

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS



The management trio of (from left) Joe McCarthy, William Wrigley, Jr., and William L. Veeck Sr. was probably the best in Cubs history – until McCarthy was pushed out in 1930 partially due to Wrigley’s yearning for a World Series title. McCarthy went on to manage the dynastic New York Yankees.

## ***Cubs postseason hangovers create long-lasting headaches on and off the field***

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If you’d been paying close attention instead of gnashing your teeth, you’d realize a Cubs hangover from a postseason expedition, last year’s one the most successful since 1908, was the rule, not the exception.

The same conditions – health and mental well-being of a team, conditions of opponents, good fortune – cannot be bottled from one season to another. A World Series champion must possess overwhelming talent while almost having an unbeatable reputation preceding them to realistically have a chance to repeat. The youngish Cubs of 2016 got kudos for their oncoming talent, but did not have the track record of near-invincibility a la the dynastic Yankees or, for a shorter period, the mid-Seventies Big Red Machine.

Dragged down by an increasingly shaky starting rotation and key position players’ poor seasons, the 2017 Cubs waffled sideways to 43-45 at the All-Star break. In frustrating

the masses, they continued a historical trend that has really hurt the franchise, both in on-field momentum and leadership personnel, for the better part of a century.

The only Cubs postseason entry that returned the next year to October baseball since 1907 were the Lou Piniella-led 2007-08 teams. And any carryover positive effects of the 97-win '08 team were crushed by the morale-busting three-game NLDS sweep by the Dodgers, a team hot just at the right time, and dismissed from the postseason after their triumph over the Cubs. Remember Milton Bradley, who sweet-talked GM Jim Hendry – nervous because of lefty-hitting Kosuke Fukudome's progressive decline in '08 – into a free-agent contract? Bradley's anti-social behavior threw a big roadblock into the 2009 season. The Cubs did not recover until Hendry successor Theo Epstein's teardown-and-rebuild was in its fourth season in 2015.

Perhaps the most disastrous hangover of a Cubs postseason foray took place in 1930. A sudden September collapse cost the franchise the services of manager Joe McCarthy. Marse Joe was just fine at the Cubs' helm, having overseen the buildup of the NL's most powerful lineup since 1926. But then-owner William Wrigley, Jr. lusted after a World Series title denied by the Cubs' unexpected fold in the '29 Fall Classic against Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics. The gum magnate was none too pleased at McCarthy for the October failure.

Wrigley, who had ongoing ideas about prize '29 acquisition Rogers Hornsby becoming manager, sealed the deal after the Cubs coughed up a 5 1/2-game lead, their season high point on Aug. 30, 1930. The Cubs entertained big crowds not yet turned away by the growing Great Depression via Hack Wilson's record 56-homer, 191-RBI season. A 9-14 skid, handing over the NL pennant to the Cardinals, resulted in McCarthy's resignation and Hornsby's promotion to manager.

Wrigley died early in 1932. Without his sponsor, Hornsby walked on increasingly shaky ground, especially after being investigated by Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis for his love of horse racing that included borrowed money from Cubs players to pay his debts. Cubs president William L. Veeck, Sr., granted near-ownership power, fired Hornsby in August in favor of Charlie Grimm.

Although the Cubs staged a spectacular stretch run to win the pennant under Jolly Cholly, McCarthy had established himself as Yankees manager. He took over a well-oiled machine on the back nine of Babe Ruth's career and in the prime of Lou Gehrig's, seamlessly keeping the momentum going into the 1940s. McCarthy got his immediate revenge with the Yankees' four-game sweep over the Cubs in the '32 World Series. Given a choice between McCarthy and Grimm, which would the discerning baseball fan choose as long-term Cubs manager?

Move ahead 13 years to 1945. The largely wartime draft-exempt 98-win Cubs had scraped by the near-dynastic Cardinals to win the pennant by just three games. The '45 season was the only one Stan Musial missed due to military service, in the Navy. It's safe to assume Stan the Man's bat alone would have made up that slender difference in the standings.

## **Gallagher sat on pat hand for 1946**

With all the veterans returning to baseball for 1946, you'd figure Cubs GM Jim Gallagher would have been prompted to acquire his own reinforcements. But Gallagher stood on a pat hand. The Cubs dipped to 82 victories while the Cardinals and Brooklyn Dodgers battled way above them for a pennant that St. Louis eventually captured in a three-game playoff. The '45 pennant holdover collapsed in mid-season 1947 with the franchise entering a two-decade Dark Ages in which only one seasonal Cubs entry, in 1963, finished above .500.

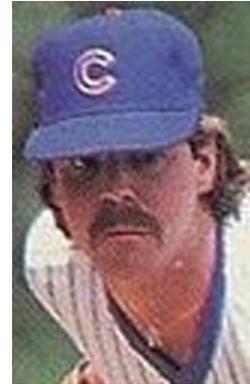
Fast forward to 1984. GM Dallas Green's answer to the startling five-game loss to the Padres in the NLCS was to re-sign his free-agent pitchers: Rick Sutcliffe, Steve Trout, Dennis Eckersley and Scott Sanderson. But this quartet, along with fifth starter Dick Ruthven, all got hurt for varying times in 1985, when the Cubs started 35-19 before collapsing via a 13-game losing streak. At one point in August all five starters were on the disabled list together with the likes Lary Sorensen, Ray Fontenot, Steve Engel, Derek Botelho, Jon Perlman, Reggie Patterson and an overage Larry Gura unsuccessfully plugging the gaping rotation holes.

Tribune Co. execs began doubting Green with all that money sidelined in the training room and the losses piling up in successive 77-84, 70-90 and 76-86 seasons. Just like with McCarthy in 1930, the worst effects of postseason hangover were not felt on the field. Green was forced out after the 1987 season, his rebuilding job unfinished, and then steadily reversed by successors Jim Frey and Larry Himes.

Many of Green's and development guru Gordie Goldsberry's home-grown players were on the field for the Boys of Zimmer 1989 NL East titlists. When Greg Maddux started, six Cubs-developed players typically were in the lineup. But like the 2017 Cubs, many of the youngsters backslid in 1990 as the Cubs fell under .500. The negative atmosphere thus created was partially responsible for the bungling of Maddux's long-term contract after the 1991 season and his subsequent free-agent defection to the Braves. The Cubs would have only two barely-over .500 seasons through 1998.

## **MacPhail-Lynch signed Gaetti over Ventura**

The tag team of president Andy MacPhail and GM Ed Lynch over-estimated the quality of their 1998 wild-card playoff team. Instead of aggressively pursuing free-agent third baseman Robin Ventura of the White Sox, the brass re-signed 40-year-old Gary Gaetti, whose stretch-run Cubs heroics in '98 proved his last hurrah. A semi-suspect pitching staff imploded to a 5.27 team ERA, worst in modern times, just below the 2000 team's 5.25. Lefty Micah Bowie had a 9.96 ERA and a 2.191 WHIP in 11 starts. As in so many other Cubs seasons, a sparkling late-spring or early-summer record (32-23 on June 8) totally disintegrated. The Cubs suffered through a 6-24 August as part of a 10-40 rout (46-47 on July 22 dipped to 56-87 on Sept. 12) and ended up 67-95.



**Lefty Steve Engel exemplified the pitching wreckage on the 1985 Cubs after all the front-line starters got hurt.**

Four years later, MacPhail, aided by Hendry in Lynch's seat, finally cleaned up their millennial-era mess. They got accolades for loading up a 2003 Cubs entry that was "five outs away" from the World Series. For 2004, the Cubs reacquired Maddux to round out a superlative rotation (on paper) while adding Derrek Lee, Michael Barrett, Todd Walker and LaTroy Hawkins.

But constant clubhouse uproars involving Sammy Sosa and assorted players and manager Dusty Baker verbally dueling broadcasters Chip Caray and Steve Stone took away any pleasant veneer from this season. Kerry Wood's and Mark Prior's injuries set the negative tone for the rotation, while bullpen instability forced Hawkins into an ill-fitting role as closer. Still, the Cubs had a 1 1/2-game lead in the wild-card race with a little more than a week to go. They'd go on to collapse, out of the money, but oddly won one more game (89) than the 2003 NL Central champs. Sosa's last-day walkout proved to be the final time he has ever set foot in Wrigley Field, while the bad vibes of the season greased the skids for Baker's departure two years later.

All this team narrative going back to Herbert Hoover's White House days proves one thing. Cherish that World Series title. Such glory, and continued success, is never guaranteed.

All the Cubs predecessors who flopped trying to advance after a postseason run would have given anything for rings. NHL enthusiasts claim the Stanley Cup is the hardest title to win in any sport. The Cubs can give them a run for their money with the World Series.



**The Cubs thought they acquired an up-and-coming lefty from the Braves in Micah Bowie. Instead, they got a 9.96 ERA in 11 starts.**