

CUBS WORLD SERIES QUEST

Cubs retire million-to-one odds, 71-year wait to achieve World Series dream

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Baseball is all about evening up the flow of its unpredictable course.

It just took longer for the Cubs. A lot longer.

Hey! Hey!, and Holy Cow!

Derailed World Series quests in 1984 and 2003, and likely other seasons, were consigned to bad-memory status when the Cubs resoundingly booked passage Saturday night to the 2016 Fall Classic against the Cleveland Indians. Fans burned seemingly a million times – as in the million-to-one odds that the Cubs have avoided a World Series since 1945 – let out one of the loudest collective sighs of relief in sports history as the 5-0 victory over the Los Angeles Dodgers was sealed.

And the war whoops lasted all night. Lucky Chicago has a lot of 4 a.m. joints, locked in before former Major Richard M. Daley put the clamps down on the late closings. Firecrackers went off 15 miles away from Wrigley Field after the final out. The pent-up yearnings needed all those post-game hours, and then some, to properly celebrate and release longtime frustrations.

With Kyle Hendricks channeling Greg Maddux and his hitters adopting the perfect hitting approach to Clayton Kershaw, the Cubs rebounded from two consecutive shutouts earlier in the NLCS with three offensively spectacular wins over the Dodgers.

Four more victories are needed to retire sports' longest championship drought against the Indians starting in Progressive Field Tuesday night. The Cubs will bring the World Series back to Wrigley Field for at least Games 3 and 4 Friday night.

The collection of bunting at Wrigley Field will be just the third World Series in Chicago since '45. The White Sox had their own moment under the arc lights in 2005, winning



Kyle Hendricks (left) channeled Greg Maddux (right) with his pitching style, totally stymieing the Dodgers with craftsmanship.

Photos: baseball-reference.com.

it all in a four-game sweep over against the Houston Astros, after losing in six games to the Dodgers in 1959.

Two teams, one city, just three World Series in 71 years. It makes little sense. But does baseball, really, the ultimate game of failure?

All but 2 expansion teams make World Series

Since 1962, all but two of the expansion teams birthed into the majors have been to at least one World Series.

The Kansas City Royals, Miami Marlins, New York Mets and Toronto Blue Jays each have won the Classic twice, while the Los Angeles Angels and Arizona Diamondbacks (after just four seasons of existence) each won once. Also making at least one World Series were the Astros, Senators-Rangers (who frittered away a near-sure win over the Cardinals), Pilots-Brewers, Padres, Rockies and Rays. Only the Expos-Nationals and Mariners have not made a World Series among the expansion crowd.

The presence of so many baseball newcomers in the World Series is one reason why veteran Las Vegas oddsmaker John Avello told me in early 1993 that the Cubs had defied million-to-one odds in avoiding the Fall Classic since '45. We are 23 years past that analysis, so who knows how much those odds had increased? No matter the number, they were off the charts.

Billy Williams and Ryne Sandberg, two Cubs Hall of Famers unlucky enough to not make a World Series, were in the house as the Cubs locked it down. Fittingly, the clincher came 46 years to the day after the death of William Sianis, the barkeep whose 1945 publicity stunt originated the billy goat curse that the Cubs would never again play in a World Series.

A late-game Fox TV shot showed Carol Haddon, the Cubs' senior season-ticket holder since the dawn of the 1970s, wiping tears from her eyes. Let it out, Carol. She earned it, with compounded interest.

The curse-busting performance ensured no crazy, franchise-crushing turnabouts were recorded as in '84 and '03 as the Cubs steadily built their lead early against Kershaw.

Hendricks ensured any drama would be put off until Cleveland by outdoing Maddux, the pitcher to whom the majors' ERA leader (2.13 ERA) has most been compared. His two-hit shutout performance over 7 1/3 innings was a textbook example of pitching craftsmanship.

The Cubs may have avoided a World Series in the last 20 years by frittering away Maddux in a botched free-agent deal in 1992. Maddux got his ring in Atlanta three years later. But the evening-up process apparently kicked in via Hendricks, not considered a big-name pitching prospect coming over in a 2012 deal for Ryan Dempster. Like Maddux, though, the brainy Hendricks was a self-made master of control, the surprise Cubs pitcher of 2016 forcing manager Joe Maddon to make him the No. 2 postseason starter on merit.

Hendricks was helped when the starch was taken out of the Dodgers and Kershaw from the first inning on.

Opposite-field style does in Kershaw

Advised to be aggressive against strike-machine Kershaw, the Cubs took just seven pitches to get a run as Dexter Fowler (double) and Kris Bryant (single) were aggressive early in the count and adopted a classic strategy of going to opposite field off a tough ace. Slashing the other way was how Williams, for example, beat Sandy Koufax with a two-run homer to left in the start after his perfect game in 1965.

The other-way strategy continued with Anthony Rizzo going to left-center with a liner Andrew Toles misplayed for an error. And Ben Zobrist lofted a fly to right-center field for a 2-0 lead, burning up 30 Kershaw pitches.



Dexter Fowler(left) led off the game with an opposite-field double, a successful tactic against Clayton Kershaw (right). Photos: baseball-reference.com.

The star Dodgers lefty was over-amped and thus overthrowing. Eventually the Cubs could swing free and easy with Kershaw out of his game. Addison Russell pulled a double to left to lead off the second. Fowler followed suit by pulling an RBI single to left for a 3-0 lead. And for emphasis, Willson Contreras homered to left. Out of his earlier doldrums, Rizzo pulled a homer to right in the fifth to finish off Kershaw.

Kershaw only twice previously this season had allowed more than two earned runs in a start.

The decibel level steadily increased in Wrigley and among the mobs assembling outside. Our friend Al Yellon of BleedCubbieBlue.com, a Cubs fan since 1963, said “quite possibly” the noise level was the loudest ever at the Friendly Confines.

And if things weren’t positive enough for the Cubs after so much deferment, the brass had the tantalizing news that slugger Kyle Schwarber, sidelined all season due to a severe knee injury, would resume hitting in the Arizona Fall League. Schwarber’s Dallas



Wrigley Field's famed marquee (left) was ready for action while bunting draped the jam-packed stands.

surgeon proclaimed him a month ahead of schedule, clearing him for baseball duty. Speculation then bubbled that Schwarber could even return for the World Series, at least as a designated hitter in the Cleveland games.

Thus, to paraphrase the late Jerome Holtzman, a doff of the chapeau to Dr. David Fletcher, president of the Chicago Baseball Museum. With some sports-medicine experience of his own, ol' sawbones Fletcher said earlier in the season that Schwarber – projected to miss all of 2016 – could return at the end of the season.

Schwarber in Progressive Field? Better late than never – just like the Cubs in the World Series.