



## ***‘What if?’ an intriguing concept for projecting out Hubbs’ career***

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What if?

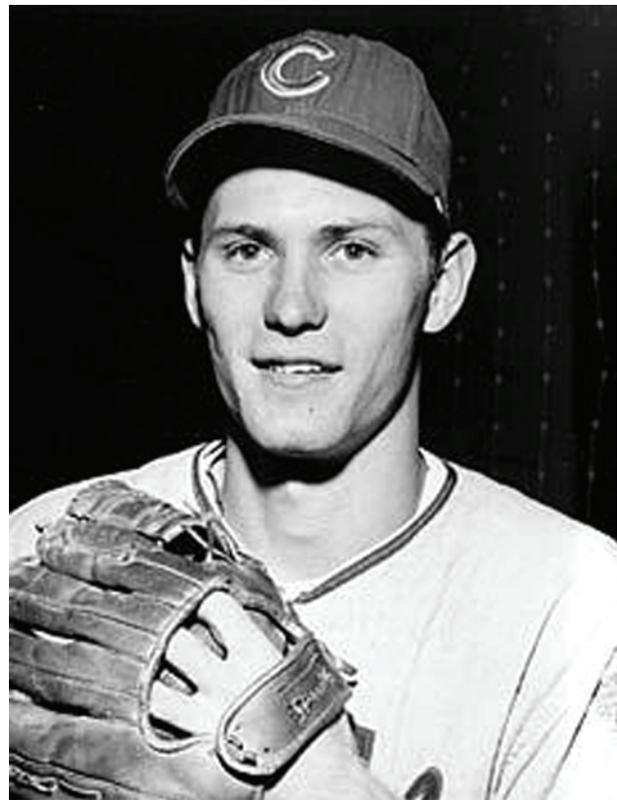
That is the only question which can be applied to the memory of Ken Hubbs 50 years after he was killed in the crash of his own private plane on Feb. 13, 1964 near Provo, Utah. There are no real answers, only projections, speculation and wishful thinking.

When a promising individual is cut down too young, the “what ifs” proliferate almost as long as the people who knew or followed him live.

We just came through a “what if?” blizzard of TV programming and literature on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s assassination. On a much smaller scale, for those who cherish the timeline of baseball history, “what if?” has to apply to the persona of Hubbs, the 1962 National League Rookie of the Year who set two sensational second-base fielding records that prompted his honors that year.

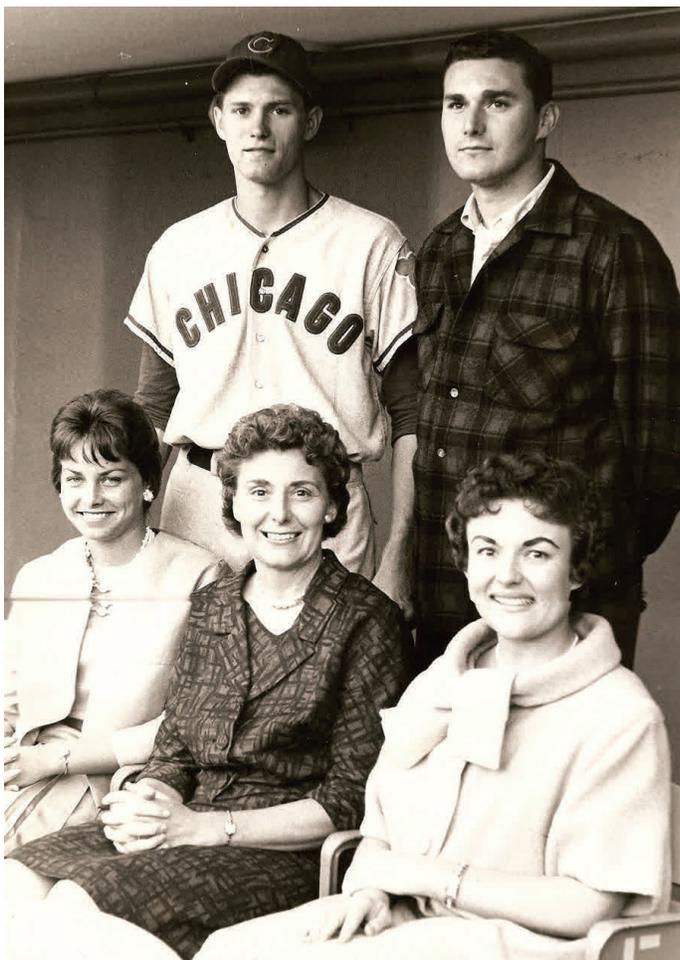
In a syndicated 1964 TV documentary on Hubbs, *A Glimpse of Greatness*, then-Cubs head coach Bob Kennedy provided the most tantalizing “what if” to host Tom Harmon, father of present-day NCIS star Mark Harmon.

“No doubt this boy would be Hall of Fame material,” said Kennedy, known for far more gruff pronouncements 15 years later as Cubs general manager.



**Ken Hubbs' All-American personality, complementing his talent, won over scores of fans with the Cubs in 1962-63.**

Would that mean Hubbs would have been a Bill Mazerowski-type fielder who grafted on 180 to 200 hits a season? That would have been the only way Kennedy could have foreseen Cooperstown-style talent by the middle-infield standards of the day. And, remember, Mazerowski, while a glove master, was boosted into the Hall through the Veteran's Committee by his unforgettable walk-off, World Series-winning homer for the Pirates in 1960.



**Ken Hubbs with brother Keith Hubbs (right) in back row at Dodger Stadium. In front row (from left) are Ken's then-fiancee Linda Pray; Dorothy Hubbs, mother of Ken and Keith Hubbs, and Roxie Hubbs, wife of Keith Hubbs. Photo courtesy of Keith Hubbs.**

Kennedy could not have projected ahead to the Ryne Sandberg/Joe Morgan/Robert Alomar archetype of the do-it-all second baseman whose power is the cherry on the sundae of all his other skill sets. Such a player did not exist in the 1960s.

Yet according to Cubs Hall of Famer Billy Williams, Hubbs' 1961 predecessor as Rookie of the Year and the most frequent hitter behind him in the Cubs' order, the fresh-faced Hubbs could have blazed a trail in creating that all-around prototype second baseman. The Sweet Swinger is the only one who could have directly compared the physical tools of Hubbs and Sandberg, for whom he served as a coach through part of the 1980s and 1990s.

"There was a feeling he was going to be outstanding," said Williams. "Kenny was smooth as silk and had a great arm. He went into right field, center field to get balls. You would have seen an equal player if he had lived – an equal player to Ryno. He had pretty good power.

"You look at a special player playing second base. He could do a lot of things well. A lot of guys won Rookie of the Year and went on to become Hall of Fame players. I saw Kenny as a complete player. He broke Bobby Doerr's (fielding) record. He could hit and run, could use a bat. You look at a guy like that with all the traits. He also came from a great family."

After a half-century, a declining number of Hubbs' Cubs teammates remain. Yet those who do tend to agree with Williams.

“There’s a damn good chance he could have been (an eventual Hall of Famer),” said former pitcher Bob Anderson, a Hammond, Ind. native who played with Hubbs in 1961-62.

“He did some astounding things his rookie year. He had great range, great arm and a great attitude. Everyone liked him. His whole demeanor – he was having fun.”

When Dick Ellsworth went 22-10 in 1963 as the last Cubs lefty to win 20 games, he benefited greatly from Hubbs’ fielding.

“He was definitely All-Star material,” said Ellsworth, now a part-owner of the Triple-A Fresno (Calif.) Grizzlies. “I don’t know about the Hall of Fame. He had only played a short period of time. There was not a whole lot of room for improvement. He could handle the bat. He played a great second base.”

Hubbs was only chronologically 20 and 21 when he put on his blue pinstripes.

“When he was on the field, he was a much older age than he was off the field,” Anderson said. “Like a kid to some degree, he was awed by his surroundings. But when he got on the field, he was a mature young man. He had the natural talent. He didn’t have to push hard to look good.”

Hubbs appeared a born leader, a quality that stuck out to Ellsworth.

“He had great leadership qualities,” he said. “In another couple of years, he would have been a strong leader on that ballclub. Everyone looked up to him.”

Hubbs had another important quality for a player breaking in on a team setting a franchise record with 103 losses in 1962.

“I’ll always remember his sense of humor,” said Ellsworth. “There was always a funny side to everything. As poorly as we played as a ballclub, there’s always a bright side and funny side to the story. Kenny, in order to get ready to play every day, developed a sense of humor to get him to the next game.”

### **SI fancied Cubs’ near-dynasty starring Hubbs**

Baseball, though, is ultimately a team game, and the manager has to be at his sharpest, too. There’s no slam-dunk scenario where a Hubbs at the top of his game would have made the Cubs into a dynasty years down the road, as a fanciful Steve Rushin essay in 1993 in Sports Illustrated suggested. The Cubs proved through the flawed Leo Du-rocher managerial era that a roster-full of Hall of Famers was still not enough to win a division, let alone the team Holy Grail of a World Series.

### **1963 ‘Tenth Inning’ with Hubbs featured**

A podcast of the Sept. 1, 1963 “Tenth Inning” show with Jack Brickhouse interviewing Ken Hubbs is [featured on the Chicago Baseball Museum web site](#).

Please click on “Vintage Radio Highlights” near the top of the home page to access the podcast.

Perhaps the definitive word on projections came from Lou Brock, who came up at the same time as Hubbs in Sept. 1961 and was thrust prematurely – Brock played only at Class C St. Cloud -- into the lineup by impatient Cubs GM John Holland.

Queried through the decades in another “what if” Cubs timeline, Brock said the star-crossed 1969 team mainly lacked a speedy leadoff man, like himself. Fellow Hall of Famer Billy Williams agreed. The Durocher-era Cubs had a perfect No. 2 hitter in hit-and-run specialist Glenn Beckert, who also won a Gold Glove at second in 1968.

We will never know what kind of finished product of a ballplayer was lost when Hubbs’ red Cessna went down in a snowstorm as he and friend Dennis Doyle set off for Colton, Calif., Hubbs’ hometown near San Bernardino.

What was definitely lost was the sterling character Hubbs had already become at just 22. That quality of personality, said older brother Keith Hubbs, of Carlsbad, Calif., would have made his sibling strive to become a Hall of Fame-calibre player.

“He had two years of learning (in the majors),” Keith Hubbs said. “Kenny was a master at practice, making something he did better. I’ve told people, he would have broken his own record fielding. He was never satisfied with what he did.

“If you knew Kenny, he’d work 10 times as long as anyone. As a Little Leaguer, he threw a baseball up against a block wall in our back yard until it unraveled when he practiced fielding.”

Exceeding 78 straight games and 418 consecutive chances without an error, as Ryne Sandberg eventually did, would have made Hubbs one of the best of all time at second. But mastering the art of hitting, the toughest skill in all sports, would have vaulted him into Cooperstown consideration.

Again, Keith Hubbs said his brother was up to the task.

“Back up your best (major-league hitters) to their younger days,” he said. “Kenny let his youth leagues in homers. In high school, he batted .500. He had fast hands. Kenny had two 5-for-5 games. I think he would have gotten to 20 (homers), he was a strong kid.”



**Ken Hubbs (right) and date Linda Pray pose before the Colton High School 1959 senior prom.**

## Hitting in 1960s toughest nut to crack

Still, put in the context of history, questions abound. In 1963, when Hubbs slipped from .260 in his rookie season to .235, pitchers dominated with an enlargement of the strike zone. The next five seasons through 1968 were generally a pitchers' era. Hubbs would have had to face the likes of Sandy Koufax, Don Drysdale, Juan Marichal and Bob Gibson in their primes.

If all-around athletic skill combined with steely determination and dedication could have carried him had history changed, the Cubs would have had a special player in Hubbs. He was "The Natural" in real life.

A skilled high school quarterback, he was recruited all over the country, including Notre Dame. Basketball may have been his best sport. John Wooden at UCLA, along with other major programs, had their eyes on Hubbs, a defensive fiend who could dunk the ball. Baseball almost was a third sport, even though Hubbs had played in the Little League World Series at 12 in 1954.

Hubbs also dated Sharon Boudreau, daughter of Cubs announcer Lou Boudreau, on several occasions while he played in Chicago. "That would have been my dream," Boudreau later told Keith Hubbs about a permanent pairing of the two. Instead, Sharon Boudreau married Denny McLain, whose opportunistic and extra-legal personality was the polar opposite of Hubbs.



**When he was younger, Mark Harmon wanted to play Ken Hubbs in a movie on his life. Sadly, Harmon has aged and the movie has never come to fruition. Photo credit [Angela George](#).**

Strangely, the Hubbs story was never made into a movie. A younger Mark Harmon said if such a film was ever produced, he wanted to play Hubbs.

Hubbs' death certainly contributed to the strangest history of any sports franchise in existence. The Cubs did not need bad luck heaped upon the ignorant, eccentric management of the Wrigley family regime.

In fact, in 1962, while Hubbs made a name for himself, P.K. Wrigley mandated his scouts could not sign any new amateur players after the perceived squandering of bonus money on failed prospects. Eventually, Wrigley was persuaded to relent; the scouts inked six new players. But the negative effect on the farm system was felt for years to come, adding to the woes brought on by the ill-advised "College of Coaches" system that left the Cubs without an official manager for five seasons.

Hubbs actually was part of an uptick of talent coming out of the chronically under-producing Cubs system. From 1956 to 1958, Chicago spewed forth hard-throwing pitchers Moe Drabowsky, Dick Drott, Glen Hobbie and Bob Anderson. In 1960, lefty Dick Ellsworth became part of the talent flow.

George Altman, a Kansas City Monarch import via Buck O'Neil, became the Cubs' first regular African-American outfielder two years after his 1959 debut. Lou Johnson, another ex-Monarch, surfaced in 1960 (only to find success five years later with the Dodgers). Hubbs and Brock came up at the end of 1961.

The cream of the crop, of course, were Ron Santo and Billy Williams, who arrived at Wrigley Field to stay in 1960 and had 14-season runs on their way to the Hall of Fame.

Yet injuries and the Hubbs tragedy derailed much of the good effect of the talent flow. Drabowsky, Drott, Hobbie and Anderson all suffered assorted injuries. A year after Ellsworth's 22-win season in 1963, he pitched through tendinitis caused by his slider, and his effectiveness declined dramatically in two consecutive second halves in 1964-65 before a 22-loss campaign in 1966.

We all know what happened with Brock, as Holland pulled the plug on him a bit too quickly in 1964 as he was just coming into his own. Brock was dispatched to St. Louis for Ernie Broglio, whose elbow ailments had already started as a Cardinal. The disastrous Broglio deal prompted a Major League Baseball mandate that health information be exchanged between teams in trades.

In effect, the Cubs had a "lost contender" on their hands with all the talent gone awry.

### **Period of tragedy in Chicago sports**

Yet another negative about Hubbs' death is it seemed to trigger a 13-month period of tragedy for Chicago teams.

During training camp in 1964, Bears running back Willie Galimore and end John Farington were killed in the rural crash of their car. And in the middle of spring training 1965, Cubs radio voice Jack Quinlan died when his convertible missed a turn and rammed into a semi-trailer truck. Quinlan was considered even by Jack Brickhouse and Vince Lloyd as a true golden voice, perhaps the best in Chicago baseball history, who seemed destined for a network announcing job.

But despite the feeling of abject loss, positives always envelop Ken Hubbs' memory. Keith Hubbs does not hang crepe over his brother's premature death. He's had most of a lifetime to reflect, while using his own Mormon faith for perspective.

The story Keith Hubbs often tells is he got the mandate from his brother himself to not mope over the loss.

Beset by nightmares about the plane crash for three days afterward, waking up in a sweat, Hubbs said he had a different dream on the fourth night. He recalled how he always hugged Kenny when the two greeted one another after an absence. This time, there would be no physical contact in the seeming meeting of two worlds.

“I’m standing there,” he recalled. “All I remember is a little distance away, Kenny’s walking toward me. We don’t hug. He stops short of us hugging. He says to me, ‘Quit worrying about me. It was quick and it was no pain.’ He turns and walks away.

“I never had the [crash] nightmare again.”

Nor has Keith Hubbs had another spiritual visit from his brother, leaving him to come to his own conclusions about the fairness of such an early death.

“I’ve often thought that there was so much stuff left for him to do,” he said. “But we believe the good people who go onto the next life teach righteous things. Kenny’s involved (positively) in whatever he’s doing.”

### **Santo grasps Hubbs’ 1963 glove 41 years later**

Ken Hubbs came to life again in a startling way on Aug. 13, 2004. Before he set out on a Mormon mission to Chicago, Keith Hubbs discovered his brother’s final big-league 1963 glove stashed away in a closet. He brought it to Wrigley Field, where he showed it to Ron Santo, Hubbs’ best friend on the Cubs in the two-plus seasons they were teammates. Santo tried on the glove for size.



**Ron Santo tries on late friend Ken Hubbs' 1963 glove at Wrigley Field in 2004 as Keith Hubbs looks on.**

Interestingly, in *A Glimpse of Greatness* back in 1964, Santo told Tom Harmon he had talked about life after death with Hubbs from each of their perspectives – Santo as a Catholic and Hubbs as a Mormon.

When Santo died late in 2010, his Type 1 diabetes finally consuming him after 52-year battle before he could get voted into the Hall of Fame, Keith Hubbs knew in his heart the friends had re-united.

“Kenny was right there to meet him,” he said.

By that measurement, Hubbs continues to exist in two lives. The Ken Hubbs Foundation, which his brother headed up for much of its 50-year existence, continues to annually honor 44 boys and girls high-school athletes in the San Bernardino area. Most famous honorees are the father-son football team of Ronnie Lott and Ryan Nece. Future NBA notables Bryon Russell and Shawn Rooks also were award winners.

Ryne Sandberg also should carry on a bit of the Hubbs influence in his new job as Phillies manager. About 20 years ago, Keith Hubbs gave Sandberg a copy of *A Glimpse of Greatness*. If he paid attention to the vintage show, he had to have been moved. And

seeing one of his Cubs second-base predecessors had the right stuff of character could only enforce the Sandberg philosophy best expressed in his own Hall of Fame induction speech in 2006.

Hubbs' No. 16 had been taken out of circulation for six years by Cubs clubhouse caudillo Yosh Kawano. Finally, in Sept. 1970, minor-league callup Roger Metzger, a short-stop, was issued No. 16. Early the next season, infielder Gary Jesteadt wore the number. Later in 1971, former No. 1 draft pick Gene Hiser, an outfielder, was issued No. 16. As an organization, the Cubs did not retire any numbers until Ernie Banks' No. 14 was set aside in 1982, after Tribune Co. assumed ownership.

Someway, there has to be a method to set No. 16 aside again as a symbol of what athleticism combined with good character can achieve in a short time. A lot of potential was unrealized in Hubbs' life, but a considerable amount still was accomplished. So those modest 22 years did have meaning.