

# CUBS

## WORLD SERIES QUEST

### *Dodgers' tired pitching staff should help Cubs finally make World Series*

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Logic says the Cubs have got all the angles in place for their first World Series appearance in 71 years. They should win the National League Championship series in six games.

Their opponent is game but tired, flying into Chicago Friday while the Cubs have had three nights off at home since they last played. The Dodgers' two unhittable pitchers, Koufax-ian ace Clayton Kershaw and closer Kenley Jansen, were frankly abused by manager Dave Roberts (or the ghost of serial pitcher-abuser Walter Alston?) in the Division Series. LA has no other lockdown starters. They have several left-handed hitting power threats, but none at the Anthony Rizzo impact level.



**Manager Dave Roberts' gross overuse of closer Kenley Jansen (left) and ace Clayton Kershaw in the NLDS can only play into the Cubs' hands.**

But this is a situation when any Cubs fan must listen to manager Joe Maddon's wisdom. Maddon always focuses on the game at hand without a shred of futurism. You cannot look beyond the NLCS to a duel with the Indians or Blue Jays for the final step to retire the 1908 syndrome. Like the players, anyone in the Cubs' Universe must mentally go game-by-game to survive potential tripwires that have cropped up in a wild and crazy postseason.

At least the idea of revenge and making up for decade-old wrongs has been purged. That would have been the sideshow had the Nationals won. Dusty Baker got put on the cross for sins not of his doing while running the Cubs. He had to deal with inexcusable racism from fans angry about the 2003 NLCS meltdown. No one needed to deal with that kind of storyline when the Cubs are oh-so-close to their holy grail.

The Dodgers swept aside the then-nervous Cubs like they were a Little League team in the NLDS in 2008. But calls for revenge should be muted. No one is left from that 97-win Cubs team, and the front office of that time has been almost totally cleaned out by Theo Epstein and his Boston-originated posse.

This NLCS offers just plain ol' baseball. The only real Chicago connections on LA are homegrown Cub-turned-comeback kid Rich Hill, who ran afoul of Lou Piniella, and former top Sox prospect Trayce Thompson, off the playoff roster due to a back injury. Hill will get a start against his old team. But how long he lasts is questionable thanks to the shortest of leashes by Roberts, who appears to have been a far better baserunner as a player than a handler of pitchers as a manager.

The Cubs are perfectly aligned with Jon Lester getting at least two starts. Lefty Lester is the perfect man to slow down southpaw swingers Adrian Gonzalez, Corey Seager, Chase Utley, Joc Pederson and Josh Reddick. If Kyle Hendricks has no after-effects from being struck by a baseball in Game 2 of the NLDS, he's also the right man to work Game 2 on Sunday, when the forecast calls for winds blowing in. Pitching in turn, Jake Arrieta would return to the scene of his no-hitter triumph in Game 3 in Los Angeles.

### **Fly the 'W' flag at Dodger Stadium**

Winning at least once in Dodger Stadium will be the key to the Cubs' crossing their Jordan River. Only the most historic rally in team postseason history in the ninth inning in San Francisco prevented the Chicagoans from continuing their 0-for-the-West Coast/Phoenix streak dating back to 1984. Dodger Stadium at night is an especially big ball-park with heavier air acting like in-blowing wind to retard the flight of prospective home runs.

The best path to the World Series suggests winning the first two games in Chicago, taking one of three at Chavez Ravine and then wrapping it up, Saturday night live, in front of a celebrating crowd in Game 6 at Wrigley Field. Capturing the first two games is so crucial a momentum-builder, particularly with the best edges of strike machines Kershaw and Jansen taken off by a Roberts hyper-desperate to beat the Nats. In particular, how long into the NLCS will Jansen feel the effects of a 51-pitch outing in Game 5 against the Nats?

Matchup man Maddon also must be disabused of two ideas throughout the NLCS: not starting Javy Baez at second and using Aroldis Chapman for more than three outs prior to the ninth.

Baez is playing like a man possessed in the field. Even if the pitching splits against hitter Baez are not favorable, his dominance at second base can win games all by itself. Baez is by far the best defensive player in the entire post-season.

Maddon caught a case of Roberts-itis with his gotta-win-it-this-instant use of Chapman in the eighth inning of Game 3 against the Giants. The manager's postgame disarming style with the media prevented a blizzard of tough questions. No matter what the flow of his bullpen up to the ninth, Maddon must limit Chapman to the final inning, starting it clean with no runners on base.

And if someone in the Epstein posse had been culling tape, he ought to present to Maddon a clip of LA rookie whiz Julio Urias' outing against the Nats in Game 5. Fox announcer Harold Reynolds proclaimed Urias' slick pickoff move as a balk. HD replays showed Urias had crossed his lead leg over the trailing leg. Urias led the NL in pickoffs with six in just 18 regular-season games. The Cubs ought to be eagle-eyed and get into the umpiring crews' head to be on the lookout when Urias works his magic.

Overall, even more entertainment for a championship-starved fan base is in the offing. But never, ever get ahead of yourselves. Celebrate after the 27<sup>th</sup> out is recorded, and not a second before.



**The Cubs ought to be on the lookout for Dodgers rookie Julio Urias' balk-bordering pick-off move.**