

CUBS WORLD SERIES QUEST

Strong connections mark World Series as Cubs picked in 7 games over Indians

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That the Cubs and Cleveland Indians both possess impact young position players and shutdown starting pitching is a given as the World Series opens in Progressive Field Tuesday night.

The Cubs seem to have a bigger collection of both, even as the Indians have literally shut down two successively offensively robust American League playoff opponents. Make it the Cubs in seven games as the 1908 syndrome is retired once and for all as sports' longest championship drought.

But just as delicious is a storyline of firm links between the two teams, present and past.

Sticking out above all else is the Theo Epstein-Terry Francona connection. They were Batman and Robin in bringing the Red Sox's strange title failures to a shocking end in 2004 that included an unprecedented back-from-the-dead comeback against the blood rival New York Yankees in the ALCS.

To prove the championship was not a one-hit wonder, GM Epstein and manager Francona did it again in 2007. Then their collective spectacular failure in another World Series quest in 2011 changed the fortunes of the two teams that are meeting in the Fall Classic.

The Red Sox's stunning collapse from a nine-game lead in the wild-card race in Sept. 2011, with Francona seemingly losing control of the clubhouse, led to both men's quick departures after the season. Almost immediately, Epstein fell in the Cubs' laps as chairman Tom Ricketts looked for a new leader after sacking holdover GM Jim Hendry.



Theo Epstein (left) and Terry Francona were Batman and Robin with the Red Sox in 2004 and 2007. Now they are on opposite sides in the World Series.

Then, after a vacation as an ESPN analyst, Francona signed on to his third big-league manager's job, tasked with guiding the Indians' rebuild.

Francona a cameo Cub

Epstein had absolutely no connections to the Cubs prior to his crazy departure from his native Boston. But Francona had an overlooked tie with Wrigley Field.

On the downslide with bad knees from his former status as a Montreal Expos comer, Francona had a stint as a backup outfielder-first baseman on the awful 1986 Cubs. I recall pulling the newly-arrived Francona aside one day, cautioning him the Cubs had a strange tradition of putting slow players in center field to get another bat in the lineup. Sure enough, one day Francona found himself in a double switch in the ninth inning playing center between Gary Matthews and Keith Moreland, both dreadnaughts.

Francona, of course, had still another Chicago baseball connection. He was Michael Jordan's manager at Double-A Birmingham in 1994. Jordan hit .202 without any previous high-level baseball experience, a feat unto itself in the eyes of former Cubs manager Jim Riggleman. Francona surely had an impact in letting His Airness get the baseball bug out of his system before his comeback with the Bulls to win three more NBA titles.



Player-manager Lou Boudreau was AL MVP for the 1948 Indians, then later was a beloved sports announcer for WGN-Radio.

Still another, more historical connection links the Cubs and Indians, trying to win their first World Series since 1948.

Lou Boudreau, of course, was the player-manager – and AL Most Valuable Player – of the '48 Indians. The south suburban Harvey native parlayed that fantastic season (.355, 106 RBIs) into two more managing jobs in Boston and Kansas City before being hired in a Jack Brickhouse stroke of genius when WGN acquired the Cubs' radio rights in 1958. Brickhouse recalled how Boudreau talked a good game as a manager. Why not also do it on the radio?

'Good Kid' a good draw on WGN

His second career was born. First teamed with Jack Quinlan, then Vince Lloyd, Boudreau became the beloved "Good Kid" analyst, and sometime play-by-play man, working the next three decades before being forcibly retired by changing WGN management. His knowledge and rapport with his play-by-play partners were second to none. His syntax, though, was something else. Good Kid endeared himself to his mass of listeners throughout the Midwest by navigating Madlock facing Matlack, or calling supreme Cubs killer Mike Schmidt "Smit."

The Lloyd-Boudreau duo kept busy in the off-season in the 1960s. They teamed to air a Big Ten football game of the week once the Cubs were done. They also served as the Bulls first radio broadcasters (home games only) from 1966 to 1970. If you worked at WGN then, you played every position, Ben Zobrist-style. Boudreau also anchored be-

tween-periods shows on Blackhawks road telecasts (Boudreau had played club hockey at the University of Illinois).

Still another Chicago-Cleveland link is the presence of slick second baseman Jason Kipnis. In his fifth full season, Kipnis enjoyed his best-ever campaign with 23 homers and 82 RBIs, helping spark a strong lineup. Kipnis is the pride of Glenbrook North in north suburban Northbrook. So many media wanted to corral Kipnis in his trips home early in his career the Indians media relations department had to cut off the flow of interviews to let the player do his work.

Kipnis teams as a double-play partner with Francisco Lindor, the home-grown Indian who most resembles the collection of spectacular Cubs kids. Switch-hitter Lindor came up clutch in the playoffs after a .301 regular season with 78 RBIs.

Napoli top .239 hitter in baseball

Main power duties are handled by another switch-hitter, Carlos Santana (34 homers) and first baseman Mike Napoli. With 34 homers and 101 RBIs, Napoli may be the most productive .239 hitter in baseball.

Overall, the Indians have a tag-team pitching approach that has peaked in seven wins in eight playoff games. Francona's staff stifled two of the most powerful lineups in the game, giving up just seven runs in a three-game sweep of the Red Sox. For good measure, Cleveland allowed just eight runs, including two shutouts, in five games against playoff-flopping Toronto.

The only Indians starter who can dominate in the manner of Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks and Jake Arrieta (when he has his command) is 18-game winner Corey Kluber, who had 227 strikeouts in 215 innings with just a 1.056 WHIP. With five days' rest since the Indians eliminated the Blue Jays, Francona can once again employ former closer Andrew Miller to squelch mid-game rallies as he has done throughout the playoffs. Cody Allen typically handles ninth-inning duties.

The Indians staff may have to face yet another prime young Cubs hitter with little recent scouting information available. The Chicagoans' secret weapon could be the fast-recovering Kyle Schwarber, who would be an ideal designated hitter in the games in Cleveland. Schwarber has recovered ahead of schedule from a severe early-season knee injury.

Given the surprising TitleTown status of Cleveland after the LeBron James-fueled Cavaliers NBA championship, Fox will appreciate the Cubs-Indians matchup with the long World Series droughts hanging in the balance. Businesses in either town also will look kindly on the two teams. Fans can drive the distance between the two cities in 6 ½ hours rather than paying high last-minute airline fares.



Dominating Corey Kluber is the only Indians pitcher who can compare with the top Cubs rotation arms.