

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Bartman should have been absolved, honored long ago

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No more classy overture could lift the burden from Steve Bartman than a World Series ring.

Problem is, the Cubs had to win a World Series for chairman Tom Ricketts to craft the ultimate apology for Bartman playing the Hitchcockian role as the “wrong man.”

Given the passage of almost 14 years, the stark fact Bartman was 15th on a list of the 10 top reasons why the Cubs did not advance to the 2003 World Series after being just five outs away with a rested bullpen and motivated players.

In all that passage of time, no Cubs top executive, manager, player or media executive came forth to exonerate Bartman and impress in the public mind he wasn't even in the wrong place at the wrong time. He did what any other fan would have done – try to catch a foul ball.

Here are some tough questions that still need answers about the involvement, or lack thereof, of people who could have prevented Bartman from becoming a recluse, afraid to re-enter the Wrigley Field he loved or move about in public identified as himself:

- Why has not the affluent attorney who grabbed the Bartman Ball on the rebound ever identified himself after profiteering by selling the ball for low six figures to Harry Caray's boss Grant DePorter? Bartman has been under a kind of house arrest while the attorney made out like a bandit. DePorter added to the misery by blowing up the ball and making it into what he said was pasta sauce. This attorney has not suffered one bit, other than the guilty feeling knowing the reaction if he outed himself.
- Why didn't then-Cubs president Andy MacPhail make a statement or meet privately with Bartman as soon as possible to support a loyal fan who was railroaded into anonymity? I can see not saying anything the next day, to not disrupt the Cubs' mindset going into Game 7 of the NLCS. But once the collapse was complete and the smoke had cleared, MacPhail needed to clean up the situation. Tribune Co. bigwig Dennis FitzSi-



Moises Alou leaps in vain as Steve Bartman deflects the ball amid the most catastrophic game in Cubs history.



Some thought Steve Bartman should have had a place in the Cubs' World Series parade. But team chairman Tom Ricketts, seen waving in the parade, opted for the classy route with a ring for Bartman.

mons should have joined in. Problem was, the conservative baseball blueblood under-spent and under-staffed with his big-market team. He made matters much worse by under-acting here.

- Why didn't team leaders like Moises Alou or Kerry Wood organize a troop of players to meet with Bartman, absolve him and immediately welcome him back to Wrigley Field? The next afternoon, I talked with Alou, who was angered at media attempts – particularly the Chicago Sun-Times – to identify Bartman as soon as possible overnight. Alou, of course, drew the attention of the entire world by throwing a fit for not making a catch as Bartman tipped the ball. It says here that Alou, no athletic left fielder, was questionable in being able to time a leap for the catch. The actions of prominent players would have made an impression on a massive Cubs fan base – the team would draw more than 3 million fans the next half-decade – that even an active MacPhail would not have accomplished.

- Speaking of players, have you heard much from short-stop Alex Gonzalez on the meltdown and Bartman at that time and in ensuing years? A kind of quiet guy, Gonzalez

needed to step up and set a pick for Bartman. Normally sure-handed, he made the error minutes after the Bartman deflection on what would have been at least the second, momentum-cutting out, and possibly an inning-ending double play (it was no sure thing like most claim).

- Why has there been no industry rebuke to Englishman Michael Cooke, then editor of the Sun-Times, who took a Fleet Street tabloid approach to quickly smoking out Bartman's identity and address? Cooke, who had two tenures as Sun-Times editor, desired to sell papers badly against the establishment – and Cubs corporate cousin – Tribune. Cooke was no long-timer in Chicago. He was a journalistic mercenary. He moved out of the country again, to Canada, after his second time at the erstwhile Bright One in 2009. Cooke literally had a hit-and-run attitude toward Bartman. How many other victims of his sensationalism has he racked up while dodging the industry-wide layoffs of the past decades?

- Bartman immediately made it clear he wanted privacy and would not do interviews. So then why didn't some ESPN bigwig say "out of bounds" to hyper-aggressive writer Wayne Drehs, who stalked Bartman in the parking lot of the latter's Chicago north suburban office in 2005? Drehs waited until Bartman walked to his car at day's end, getting a couple of perfunctory comments. Some Cooke-ian attitude existed in Bristol, Conn. – get the story, and rack up views and ratings no matter how much someone is hurt.

Despite the awarding of the ring to Bartman, the memory of the incident will not fade anytime no matter how many World Series the Cubs win. The shocking collapse against

the Marlins is the most catastrophic on-field incident in one game in team history. Scapegoats were needed. It took courage no one showed to accept responsibility as guilty parties and take the pressure off an innocent man.

Better late than never for Bartman, but it should not have taken all this time for justice to be granted.