

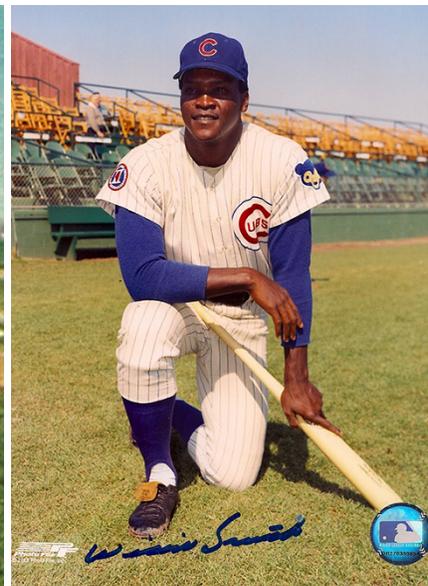
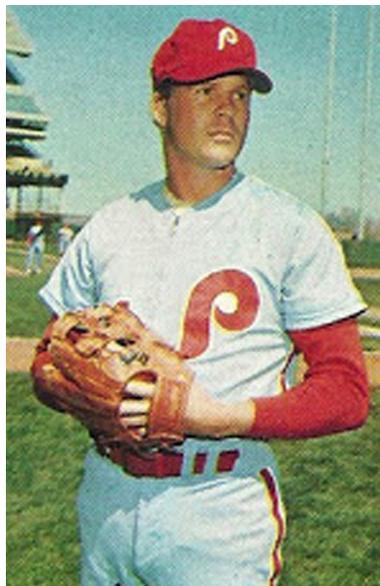


'Wonderful Willie's' 1969 blast most memorable of Cubs opener events

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Prior to the mid-20th century, Cubs openers weren't a big deal.

Maybe because the games were played on a weekday, fans couldn't afford to play hooky from scarce jobs in the Depression or sneak off where you punched in and out of a factory or office. The kids would get whipped with a strap or paddle at home if parents discovered they had cut school for the opener. And, after all, World Series appearances – on a once every- three-years cycle from 1929-38 – were more impactful. Save your hard-earned dollars to see Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio and Hank Greenberg in addition to your favorite Cubs matinee idols.



Reliever Barry Lersch (left) delivered, and so did Willie Smith, a first-pitch walkoff homer to win the 1969 opener.

Gradually, things changed starting in the 1960s. Interesting things began to transpire in openers. Sammy Taylor slugged a walk-off homer to beat the Braves in 1961. Lou Brock mashed a homer far out onto Sheffield Avenue against the Cardinals in 1962, giving GM John Holland and the College of Coaches the false impression Brock was a middle-of-the-lineup guy despite his blinding speed. And in 1965, there was a little too much action – a 10-10 standoff between the Cubs and Cardinals after nine innings that was called on account of darkness two innings later. The stats and game-played was in the book, but the antiquated rules of the time required the game be played over rather than suspended and picked up at the point of interruption. That's how Billy Williams and Ron Santo show 164 games played on their 1965 stats line.

So we'll give a shot at rating the most impactful Cubs openers, best down the line, since the Sixties here:

Phillies-Cubs, season opener, April 8, 1969, Chicago

This is the opener by which all other "lid-lifters," as Vince Lloyd described the game on WGN-Radio a few minutes before first pitch – are measured.

The 7-6, 11-inning drama featured a "Banks and Money" duel. Starting the countdown to his 500th homer, Ernie "Mr. Cub" Banks belted two homers in his first two at-bats. Phillies rookie Don Money matched him with two of his own to power a comeback from a 5-1 deficit. Then the Phillies pushed ahead the go-ahead run in the top of the 11th. With Randy Hundley aboard with one out in the bottom of the inning, "Wonderful Willie" Smith pinch hit for Jim Hickman. He slugged reliever Barry Lersch's first pitch into the right-field bleachers for the victory, sending the remnants of 40,796 into a frenzy and sparking the Cubs to possibly their most memorable and most heartbreaking season (hello, 2003?) in history. Smith's heroics earned him a spiking amid his teammate's riotous celebration at home plate.

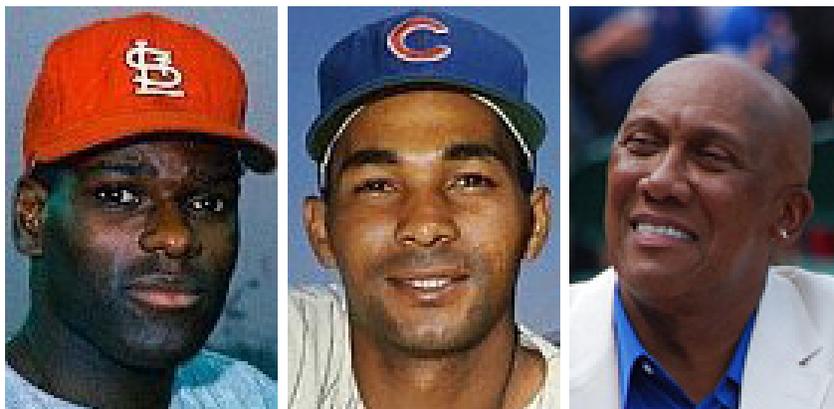
'69 pre-game shows podcast

The "Durocher in the Dugout" and "Leadoff Man" radio pre-game shows before the famed 1969 Cubs season opener at Wrigley Field are featured as a podcast on the "Diamond Gems Flashback."

Go to <http://www.chicagobaseballmuseum.org/chicago-baseball-museum-media.php#Leo-Durocher-1969> or "Vintage Radio Highlights" on the Chicago Baseball Museum's home page.

Cardinals-Cubs season opener, April 6, 1971, Chicago

The outcome was crafted by the best of the best in a 2-1 Cubs victory in 10 innings in...a snappy 1 hour, 58 minutes.



Bob Gibson (left) served up – and then couldn't "remember" – the 10th-inning, game-winning homer by Billy Williams (center) that rewarded Fergie Jenkins' (right) one-run complete game. Jenkins photo credit: [ScottRAnselmo](#).

How did the time fly? Because Fergie Jenkins and Bob Gibson dueled each other for the only time on Opening Day. The head-to-head matchups were umpires' dreams due to the quick pace of the strike-throwers and low scores. Jenkins, who was 5-3 lifetime against Gibson, allowed just three hits, including a Joe Torre homer, in 10 innings.

Gibson permitted six Cubs hits in nine innings. The only that really mattered came with one out in the 10th when Billy Williams powered a fastball into the right-field bleachers for the win in 39-degree weather. The game thus was decided by three Hall of Famers. Two decades later, the proud Gibson professed to not remember the Williams blast. Hall of Famers predominated in that era. The game's two managers, the Cubs' Leo Durocher and Cards' Red Schoendienst, were future enshrines. So were three others in the ballpark that day: Torre, Ron Santo and Lou Brock.

Cardinals-Cubs season opener, April 12, 1965, Chicago

This was a game without end, thanks to some of the familiar names in Cubs-Cardinals history.

Odd things took place in the first inning to set the tone. Cubs starter Larry Jackson, coming off a 24-win season, was uncommonly wild, issuing a bases-loaded walk to Bob Uecker, the future "Mr. Baseball" funnyman, and was pulled before the inning was out. Opposing pitcher Gibson, usually in shutdown mode against the Cubs, lasted only into the fourth, allowing five runs. The Cards, though, were in position to win 10-7 when Banks slugged a three-run, two-out homer in the bottom of the ninth off former teammate Barney Schultz. Since Daylight Savings Time began later in April in '65, darkness crept into Wrigley Field just after 5:30 p.m. and the game was called, to be one of a pair of tied Cubs games replayed in their entirety that season.

Phillies-Cubs season opener, April 4, 1989, Wrigley Field

All else that took place before the eighth inning, including a two-run Andre Dawson homer, on this date paled in comparison to Mitch "Wild Thing" Williams' appropriate Cubs debut in a 5-4 victory.

The legend grows through the decades. Most believe Williams walked the bases loaded, then struck out the side in the ninth to preserve the win. Williams in reality allowed three softly-hit singles by Bob Dernier, Tommy Herr and Von Hayes to load the bases.

Then the coup de grace: Wild Thing struck out future Hall of Famer Mike Schmidt, Chris James (on a 3-2 pitch) and Mark Ryal all swinging for the first of 36 saves that helped the youthful, surprising "Boys of Zimmer" Cubs win the NL East title. Williams was first summoned with one out in the eighth. Also in character, he walked Dickie



Notoriously weak hitter Bob Uecker collected a bases-loaded walk against the Cubs' Larry Jackson in the 1965 season opener.

Thon, balked him to second, and walked Ricky Jordan. Preparing for his date with history, he retired Steve Lake on fly ball to end the threat.

Brewers-Cubs season opener, March 31, 2008, Chicago

Wrigley Field literally shook to its foundations as the ballyhooed Kosuke Fukudome never had a better day in the majors than his debut in the 4-3, 10-inning Cubs loss.

The ol' ballyard first shook in the second when Japanese import Fukudome, one of the more hyped acquisitions in Cubs history, doubled to center in his first major-league at-bat in the second. But he saved the best for last. After the Brewers had taken a 3-0 lead in the top of the ninth, a leadoff single and walk brought up Fukudome, who belted a game-tying three-run homer to right. The Richter scale must've registered a five with the epicenter 1060 W. Addison. Alas, Bob Howry gave up the winning run in the 10th, one of the few blips in a 97-win regular season. The playoffs, however, were another story.

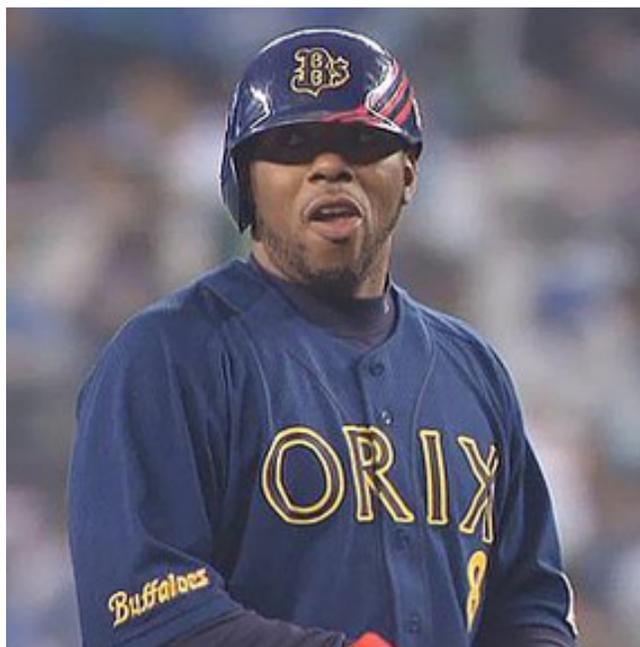
Pirates-Cubs home opener, April 14, 1978, Chicago

Larry Biittner's ninth-inning walk-off homer against the Pirates' Jim Bibby capped an exciting-enough game in the Cubs' 5-4 triumph.

But the crowd was the story here. A record Opening Day mob of 45,777 for the seventh game of the season was the largest Wrigley Field crowd since 47,101 had shown up for Jackie Robinson's Chicago debut on May 18, 1947. By 6:30 a.m. some 3,000 people waited in two block-long lines – one each snaking along Waveland and Sheffield avenues – for the bleachers to open. Wary of trouble if they waited any longer, Cubs management flung open the bleachers ticket windows at 8 a.m., surely a record early opening time. Pushing and shoving ensued near the front of the line. Somehow, the team avoided major disturbances inside the ballpark. But never again did the Cubs sell Opening Day tickets on the day of the game.

Mets-Cubs season opener, April 4, 1994, Chicago

With First Lady Hillary Clinton watching, Karl "Tuffy" Rhodes had half a season worth of production in one day in the 12-8 Cubs loss that set the tone for the forgettable, strike-shortened season.



Three Opening Day homers were an advance preview of the power feats by Tuffy Rhodes in Japanese pro-baseball, where he is depicted here.

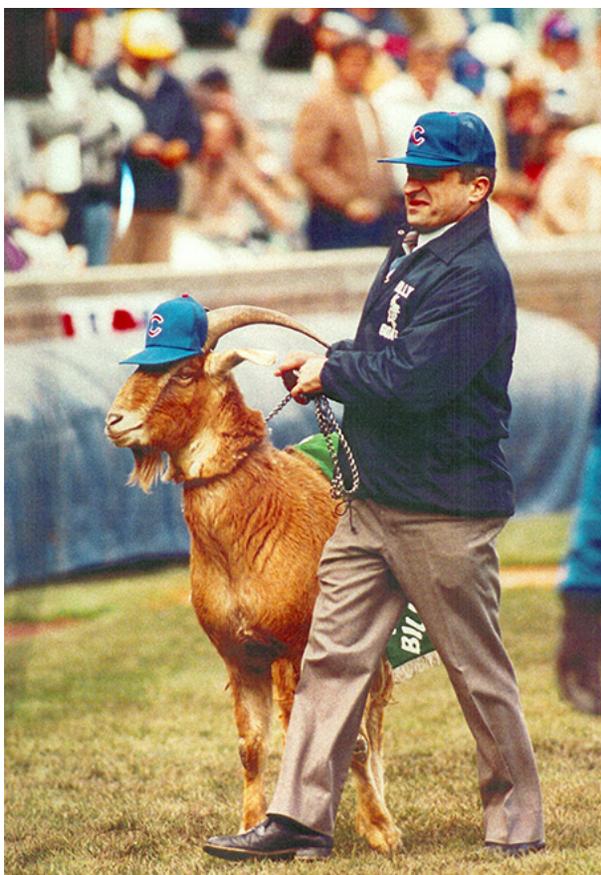
Former Astro Rhodes flexed his muscles against the Mets' Doc Gooden, slugging solo homers in the first, third and fifth innings. He was the only Cub to ever connect three times in an opener. Rhodes then cooled off, hitting just five homers the rest of the strike-shortened season. However, he was only a few years from becoming a home-run star in Japanese baseball, so the trio of homers proved a sneak preview. Meanwhile, Clinton sung in the seventh inning with Harry Caray, then stopped in the pressbox, oddly enough with a flying wedge of Secret Service agents. Park Ridge native and childhood Ernie Banks fan Hillary revealed this was her first Wrigley Field game since the 1984 playoffs. Question is, how did she get tickets in '84 as the Arkansas gov's wife when millions couldn't get in? Hmm...

Giants-Cubs season opener, April 3, 1984, San Francisco

In one of the more unlikely venues, the Cubs set the tone for their franchise-altering 1984 season in the 5-3 victory over the Giants.

Usually the Cubs stumbled in a trail of tears on their West Coast trips. Windswept, childly Candlestick Park only made it worse. But the re-made team under GM Dallas Green

showed all the skills that would propel it to 96 victories and, unfortunately, a huge playoff pratfall down the coast in San Diego six months later. Clutch hitting by Ron Cey and Keith Moreland and an uncommonly effective starting performance by Philly import Dick Ruthven carried the day.



Nine years after being barred from entrance, Sam Sianis and his mascot billy goat were invited into Wrigley Field for the 1982 home opener.

Mets-Cubs home opener, April 9, 1982, Chicago

In spite of two inches of snow that fell overnight and 34-degree temperatures, the first opener of Green's regime and Tribune Co. ownership was a success.

Green brought in extra grounds crew helpers to clear the snow before game time, and rewarded them with an extra case of beer for their troubles. Fergie Jenkins allowed five hits in a shutout that lasted into the seventh. Best of all, the new bosses invited barkeep Sam Sianis and his mascot billy goat to enter the premises after the stuffy Wrigley family had barred the animal since the 1945 World Series. The curse was lifted, for at least one day, in the 5-0 victory.

**Expos-Cubs season opener,
April 6, 1973, Chicago**

A future Hall of Famer officially beat the Montreal Expos in the 3-2 victory in the bottom of the ninth.

But Tony La Russa was the last guy in the park seemingly bound for Cooperstown on this day. The 25th man on the roster, La Russa was barely hanging on as a spare infielder with a sore arm. In the ninth inning, though, his legs would have value. Against screwballer Mike Marshall, who always bedeviled the Cubs in getting out of terrible jams in the ninth, the Cubs loaded the bases with nobody out. Marshall looked like situation-normal when he got the next two batters out, including Jim Hickman looking at a called strike three. Meanwhile, Cubs manager Whitey Lockman had pinch-run for Ron Santo, the second man to reach against Marshall, with La Russa. As Rick Monday carefully looked over the ball-four pitch from Marshall, La Russa trotted home to complete his only game ever with the Cubs. Amazingly, La Russa's recollection of his afternoon in the Wrigley Field sun was cut from WGN-TV's upcoming 100th anniversary Wrigley Field special.