



The Cubs life of Larry Biittner: '77 surge, '78 opener walkoff, '79 ball-in-the-hat

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Forty years ago this month, Larry Biittner – that’s two “i’s” and two “t’s” -- and his 24 Cubs teammates enjoyed the time of their lives.

So did otherwise grumpy Cubs manager Herman Franks and his coaches. Jack Brickhouse merrily chronicled the surge on Good Ol’ Channel 9 for most games, and then to an expanded Midwest audience on Sunday afternoons and selected road night games via the WGN Continental –Chicago Cubs Baseball Network. Vince Lloyd and Lou Boudreau happily rang their cowbell for clutch Cubs homers. All the broadcasters went bonkers with two out in the ninth as second-year right-hander Bruce Sutter closed out games with a split-fingered fastball, a tricky “drop pitch” no one had ever seen before.

What was all the fuss about? Another Cubs rebuilding program seemed to be finally bearing fruit. The always-frustrated Cubs fans gave the team a standing ovation when they took the field each home game, then stood again when Sutter baffled opposing hitters in the ninth.

Three full, mostly dreadful seasons had passed since owner Phil Wrigley ordered the remnants of the famed 1969 Cubs broken up and scattered all over baseball. Now the 1977 Cubs had an entirely home-grown starting rotation and closer. They were stocked liberally for the first time with Latin players, sometimes fielding four Spanish-speaking starting players – the double play combo of Ivan DeJesus and Manny Trillo, center fielder Jerry Morales and left fielder Jose Cardenal. Rookie lefty Willie Hernandez busied himself setting up Sutter.

The Cubs zoomed through the National League to a huge first-place lead. They enjoyed a 19-4 run in May. An eight-game winning streak enabled the Cubs to build a 47-22 record with an 8 ½-game lead by June 28, 1977. A happy Boudreau proclaimed the team “could kiss the .500 mark good-bye” with this surge.



Larry Biittner points to his name on a mural listing all-time Cubs at AU Sports in Morton Grove.

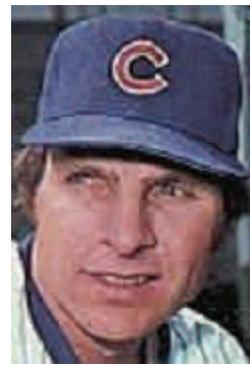
Biittner, one of the last active Washington Senators players, was a pace-setter in what turned out to be a half-season of gross over-achievers. Enjoying a career season, the left-handed hitter, acquired from the Montreal Expos for Andre Thornton early in the 1976 season, was a semi-regular playing left field and first base when Bill Buckner's surgically-repaired ankle hurt too much to go.

Unlike many teammates, Biittner more than held serve, finishing with 12 homers, 62 RBIs and a .298 average. The Cubs began to lose air in July when Franks' overuse of Sutter sent the closer to the disabled list. They held onto first through early August, and were still 20 above .500 at 62-42 on Aug. 2. But the powerful Phillies came on strong, sweeping the Cubs four in a row in an Aug. 12-14 weekend series at Wrigley Field. The Cubs were 6 ½ games out now.

'77 team still 12 above .500 on Sept. 9

But as school opened up again before Labor Day, the season still seemed a success, considering where the Cubs had come from. They were still 76-64 on Sept. 9. The baseball gods, obviously chuckling at Boudreau's late-June proclamation, played another cruel joke on the put-upon franchise and its fans. The Cubs lost their final five in a row to finish exactly at .500 at 81-81. After their 25 over .500 peak, they never again won more than three in a row.

Fans of a certain age did not forget the '77 fun through all the subsequent triumph (2016) and tragedies (too many to count and elaborate here). Those not old enough to remember were told of the team's feats, and that of Biittner's. More than 100 lined up to get his autograph at a recent Saturday appearance at AU Sports in north suburban Morton Grove, after Biittner had made a marathon round-trip drive from his Pocahontas, Iowa home for the event.



Larry Biittner enjoyed his career season for the 1977 Cubs.

"It's nice to be noticed," Biittner, now 71, said. "I like coming in and doing these (appearances) every now and then."

He would go on to be involved in Cubs happenings both ridiculous (losing the ball in his hat, one of four first baseman in the lineup at the same time) and sublime (slugging a walkoff homer on Opening Day 1978 at Wrigley Field). Sweet Lou Piniella would later term oddball stuff like the first two events "Cubbie Occurrences".

Might be too cruel to lump the '77 Cubs' fate into Piniella's classification. That team tried hard. They just ran out of gas and good health, and were short in the right-handed power department, a necessity at Wrigley Field.

Better handling of Sutter from the old-school Franks would have helped. He employed too much of a good thing by using Sutter multiple innings, several games in a row. Closers in 1977 rarely were confined solely to the ninth inning.

"The big thing was when Sutter got hurt," Biittner said. "He was automatic coming in as a closer. I used to like watching the players' faces striking out against him. He actually threw two split-fingers. His big one was the strikeout pitch, the one that really dropped straight down."

“We would have loved to continue. We tried our best and it didn’t work. What are you going to do? Injuries were a big part of the game. They were lucky last year (other than Kyle Schwarber’s early-season knee injuries).”

Joe Maddon would have loved Biittner as a left-handed hitting gap hitter who could play first base and either left or right (he played some center in college).

“All I cared was getting my name in the lineup,” he said. “I didn’t care where I played.”

An emergency lefty reliever

Biittner even volunteered to pitch. Franks used him as an emergency reliever in the first game of a Wrigley Field doubleheader on July 4, 1977 when the Cubs were being blown out by the Montreal Expos. He served up three homers, including one to future Cub Andre Dawson, but also struck out three in 1 1/3 innings.

The positive hangover from the three-month ‘77 run in first boosted the Opening Day crowd to a record 45,777 on April 14, 1978. Thousands massed by the bleachers before 8 a.m., when management decided to open the gates to relieve the pressure. The 5 1/2-hour wait until first pitch prompted food fights between the left- and right-field bleachers and other mayhem. The 8,000-some fans without seats camped in aisles and on laps. Never again would the Cubs sell bleacher tickets on Opening Day.

Biittner put a positive end to the fans’ long day with a ninth inning walkoff homer off Jim Bibby to join Willie Smith (1969) and Billy Williams (1971) as Opening Day game-ending homer producers. Oddly enough, for awhile Biittner wore Williams’ No. 26. The Cubs and clubhouse caudillo Yosh Kawano were not in the business of retiring numbers at this point.

Biittner amassed a .290 season in a similarly versatile role in 1979, when the Cubs again hung around in contention into August – and then had a ‘77-style September nosedive. On Aug. 20, Lynn McGlothen beat Rick Sutcliffe and the Dodgers 2-1 at Wrigley Field. The Cubs were 67-54, four games out. They then marched to the rear as quickly as possible, finishing 80-82 in fifth, 18 games out.

Attitudes steadily soured in a clubhouse veteran radio sportscaster David Schuster rated one of the worst he’s ever covered. At the start of August, the usually penurious Cubs management paid for a team dinner at a fancy Montreal restaurant. But several players, led by veteran infielder Ted Sizemore, objected vociferously to a two-bottle-of-wine-per-table limit. Franks couldn’t stand the complainers. With a week to go, the corpulent, tobacco-spewing skipper outright quit on the team, singling out the likes of Buckner and outfielder Mike Vail as players who drove him back to home in Salt Lake City.

Bashful baseball in hat

Amid the backslide, Biittner provided the most humorous moment. On Sept. 26, 1979, Biittner tried to dive for a ball in the Wrigley Field right-center gap by the Mets’ Bruce Boisclair. As he dived, his cap flew off. Somehow, the ball, of which he had momentarily lost track, rolled under the cap.

Scrambling to his feet, Biittner looked around. As Boisclair chugged around the bases, Biittner finally peered under his cap, grabbed the ball and rifled a throw to nail the baserunner at third. The play is an all-time baseball blooper video replayed for the better part of four decades.

“I dove for the ball and when I hit the ground, the glove opened up, and the ball rolled out right into my cap,” Biittner said. “They were telling me in the outfield. Jerry Martin was playing center and he ran over laughing so hard. He said it’s under your damn hat.”

The 1979 negatives spilled over into 1980. After an 11-6 start, the Cubs kept spiraling downward without a break to a 64-98 record under managers Preston Gomez and Joey Amalfitano.

Suburban Mt. Prospect-raised slugger Dave Kingman’s homecoming soured after seasons of 28 and 48 homers, respectively, as the Cubs first-ever free-agent signee. He doused Daily Herald beat writer Don Friske with ice water in spring training, reportedly threw a female TV producer into Lake Michigan from his boat, and was seen riding a jet ski off Navy Pier while the Cubs held “Davie Kingman T-shirt Day” at Wrigley Field. Kingman was traded to the Mets just prior to the 1981 season.

His teammates viewed Kingman differently than spurned writers and fans.

“He was a good guy,” Biittner said. “The press really took him wrong. He was not a politician.”

Kingman’s frequent absences necessitated oddball lineups from Amalfitano in the waning days of the lost season. In several games, the Cubs started four first baseman-types at the same time—lumbering Cliff Johnson at first, Biittner in right, Scot Thompson in center and Buckner in left. The original alignment at Johnson in left, but he absolutely could not handle the outfield, forcing the limping Buckner to move off first. One non-baseball fan observing the scene said the Cubs did not look like ballplayers – “they look like they work in offices.”

Said Biittner: “Cliff wasn’t really a first baseman. He was a former catcher. First base was the only place he could play at the time.”

Biittner was re-united with infielder Lenny Randle on the 1980 Cubs. Both were Senators players in the franchise’s final season in DC in 1971, when fans stormed the RFK Stadium field in the ninth inning of the final game, forfeiting a likely victory to the visiting New York Yankees. Moving on to the Reds and Rangers before his 1983 retirement, he was the third-to-last Senators player active in the majors. Outfielder Jeff Burroughs and infielder Toby Harrah outlasted him.

But even with such a distinction, once a Cub, always a Cub. That’s why Biittner nearly got writers’ cramp signing at AU Sports. Imagine how busy the 25th man on the 2016 champions will be in 2056.



Dave Kingman was branded a “good guy” by Larry Biittner.