



Cubs keep falling into ‘Curse of Joe McCarthy’ on manager moves

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Friday, October 4th, 2013*

Amazing how Theo Epstein tries to defy “curses.”

The Cubs’ master of baseball did so as general manager of the Boston Red Sox nine years ago, his charges pulling off a miracle ALCS comeback against the New York Yankees that enable the Red Sox to survive to win another day -- Beantown’s long-coveted World Series. That way, the “Sawks” cast off the supposed “Curse of the Bambino,” really not a hex but a catchy title to a book by Boston Globe columnist Dan Shaughnessy.

Babe Ruth never cursed the Red Sox when he was traded by cash-strapped owner Harry Frazee to the Yankees in 1920. The Bambino probably gazed to the heavens with a huge “thank-you.” He now entered the biggest stage of the world, a prime platform to satisfy his enormous appetites for attention, vittles and women. Similarly, the Cubs’ “Billy Goat Curse” from the 1945 World Series was merely a publicity stunt by attention-craving barkeep William Sianis, who had plenty of customers/sportswriters as a conduit for his animal act.

The only “curse” involving either of Epstein’s teams is one of past bad management/ownership. In the Red Sox’s case, the self-imposed hex was the ridiculous, Tom Yawkey-pass-the-buck delay of integration of the roster until 1959 and the regression of racial attitudes in the late 1970s after much progress by GM Dick O’Connell. One-third of the way across the country in Wrigley Field, the dual “curses” were mismanagement and under-funding of scouting and player development -- with the exception of the Dallas Green-Gordon Goldsberry Era of the 1980s – and the oddball hiring and firing of managers.



The dynamic Cubs trio of (from left) manager Joe McCarthy, owner William Wrigley, Jr., and president William L. Veeck. Frantic for a World Series winner, Wrigley fired McCarthy prematurely late in the 1930 season with repercussions until the present day in team annals.

Since Shaughnessy can have a way with words, so shall we. So let's call the endless list of Cubs skippers – none who has anywhere close to a Tony LaRussa-length St. Louis Cardinals tenure – the “Curse of Joe McCarthy.” The team simply has never recognized when it had a winner running the dugout. Either promoting or recycling from within or hiring celebrity managers from without, the Cubs pull relatively quick hooks on their managerial hires. Or they expect the pilots to fly a contraption without enough lift in the talent engines powering it, creating crash-and-burn scenarios for managers who have won elsewhere.

The endless process has gone to extremes never duplicated in baseball. Leading the way was the wacky College of Coaches experiment, in full force in 1961-62 that followed the “trade” of manager Charlie Grimm for radio color analyst Lou Boudreau, each assuming the other's job.

The manager “curse” is marked by an utter lack of longevity. There's not even one post-1900 Cubs manager who served as long in one stint as White Sox notables as Jimmy Dykes 13 years (1934-46) and Al Lopez's nine seasons (1957-65). For all his controversies, Ozzie Guillen put in just two games short of eight full seasons (2004-11). Even Tony La Russa's nearly seven years (1979-86) would put him about No. 2 in longevity in the modern Cubs era.



Frank Chance (left) had the longest continuous post-1900 tenure of a Cubs manager – and it wasn't even as long as Ozzie Guillen's (right) on the White Sox. Guillen photo credit: [Keith Allison](#).

Top tenure was Frank Chance's 7 ½ seasons (1905-12). Leo Durocher had enough staying power despite his attendant tumult to go 6 ½ seasons (1966-72). Charlie Grimm had the equivalent of six full campaigns (1932-38) in his first of three go-arounds in Chicago; he also was the first manager of the Milwaukee Braves. Jim Riggelman went basically five full seasons (1995-99), with some games shaved off the start due to the players' strike. No one else equals this quartet.

The McCarthy cautionary tale is conjured up by Epstein's sacking of Dale Sveum, after the bristly-faced ex-shortstop seemingly did everything his boss had mandated through two years of his three-year contract. Sveum baby-sat a substandard roster, created intentionally so Epstein and GM Jed Hoyer could keep spots open for developing players and flip middling veterans at mid-season for talented kids to help re-stock the farm system. With a couple of exceptions near the end of his tenure, Sveum apparently kept control of the clubhouse despite 197 losses. And now Epstein is seeking a supposed upgrade in his manager.

McCarthy didn't win fast enough for Wrigley

Sveum's and other manager sackings keep coming back to owner William Wrigley Jr.'s misguided firing of McCarthy in 1930, hence the "curse" tag attached to his name. "Marse Joe" had a 442-331 record in nearly five seasons as Cubs manager, having revived the team from 1926 on from its previous mediocre standing. McCarthy won the 1929 NL pennant as the Cubs zoomed to status as baseball's most powerful and popular franchise, even ahead of the New York Yankees. The Cubs craze was so white-hot Wrigley, team president William L. Veeck and even club secretary Margaret Donahue appeared in ads ranging from summer straw hats to Quaker Oats oatmeal.

But McCarthy's success was not good enough for a world championship-craving Wrigley. The Cubs shockingly collapsed in the 1929 World Series against the Philadelphia Athletics, thwarting Wrigley's dream on which he had spent a fortune by the day's standards. Then, after the Cubs climbed to a 5 1/2-game NL lead on Aug. 30, 1930, they slumped and fell out of the lead two weeks later.

That was enough for Wrigley, who demanded a World Series winner. He told McCarthy he would not return for 1931. The owner, otherwise a rational man who mined gold with his decisions, convinced himself McCarthy was not the manager to take the Cubs to Point A. McCarthy opted to leave with four games to go.

Wrigley was enthralled with batting king Rogers Hornsby's apparent dual ability as a manager, naming him as McCarthy's successor. Hornsby also had piloted the St. Louis Cardinals to the 1926 World Series title as player-manager before also directing the New York Giants and Boston Braves. The dynamic Veeck privately had his doubts about the sometimes prickly and always exacting Hornsby, but went along with his boss.

The disaster that followed no doubt changed the course of Cubs history.

McCarthy immediately signed to manage the Yankees. He went on to win seven World Series between 1932 and 1943, including two at the expense of the Cubs via four-game sweeps in '32 and 1938.

Hornsby never won post-Cubs

Hornsby? He created too much friction in the clubhouse, including owing money to players to finance his racetrack obsession. Granted near-ownership power after Wrigley's death in 1932, Veeck fired the Rajah 99 games into the '32 season. Affable first baseman Grimm was named as Hornsby's replacement as a relieved Cubs roster revved it up to charge to the NL pennant. Hornsby never had another winning season managing the St. Louis Browns and Cincinnati Reds, stoking even more conflicts with players along the way.

Managing the core of talent in place under McCarthy and Hornsby with several key players like Phil Cavarretta yet to come, Grimm turned out to be the only true post-McCarthy "upgrade."

“Jolly Cholly” won three pennants (1932, 1935 and 1945) in the first two of his three Cubs managerial tenures.

Grimm, and Durocher for a couple of years, turned out to be the only managers who were a quantifiable improvement over their predecessors. A prime example of management outsmarting themselves in believing they had a better manager took place in 1999. Capable, media-friendly manager Jim Riggleman was deemed inadequate despite frequently flawed rosters imposed on him by thrifty team president Andy MacPhail after a massive 24-64 collapse in '99. Cubs brass privately told beat writers they felt new hire Don Baylor, who had led the expansion Colorado Rockies to contender-status, was an upgrade over Riggleman.

But Baylor had the same headaches as Riggleman – a preening, selfish Sammy Sosa, poor pitching and little talent flow from the farm system. Worse yet, the former tough-guy hitter had some communication problems with players, and spent as little time with the media as he could. Baylor later explained he once played for an unidentified Angels manager who “schmoozed” with the media more than dealing with players, who resented him for that stance.

The Baylor Era was doomed near the end of an otherwise surprisingly good 2001 season.

First, the players rebelled against the strenuous pre-game workouts led by martial-arts guru Mack Newton, whom Baylor imported as a special project to change the team mentality. He even paid some of Newton’s salary out of his own pocket. Newton revealed in the publicity over his role, but eventually departed by late summer after the negative reaction from the Cubs.

Then, in the closing days of the '01 campaign, clashes between Baylor and opinionated pitching coach Oscar Acosta led to the latter’s dismissal. The pitchers were big backers of Acosta, several profanely expressing their displeasure in broadcast interviews. Most extreme action was Kerry Wood threatening not to make his final scheduled start, forcing No. 2 Cubs exec Jim Hendry to dash to the clubhouse to prevent the pitcher’s personal strike. Baylor was a dead-manager walking. He was fired midway through the 2002 season. To this day, through several hitting coach gigs, Baylor has refused to talk about his Cubs days.



With five full years as Cubs manager, Jim Riggleman had the longest continuous tenure since Leo Durocher in 1972. Photo credit: [Pat Pfister](#).

Baylor was first among a threesome of celebrity managers hired during the last decade of Tribune Co. ownership. But in the Wrigley family ownership, managers largely came from within the organization. There were few outstanding candidates recruited. Phil Wrigley, William Wrigley Jr.'s son and heir, simply moved managers up, down and sideways within his organization, in which loyalty often resulted in a career-long job.

In a move reminiscent of the William L. Veeck's mid-season sacking of Hornsby – Phil Wrigley tried many times to mimic his father and Veeck – Grimm yielded to longtime catcher Gabby Hartnett in mid-season 1938. And Wrigley was pleased, because once again the change provided a spark as in 1932. Hartnett himself provided the key blow with his “homer in the gloamin” at Wrigley Field as the Cubs overhauled the Pittsburgh Pirates in the stretch for the privilege of being swept four in a row by the McCarty-led Yankees in the World Series.

Inbred Cubs managers under Phil Wrigley

In ensuing decades, Phil Wrigley typically promoted or recycled from within. Grimm had two more managerial stints, then joined the College of Coaches. Almost all of the 1950s featured managers who were Cubs players, coaches or Triple-A managers – or a combination of all three. Successively serving starting in 1951 were Phil Cavarretta, Stan Hack and Bob Scheffing. Cavarretta became the first manager ever fired in spring training when he told Wrigley in 1954 the team would not be a contender. Hack was swept out when John Holland, arriving from Triple-A Los Angeles as GM after the 1956 season, cut him in favor of LA manager Scheffing, a former Cubs catcher. In turn, Scheffing got the gate after getting as much as he could out of a shaky roster (hello, Mr. Sveum) in 1959, when Wrigley also felt he had to make headlines competing with the World Series-bound White Sox.

Wrigley stayed within the family early in the 1960 season, when he worried about the health of Grimm, in his third managerial stint. He tapped Boudreau to manage his fourth team, after the Cleveland Indians, Boston Red Sox and Kansas City Athletics. Interestingly, in the swap of roles Grimm went to the same job he snared back when he was first fired in 1938 – team broadcaster. But after Boudreau's Cubs stumbled to 94 losses, and the Good Kid desired a multi-year contract, Wrigley threw in the towel to accept trusted coach Elvin Tappe's idea of rotating coaches in and out of the top job.

Of course the rotating scheme was doomed to failure with all the coaches taking an “et tu Brute” knife-poised-at-the-back stance toward each other. Almost all the college members figured Wrigley would tire of the goofy idea and re-institute a manager's job they coveted. By mid-1962 the quick-change head-coach rotation was informally deemed unworkable with martinet coach Charlie Metro, who at one point banned shaving in the clubhouse, taking over for the final half of a record 103-loss season.

Metro was dismissed after much player dissension. So Triple-A Salt Lake City manager Bob Kennedy, a native South Sider, was appointed “head coach” for the entire 1963 season. Kennedy lasted until June 1965, when longtime organization man Lou Klein finished out the rest of the season before Durocher's appointment.

Leo The Lip was one of the three “outsiders” hired by Wrigley. First was former Cincinnati Reds World Series hero Jimmie Wilson. His Fall Classic fame led the gum magnate to hire Wilson to replace Hartnett for the 1941 season. But with flailing sportswriter-turned-GM Jim Gallagher – another Wrigley hire that tried to mimic ex-scribe Veeck’s appointment 22 years previously – in charge, Wilson had no chance to win. Grimm came back in 1944. In turn, Grimm managed until mid-1949, when former Gashouse Gang Cardinals manager Frankie Frisch took his turn, against the advice of a trusted friend. By now, the Cubs were perceived as a stumblebum organization. Frisch lasted the equivalent of two seasons before hometown hero Cavarretta got the call.

Durocher was the most ballyhooed hire of them all. His storylines and litany of amoral behavior is just too long to chronicle here. Suffice to say The Lip did jolt the Cubs out of their 21-year “second-division” stupor in 1967. He seemed to exert a Svengali-type influence on Wrigley, who even forgave him (after considering firing Durocher) for going AWOL to his stepson’s summer-camp parents day in late July 1969. Despite an Aug. 1971 players’ near-mutiny, the worst clubhouse row until Baylor in 2001, Wrigley kept Durocher a half-season too long.

When Durocher was forced out at the All-Star break in 1972, Wrigley went back to recycling organizational folks as manager. Whitey Lockman, former Cubs coach, Triple-A manager and in ’72 farm director, succeeded Durocher. When Lockman was tired of losing by mid-season 1974, former Cubs player, Lockman coach and ex-Triple-A manager Jim Marshall rotated into the job. Marshall lasted long enough to banish young first baseman Andre Thornton to 30-homer, 100-RBI annual production in Cleveland.

Wrigley’s last manager in 1977 was also an insider and benefit of the buddy system. Herman Franks, former Durocher loyalist on the New York Giants coaching staff, was asked by Wrigley at one point to succeed Durocher when he went AWOL in ’69. But Franks talked the owner out of such a wrenching change. Back in 1963, Franks had been GM of the Salt Lake City Bees, managed by Kennedy. Wrigley recycled ex-“head coach” Kennedy after a long stint as Cardinals farm director. Now in charge, Kennedy re-turned old favors to appoint Franks manager.

Franks quit, professing disgust with key players, late in the 1979 season. Kennedy went against the grain in 1980 to hire Preston Gomez, more closely identified with the Los Angeles Dodgers and San Diego Padres. Gomez lasted until the All-Star break. The replacement was Joey Amalfitano, who finished out the ’79 season as manager, after serving as a Cubs second baseman and two stints as a coach.

Outsiders hired starting with Green regime

Dallas Green, the ultimate outsider with his Philadelphia Phillies, totally rejected old Cubs connections in his choice of managers when he succeeded – you guessed it – Franks as GM late in 1981. Longtime Phils farm-system chum Lee Elia got Green’s first call as manager. Elia, who was briefly a spare Cubs infielder in 1968, likely was fired prematurely in 1983 for his f-bomb-filled rant against Cubs fans, a physical altercation with a camera operator and a professed ignorance of Atlanta Braves rookie Gerald Perry’s hitting tendencies after he helped beat the Cubs with a homer.

Two more managers with no previous connection to Green followed – Jim Frey and Gene Michael. Frey finally broke the first-place hex with the 1984 NL East title, but was fired in June 1986. Plucked out of the American League guidebook, Yankees organization career man Michael was out of his element as a Cub and lasted only until Labor Day 1987.

Soon after a Wrigley-style Tribune Co. buddy system swept out Green. Frey, who apparently had curried favor with the Tribune Co. brass while manager, was appointed GM with no front-office experience. He quickly hired as manager Cincinnati childhood friend Don Zimmer, who came in the old Wrigley mold as a former Cub player and coach.

Popeye's hunches propelled the youngish Cubs, the "Boys of Zimmer," to a surprise 1989 NL East crown. But an innate negativity around Zimmer and Frey led to a backward slide of most of the Green-developed kids, and '89 never came close to being repeated. When poor pitching and a free-agent spree failed out of the gate in 1991, Zimmer was soon gone. Longtime Cubs minor-league manager Jim Essian, who clapped aplenty in the dugout, proved not the answer the rest of the '91 season.

Frey was demoted to scout after '91. His replacement was ex-Sox GM Larry Himes, who had impressed Cubs chairman Stan Cook with a voluminous application. Himes-appointed managers Jim Lefebvre and Tom Trebelhorn didn't move the needle for Cubs success, but they sure increased clubhouse intrigue. Himes rules-laden reign quickly dissatisfied the players, who performed like pennant winners via a hot Sept. 1993 run to try to get Lefebvre re-hired for a third year after the season. They failed. Trebelhorn, a coach under Lefebvre, was seen by some as Himes' eyes and ears in the clubhouse. His largely-forgettable turn in the strike-shortened 1994 season was highlighted only by his "firehouse chat" across the street from Wrigley Field.

Still another outsider was Rigglesman, the first managerial hire of the regime of MacPhail and neophyte GM Ed Lynch (Himes was also demoted to scout). Rigs dodged the firing pin after a 1996 season that ended 2-14 and a 1997 campaign that began a record-worst 0-14. The 1998 wild-card playoff season, accomplished through a play-in game after a 2-6 regular-season finish, bought him another year.

The Cubs have had nothing but outsiders ever since, with the exception of half-year manager Bruce Kimm to replace Baylor in 2002 and Mike Quade to finish out the 2010 season and all of 2011. Kimm briefly had caught for the Cubs before managing in the high minors. Quade had been a longtime farm-system manager and then four-year third-base coach under Lou Piniella.

Celeb managers fell short in playoff minefields

Dusty Baker and Lou Piniella were the top Cubs "celebrity" managers since Durocher. While both had guided winning franchises, they had no previous Chicago connection and had a period of adjustment to both the Wrigley Field and Cubs experience. They had longer periods of adjustment than they originally figured. Both Baker and Piniella ended up falling short in adeptly handling the Cubs when collars got tight in the post-

season. The franchise has a nine-game playoff losing streak dating back to Game 5 of the NLCS in 2003 under Baker.

Moral of the story is to break the “Curse of Joe McCarthy,” the Cubs have rarely hired a proven champion. Only twice have they hired managers – Frisch and Durocher -- who previously won a World Series. Nor have they tapped a candidate whose avowed, long-term goal was managing the North Siders, with the necessary emotional investment in the franchise.

They passed up a dedicated, fundamentally -sound former MVP and Gold Glover who apprenticed as manager starting in the low-Class-A Midwest League, working his way up through Double- and Triple-A. Ryne Sandberg now has a three-year contract to manage the Philadelphia Phillies, but the Cubs were his obvious first choice.

Now Epstein reportedly has his eyes on the Yankees’ Joe Girardi, a former two-time Cubs catcher and childhood Cubs fan growing up in Peoria. At one time, the Cubs were in his laser sights. While a rookie Marlins manager visiting Wrigley Field in 2006, Girardi was asked if wife Kim, a Lake Forest native, would consent to him sleeping in the Cubs manager’s office a la some legendary coaches and managers if it was necessary. Girardi nodded in the affirmative.

A Yankees’ World Series victory later, it’s unclear whether that old passion for home still burns for Girardi. But if he comes to the Cubs, it will finally make up for McCarthy’s forced departure. And we can cast off the curse, even if we made that one up.



Celebrity Cubs managers like Dusty Baker had a long adjustment to Wrigley Field and the Cubs experience, and did not hold up well under pressure in the postseason.