

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## *Eerie replay of 1977 glittering record by 2016 Cubs*

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*Posted Thursday, June 23, 2016*

Yogi Berra never dies. This time, it's "déjà vu all over again."

The other day, the Cardinals beat the Cubs 4-3, fixing the losers' record at 47-22. That rang a special bell with any Cubs fan of seniority. 47-22 was the mark the 1977 Cubs had on June 28 of that season after a 4-2 win over the Expos in Montreal.

"You can kiss the .500 mark goodbye" or something close to those words was the proclamation of Good Kid Lou Boudreau on WGN-Radio. And why not? You could play lousy, 10 under .500 the rest of the season, and still win 88 to 90 games. By any measurement, a dreary four-year rebuilding stretch at Wrigley Field appeared over thanks to a charmingly opportunistic team managed by the gruff Herman Franks.

Shockingly, Boudreau was proved wrong. Defying astronomical odds, the 47-22 record steadily melted through the summer to an 81-81 fourth-place finish in the NL East, thanks to key injuries and the stark fact the Cubs had played way over their head. The '77 season is a cautionary tale to never get too giddy over a hot start.

Interestingly, the 47-22 soon became 48-29. So 39 years later, when the Cardinals completed a three-game sweep over the Cubs to drop their record to 47-23, a flashback was triggered. Not to worry, though. The 2016 Cubs have depth, power and starting pitching of which their 1977 forebears could only dream. Franks was certainly no Joe Maddon. The earlier team's only advantage was closer Bruce Sutter, introducing his nearly-unhittable split-finger fastball that dropped like a rock to fool lunging hitters.

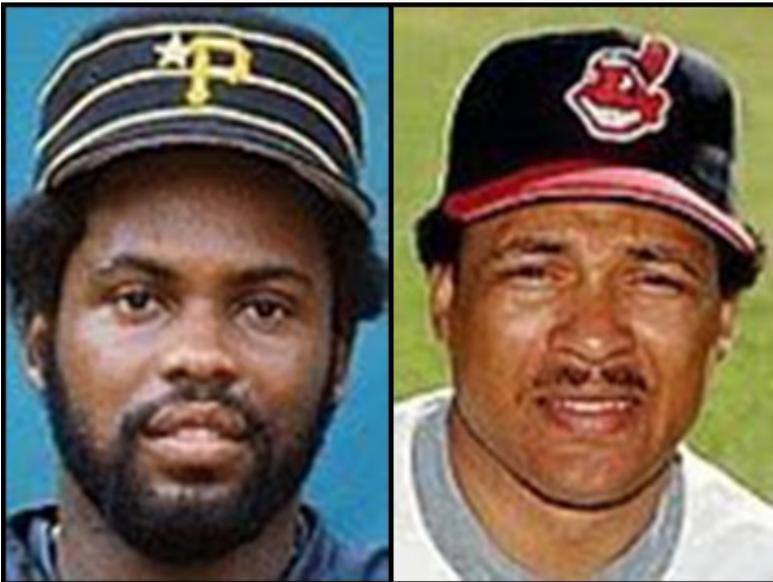


**George Castle in the Chicago Tribune's wire room in 1975. Two years later, he sported somewhat shorter hair making long drives from his Decatur, Ill. internship to Wrigley Field and Busch Stadium.**

Despite the unbelievable start, the '77 Cubs were put together in a negative atmosphere. P.K. Wrigley, out of ideas and connections in his early 80s, had appointed park operations boss Salty Saltwell as GM in 1976. Wrigley originally had wanted to recall ex-manager Leo Durocher as GM and elevate Jack Brickhouse to Cubs president – an oil-and-water combo.

After Saltwell, out of his depth, begged off the dual role, Wrigley hired Bob Kennedy, his 1963-65 “head coach” and later Cardinals farm director, as GM. And in the endless baseball buddy system, Kennedy hired Franks, 63, as manager. Franks had been out of baseball since 1970 and happy as a Salt Lake City millionaire. But Franks had run the Salt Lake City Bees Triple-A team in 1962, employing Kennedy as manager. So the favor was returned 15 years later.

Kennedy was compelled to trade two-time batting champion Bill Madlock in his early days on the job. Madlock requested a lucrative three-year contract as a reward for his efforts. In his dotage, resisting the new higher-salaried free-agent era, Wrigley drew a firm line. Kennedy dispatched Madlock to the Giants for outfielder Bobby Murcer and



**The 1977 Cubs and subsequent teams sure could have used the bats of Bill Madlock (left) and Andre Thornton.**

third baseman Steve Ontiveros. The GM then turned around to give Murcer a \$320,000 contract – more than Madlock had demanded for 1977. Pitcher Jeff Albert later recalled coming to Cubs camp in Scottsdale in Feb. 1977 to hear players talk about Wrigley not wanting to pay a black player nearly \$1 million (for three years). Wrigley saved one of his worst mandates in 45 years of Cubs ownership for last. He died at 82 just after Opening Day on April 12, 1977.

Still another longtime Cubs mainstay, center fielder Rick Monday, also departed in a trade to the Dodgers for first baseman Bill Buckner and shortstop Ivan DeJesus. This deal, though, turned out to be a rare lopsided pro-Cubs outcome for years to come.

### **Madlock, Thornton departures long-term hurts**

The sum total of Cubs moves, though, would cost them. Too much firepower was dealt away via Madlock and first baseman Andre Thornton, traded to the Expos early in the 1976 season at the insistence of then-manager Jim Marshall. Thornton started a run as a 30-homer, 100-RBI caliber player with Cleveland in '77 – the kind of run producer the Cubs would lack.

But in the moment, as an early heat wave brought a string of 90s to Chicago in May, the ramifications of typical Cubs bumbling were forgotten. Employing lineup-wide clutch hitting, decent starting pitching and second-year closer Bruce Sutter's unhittable split-finger fastball, the Cubs ripped off a 19-4 run from May 4 to May 29, going from 9-10 to 28-14. Culminating the wild toot was a three-game sweep of the historically tormenting Pirates at Wrigley Field. "Pirates suck!" repeatedly chanted the emboldened crowd. They did not forget how the Buccos often won two of every three games against the Cubs earlier in the 1970s and crafted the most lopsided shut-out in history – 22-0 – late in the 1975 season at Wrigley.

I witnessed the Cubs surge amid my own hectic travel schedule. Immediately after my junior year at Northern Illinois University finished, I started a summer news internship under city editor Roger Hughes in the newsroom of the Decatur, Ill. Herald. In that long-ago era, companies often gave birthdays as a personal day. So with my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday on Friday, May 27, 1977 and Memorial Day the following Monday, I had a four-day weekend and witnessed the Pirates sweep.

Keeping my fingers crossed, I aimed my rattletrap 1965 Buick Special – "Brown Beauty" with a bashed-in left rear door – down I-72, then I-57 for the 3 ½-hour, 180-mile drive home after work on May 26. What a waste of a V-8 engine. In the post-OPEC oil embargo years, the national speed limit was just 55 mph. Worried about state police laying speed traps, interstate travelers did not dare push the pedal to 70 mph-plus except for short, flat, unobstructed stretches where the smokies could not hide. Making matters worse was a lack of air conditioning in the car, which featured black-colored upholstery. And its radio had shorted out, forcing me to use a 16-transistor portable in the front seat. What did you expect for \$75, the price my uncle, a car salesman, had paid for Brown Beauty?

I got lucky on my living quarters in Decatur. A local furniture dealer put me in touch with his late general manager's widow – a Mrs. Ramsey. She rented out her air-conditioned basement in her home near Lake Decatur. "What do you usually pay for rent?" she asked me in her own inexperienced way. "Well, the equivalent of one week's pay, and I'm getting \$135 a week," I responded. So \$135 a month is what I paid for my internship-baseball summer.

Following the Cubs when I was in Decatur was a slight challenge. Its signal relayed from Chicago to Decatur by microwave links in the pre-superstation era, WGN-TV could be watched by cable system subscribers. But Mrs. Ramsey was not wired. I had to



**Bruce Sutter was the heart of the 1977, but he was overworked. His mid-season disablement crippled the Cubs.**

wait until a WGN Continental Network road game was aired on WCIA-TV out of Champaign on Sundays or a weeknight, and adjust my indoor antenna on my 12-inch RCA set in the basement to pick up the slightly snowy WCIA signal.

### **Nursing a Pabst to watch Cubs at Esker's**

If a day game ran long enough 'till after I knocked off work at the Herald at 4 p.m., I went to Esker's Tavern, which had a cable hookup. A non-drinker, I learned to nurse a Pabst until game's end. I got lucky, though, on Thursday, July 28. The Cubs beat the Reds 16-15 on Davey Rosello's single in 13 innings in a contest that ran past 6 p.m. and out-rated the network newscasts in Chicago. I got more than two hours' of viewing time at Esker's that day.

Religiously, I made the tedious round-trip home for weekend series if I was not working Saturday. On June 24, though, I took a commuter flight that stopped in Champaign to get home early. The Cubs scheduled their first-ever Old Timers Game on Saturday, June 25, against the Mets. Breathless reports from Chicago sportscasters in the days before predicted the largest crowd in modern Wrigley Field history, putting a premium on lining up early for bleacher tickets on Saturday morning. The predictions proved overheated. The Cubs did not even fill Wrigley Field with a 33,130 announced crowd. The Cubs pulled out the game 5-4 amid some Mets outfield misadventures in the bottom of the ninth.

With Decatur just a two-hour drive from St. Louis, I made my debut at Busch Stadium II. Even with the fantastic first half, the Cubs just caved to their arch-rivals. I witnessed a 14-0 wipeout of the visitors on Memorial Day afternoon, followed by a 6-0 defeat the next night. Re-visiting St. Louis a month later, the Cubs lost the first three of a four-game series.

Watching the July 2 game with Cards fan buddy Jim Rygelski in the left-field bleachers amid a packed Saturday night house of 50,340, I saw the Cubs make *five* errors in the first inning in a 10-3 loss. Lou Brock, Garry Templeton and Tony Scott – the first three speedy Cards hitters – simply chopped the ball on the ground in the bouncy Astroturf. Cubs fielders threw the ball all over the place as the Cards tallied four runs.

Buckner slugged a three-run homer off Al Hrabosky in the top of the ninth on July 3 to salvage the final game of the St. Louis series. Rygelski looked stricken when Buckner connected. But the first cracks in this promising season showed. In the first game of a July 4 doubleheader at Wrigley Field, the Expos slammed the Cubs 19-3. Outfielder-first baseman Larry Biittner was pressed into service as emergency pitcher in the eighth. Biittner gave up six runs on three homers, including one by future Cubs hero Andre Dawson, in 1 1/3 innings. Somehow Biittner also struck out three.

I passed up the July 4 doubleheader because I had to return to work the next day in Decatur. But continued weekend trips to Chicago resulted in witnessing more slippage.

Franks had grossly overworked Sutter in a classic case of possessing too much of a good thing. The closer pitched three days in a row through the June 28 game that lifted the

record to 47-22, with the middle appearance two innings. Sutter had an 0.68 ERA and 21 saves at that point, striking out far more than a batter an inning. Franks used Sutter up to three innings to nail down saves. The workload took its toll. Sutter was disabled in July with arm and shoulder problems.

Rick Reuschel headed toward a 20-win season, but the rest of the rotation stumbled while lineup producers slumped or got hurt. Lack of power besides Murcer's 27 homers was a drawback.

Ray Burris, a 15-game winner each of the previous two years, was consistently hammered. He'd give up 270 hits in 221 innings by season's end. Flower child Bill Bonham, pitching on potential since his 1971 Cubs debut, caved in the second half after another promising start. In Sutter's absence, Kennedy was forced to pick up a washed-up Dave Giusti as fill-in closer. It was ugly.

### **The Guns of August**

Somehow, the Cubs held onto a share of first place until Aug. 6 as the powerful Phillies came on strong. In an Aug. 12-14 four-game series at Wrigley Field I passed up due a Saturday work shift, the Phils swept the Cubs out of the race. The visitors scored 10 runs in each of the first three games. Philly newspapers branded the wipeout as "The Guns of August." The Cubs were 6 1/2 games out. The first-half success simply evaporated in the dog days.

The Cubs did recover briefly in their homestand. Meanwhile, I covered Elvis Presley's death by surveying sales of his records at Decatur stores in my internship's final week starting Aug. 15. They still had a chance for an improved season. The Cubs were 76-64 on Sept. 9 before their nosedive resumed. Yet they had been so far over .500 it still required a season-ending five-game losing streak to finish at 81-81.

Sutter's artistry that prompted bumper stickers proclaiming "Only the Lord saves more than Sutter" remains one indelible Wrigley Field image of 1977. Another is the renewed enthusiasm of fans. The May-June surge prompted fans to give the Cubs a standing ovation every time they took the field before the National Anthem.

The present-day Cubs tap onto that wellspring of fan goodwill. Odds are Maddon's gang will continue the good feeling well into October. After what the paying customers have endured, they are owed, with compound interest, a collapse-free season.