in the on-deck circle on Sept. 9, 1969 at Shea Stadium, as the Cubs fell into a fatal eight-game losing streak. Around the same time, the story of the 1945 billy goat curse was revived by barfly columnists Mike Royko and David Condon. Add on to a tipped foul ball 44 years later, and the Cubs possessed baggage no other sports team carried.

“That’s a fallacy now,” Jenkins said. “It’s over.”

Added Hands: “It’s finally over. I’m happy for the organization. Just thrilled for the city of Chicago.”

The only curse was one of bad ownership and front-office management. A sometime-critic of that man-made impediment to Cubs glory, Holtzman, 70, said the Cubs finally got it right at the top.

Praise for Ricketts

“It proved that an owner like Mr. Ricketts, who isn’t afraid to compete with other big-market teams as far as spending on free agents and player development was all that was necessary to assemble a winning team.” Holtzman said via e-mail from his home near St. Louis.

“His desire to improve the park and its neighborhood, along with the front office, insures future success as well. The World Series itself was a huge boost to the popularity of the game.”

The Cubs’ presence in the Fall Classic made it the most-watched World Series since the Red Sox busted their own championship drought in 2004. More than 3 million viewers in the Chicago area were tuned to Game 7 as midnight approached. Hands himself had to deal with the clock ahead an hour on Eastern time. He was “elated,” but also was “half asleep” as the Cubs went to work for the last time in 2016.

The ‘69 Cubs proportionately might have been just as popular in October, given the growth of population since then. We’ll never know about the depth of that appeal. Durocher gummed up the works by playing his regulars into the ground and shortening up the pitching staff to basically the Big Three and closer Phil Regan.

Jenkins and Hands might have had hot flashes back to ‘69 the way a semi-panicky Joe Maddon ran his pitching staff as the pressure of the World Series mounted. Maddon was a quick Capt. Hook with starters Jake Arrieta and Kyle Hendricks. Jenkins and



Fergie Jenkins in 2004 with a mural of the 1969 Cubs at his Arizona home.

Hands, the last pair of Cubs to each win 20 or more games in the same season in '69, never had the luxury of leaving games at the slightest disturbance in the middle innings.

Worse yet, Maddon overused closer Aroldis Chapman, almost costing him Game 7 as a result.

"I thought his in-game decisions were terrible," Hands said, particularly upset Maddon used Chapman with a five-run lead in Game 6. "What happened to all these guys who did the job (in relief) earlier in the year?"

Jenkins was blunt about Chapman's fitness to pitch at the end.

"He was throwing batting practice in the last game, unfortunately," he said. "When he pitches effectively, that fastball is alive and up. But he was down and using that slider.

"Managers are hunch players a lot of the time. "Managers do what they do."

Lack of '69 depth contrasts with '16

The '69 Cubs suffered from a lack of depth, encouraging Durocher to stick too long with his starting lineup without days off. The Lip himself was a partial cause. Then-Cubs official Blake Cullen recalled how other teams refused to help GM John Holland with trades and in-season waiver deals because of their disdain for the amoral Durocher.

No new impact players came up from the minor leagues to plug holes in center and right fields or serve as a Ben Zobrist or Javy Baez changeup in the lineup. Holland rushed up Oscar Gamble, his best position-player prospect, at 19 and just a year out of high school in Montgomery, Ala., sticking him in center at the end of Aug. 1969. Gamble later ran afoul of Holland and Durocher for dating white girls, forcing a post-season banishment to Philadelphia, then the Siberia of baseball.

In contrast, the 2016 Cubs are almost an embarrassment of riches of mature-for-their-years young players. Mimicking a successful St. Louis Cardinals farm system, the youthful Cubs are ready to produce when they hit the majors.

Kris Bryant's all-around play draws praise from Hands.

"He's got great defensive skill and the ability to run the bases," he said. "He and (Anthony) Rizzo are the cornerstones."

The Cubs succeeded ahead of schedule according to Jenkins' own forecasts.

"I picked them to win 85 in 2015, and they won 97," he said. "Then they got (Jason) Heyward, (Ben) Zobrist and (John) Lackey. I thought they were the final pieces of the puzzle."

Nothing wrong with jumping the timetable when the overall franchise was behind schedule anyway. Way, way behind. This time, the baseball Gods paid the Cubs back with compounded interest.