



## ***‘Alou Makes the Catch’ changes Cubs history, mostly for the better***

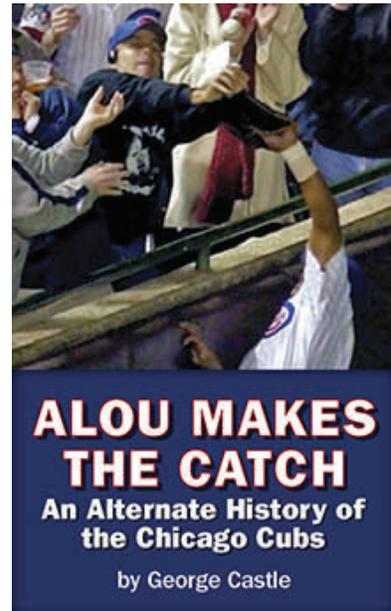
CBM Historian George Castle’s 11<sup>th</sup> book presents 10 “what if’s” in Cubs history. “Alou Makes the Catch: An Alternate History of the Chicago Cubs” plays off real persons and events to show how the star-crossed team’s championship drought might have been broken on several occasions since 1908.

In this excerpt, Castle sketches what might have happened had McDonalds founder Ray Kroc, who in the real timeline tried but failed to buy the Cubs in the early 1970s, actually succeeded in the off-season of 1973-74 as a disconsolate Philip K. Wrigley opted to finally sell. “Alou Makes the Catch” costs \$2.99, can be viewed on a Kindle and can be ordered from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/ALOU-MAKES-THE-CATCH-ebook/dp/BooAHCJDQI/>.

As the housecleaning of veterans proceeded, the 78-year-old Wrigley reluctantly decided to put the team up for sale. Kroc pounced, offering Wrigley \$17 million. With a shrewd mind for Chicago business politics, Kroc also cut the Tribune Company in on the deal. The Tribune Company owned Cubs flagship stations WGN-TV and WGN-Radio, and was a de facto co-owner of the team with Wrigley via the broadcast rights. As a minority partner, the Tribune Company was able to maintain the status quo regarding the profitable programming they had been broadcasting since 1948 on TV and 1958 on radio.

The Cubs began to turn around for Kroc almost immediately after he closed the sale in February 1974. With the roster already in place and Whitey Lockman continuing as manager, the die seemed to be already cast as the 1974 season got underway. The Cubs waffled at the start, watched carefully by Kroc, who sat in the front row near the home dugout, in contrast to the reclusive Wrigley. On May 24, 1974, Kroc charged up to Wrigley Field’s press box, seized PA announcer Pat Pieper’s mic, and announced to the fans that he was dissatisfied with the 1–0 loss the Cubs had just suffered. Third baseman Matt Alexander had chased the Cardinals’ Ted Simmons across home plate in the top of the ninth for the game’s only run when pitcher Rick Reuschel somehow left home plate uncovered. The next day, Kroc used the same method to announce a giveaway of cheeseburgers at local McDonald’s to all ticket-buyers if the Cubs won three in a row. Kroc became a hero to both fans and the media even as stuffy baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn frowned at his lack of proper decorum.

Despite a mediocre first half, the ’74 Cubs showed promise. First baseman Andre Thornton, in-



stalled as a regular early in the season, slugged 24 homers. Third baseman Bill Madlock hit .318 as a rookie. “You could build around Bill and me,” recalled Thornton. Reuschel wins 15 games. Once installed in the rotation, right-handers Ray Burris and White Sox émigré Steve Stone won 12 and 11, respectively. Bill Bonham pitched well despite losing 18 games. Only the overweight Burt Hooton was a laggard, with a 7–11 record.

Kroc and Cullen were determined to spur the Cubs to do better than their 77–85 record. Lockman stepped down as manager after the season. The management duo made a bold hire in Manager Jack McKeon, who had gotten a quick hook in the same job in Kansas City.

Cullen and McKeon decided to recall minor-league exile Fred Martin, a savvy pitching coach whom Holland had demoted more than a decade earlier for petty reasons. Martin, who had once coached a Cubs pitching staff with a 3.08 team ERA, managed to stabilize an inherently shaky coaching position that had held back the development of the team’s bullpen. Another hire was sharp veteran scout Gordon Goldsberry, who agreed to run the long-sagging scouting and player development departments.

With batting-champs Madlock (.359) and Thornton (31 homers, 112 RBIs, 101 walks) anchoring the middle of the lineup and a slimmed-down Hooton—whom the Cubs refused to trade to the Dodgers despite the urging of LA third-base coach Tommy Lasorda—once again up to par, the ’75 Cubs stayed in the National League East race with the Pirates until late August. Only a shaky bullpen doomed the team’s effort.

Martin recommended the September promotion of 22-year-old right hander Bruce Sutter. Martin had taught him a tricky drop pitch called a split-finger fastball in the minors a year earlier. But the biggest news of the year was Kroc’s announcement that among other Wrigley Field improvements, including two “mini-McDonald’s” outlets, would be the installation of lights in time for the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations. With the Cubs on the upswing, Kroc faced little official opposition to this major modification. A local noise ordinance was amended and only old-school day-baseball traditionalists protested.

With the first-ever crop of free agents available after the ’76 season, Kroc would no longer be denied his World Series shot. The increased profits the team was pulling in enabled him to sign outfielder Don Baylor and pitcher Don Gullett. During the 1977 pennant drive, the Cubs first disposed of the Pirates, an old tormentor, then went on to top the Phillies with a 25–9 August run to lock up the National League East. Reuschel won 20 games, while Sutter, carefully limited by McKeon to one inning in most of his outings, saved 41 games with a miniscule 1.28 ERA.

The four-year building process presided over by Kroc finally culminated in a Fall Classic matchup against Billy Martin and the New York Yankees, visiting Wrigley Field for the first time since the 1938 World Series. Kroc beamed in the midst of the media frenzy, while the usually stuffy Bowie Kuhn waxed eloquent about the dream matchup. The Cubs split the first two games at Yankee Stadium on October 11 and 12 thanks to free agent Gullett’s pitching, nullifying the Bombers’ power in Game 1. Master batsman “Sweet Lou” Piniella took down Sutter with a two-run single to right in the ninth to win Game 2.

When the Series shifted to Wrigley Field for a night game on October 14 with a curious President Jimmy Carter in attendance, the Cubs’ bleacher bums became their own worst enemies. It had happened before, notably when they threw fruit and other objects at Babe Ruth in left field during a similar Game 3 in 1932, before his supposed “called shot.” They had made the same

mistake with Dodgers center fielder Willie Davis in 1969, chanting the name of Davis' Chicago girlfriend, Ruthie. Davis had the last laugh, launching not one but two homers in their direction. This time, the cheap seats went wild over "Mr. October" Reggie Jackson, verbally taunting him, hurling candy bars at him, and holding up a big photo of him and Martin sitting together in the dugout in Boston the previous June. Jackson took revenge via his usual postseason showmanship, knocking out three homers, including two off Hooton, to power the Yankees to victory.

The Yankees won again in Game 4. Gullett staved off elimination for the Cubs with another stout performance in Game 5, but the Cubs couldn't hold back the Yankees' onslaught as they routed Reuschel in Game 6 back at Yankee Stadium. Both Kroc and Cubs Nation mourned. But a generation and a half burden had been lifted nevertheless.