



Historic reason to change your column

By Brian Hedger

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(Editor's note: Brian Hedger, along with CBM Historian George Castle and Jeff Carroll, now a Chicago attorney, were the Times of Northwest Indiana's coverage team for Game 6 of the Cubs-Marlins National League Championship Series Game on Oct. 14, 2003 at Wrigley Field.

Hedger was one of a group of writers who dashed to the area in which Steve Bartman was sitting after he deflected Luis Castillo's eighth-inning foul pop away from left fielder Moises Alou. The following describes what he witnessed in the chaotic eighth inning).

My column was nearly finished.

All it needed was some finishing touches. My take on the Chicago Cubs advancing to the World Series for the first time since 1945 would've been ready to go. It was surreal just reading it over, even thinking about the prospect of covering the Cubs in the 2003 'Series.

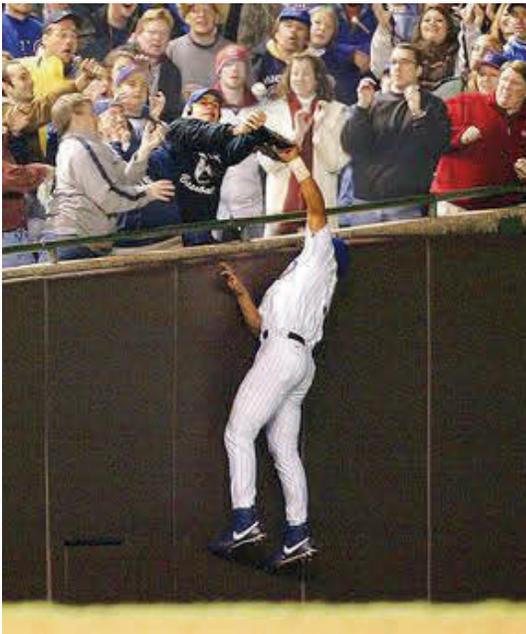
I barely noticed the foul pop off Luis Castillo's bat that headed out toward foul territory down the left-field line. In fact, I wouldn't have noticed it if Cubs left fielder Moises Alou hadn't thrown a temper tantrum after a fan blocked his path to the ball.

Soon, replays were shown on TVs all around the park. Even Cubs starting pitcher Mark Prior – normally as stoic as a fishing pond – started to lose his cool, angrily pointing to the fan in left field instead of staring in for the next pitch sign.



Brian Hedger (right background) with wife Lisa, son Chance (front left) and daughter Elizabeth. Photo courtesy of Brian Hedger.

Initially, I went back to my column, trimming a phrase here, adding one there. And then it started.



Steve Bartman meets Moises Alou on Oct. 14, 2003 – and the rest is history.

As the replays rolled, showing the fan out-reaching Alou for the ball, the entire ballpark started to chant something at him, in unison. It wasn't fit for a family publication, referencing a particular orifice in the nether region of the body.

I'm not sure what section of the park started it. But the chant steadily built to a crescendo and soon enveloped the entire place. That was the moment I knew where I needed to be – and it wasn't sitting there in the auxiliary press box watching the column I'd just written melt away into uselessness.

Quickly, I ran inside the main press box – just to see if a fellow columnist, Greg Couch, then of the Chicago Sun-Times, might've had the same idea to head downstairs and find the beleaguered fan. Greg was way ahead of me, nowhere to be found in the press box, and I knew I'd find him out in the stands down the left-field line.

My feet carried me down the main ramp faster than I've ever zipped down it before, but not so fast that I didn't take note of the surroundings. The Cubs were well into their meltdown by that point, after Alex Gonzalez's flubbed grounder and the parade of runs the Marlins scored.

All around were Cubs fans in various stages of distress. Women either sat in silence with tears streaming down their cheeks or openly bawled. Men booed, cursed or stared off into the distance, glassy-eyed. I stopped briefly on the upper walkway of the lower level to ask a teary-eyed girl wearing a cockeyed Cubs hat, "Why are you crying? It's only Game 6..."

'They did it to us again'

"It doesn't matter," she said, sniffing. "It's over now. They did it to us again. You don't understand... these are the Cubs. This is fate."

She was right. I didn't understand.

I wasn't raised in Chicago, like her. My childhood was spent in the suburbs of Detroit. I'd seen the Tigers win it all in 1984 and make it back to the postseason in 1987. The way I saw it, the Cubs still had Kerry Wood going in Game 7. They were still at home in front of their adoring fans – their adoring and now completely shaken fans.

I headed toward the mystery fan's section next.

The Cubs had already surrounded him with security guards by the time I arrived, so I only managed to get a few rows away – not quite close enough for an interview, but close enough to feel the rain on the back of my neck. Only, it wasn't raining.

I didn't realize that until I looked down and saw a half-eaten hot dog splatter right next to my left foot, followed by a half-eaten slice of pizza. I looked up and saw a plastic cup of beer hurdling through the air – its contents pouring out like a beer sprinkler.

It was raining, alright. It was raining beer and soft drinks.

That's when I truly realized how ugly this thing had become. It all happened so fast. I was only there a minute or two before I found Greg – and then noticed how many other enterprising writers had the same idea as us.

We were all milling about down there, waiting for our chance to have the big group interview with Steve Bartman, as if that was just going to happen because we were standing there waiting. Soon, an elderly Cubs usher herded the reporters into a nearby stairwell – which turned out to be the same stairwell they escorted Bartman out several minutes later.

Bartman's perp walk

She told us to be patient and they would bring him to us for a short interview. Then she told us to head out into the concourse, where we could talk to him more easily. A few minutes later, we witnessed Bartman's perp walk exit from his seat, without getting a single word with him.

He walked right by us, head covered, and headed straight up a nearby ramp... out of sight. Nearly a decade later, thanks to a lengthy ESPN documentary about the incident, we all learned how Bartman left the park that night.

They disguised him as a security guard and put him in a cab, after the teeming masses streamed out onto the streets of Wrigleyville dazed, befuddled and angry. I had my new column, even though I hadn't talked to the "Mystery Fan," nor written a single word.

I've covered teams that have won big games in strange ways and lost big games in strange ways, but that remains the craziest thing I've ever seen in my sportswriting career. Maybe I'll see something weirder or more historic, but I doubt it.

And I highly doubt anything will top that night for me personally. After I filed my column, I called home to tell my wife of the nuthouse Wrigley had become. She barely let me get the words out of my mouth before interrupting.

"I have bigger news," Lisa said.

"It can't be any bigger than what I just saw, honey. This guy tonight ..."

"I saw the game," she said. "And I just think you should know... you're going to be a Daddy."

And that's how I learned of my oldest child's existence. Maybe that's why Liz is always looking on the bright side of things, always looking for the positives in life. Maybe it was fate.

I remember letting out a wild cheer into the empty confines of Wrigley Field after the phone call ended, a primal scream that caused at least one stadium worker cleaning out the seating area to look at me like I was nuts.

I might've been the only guy in Wrigleyville walking around with a smile that night, but the history of the moment didn't escape me. I knew the Chicago Sun-Times had obtained Bartman's name and was poised to run it. I had a feeling that fateful eighth was much bigger than it even seemed at the time – and time has only proven me right.

“No matter what you think about the guy going after the ball, whether he was in the right or wrong, if they lose this series that guy will become just like the Billy Goat in Cubs history,” I told Greg. “People are going remember this game forever.”

I know I will.