

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## *Good fortune finally outweighs Top 10 of bad stuff in Cubs annals*

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Much has been made of the good fortune that finally propelled the Cubs to a World Series championship after an interminable wait.

Never before in franchise history have a one-two punch of Theo Epstein and Joe Maddon fallen into the team's laps, after so many decades of front-office and dugout incompetence. Epstein fled Boston due to a Red Sox collapse for the ages at just the exact time Tom Ricketts was looking for a post-Jim Hendry baseball boss. Maddon slipped away from Tampa Bay only due to a contract clause activated by the departure of GM/confidant Andrew Friedman.

Then, the young position players whom Epstein either drafted or acquired in trades developed quickly. The kids did not struggle for years, then flame out in the manner of Nelson Mathews, Danny Murphy, Felix Pie and many more. Only hint of a struggle was Javy Baez in limited exposure at the very start of his big-league days.

Finally, Maddon had his biggest career brain cramp in the final two games of the World Series. For sure the baseball gods smiled on the Cubs as the team on both nights in Cleveland overcame managerial mistakes as egregious as Leo Durocher's personnel handling in late summer of 1969 or Jim Frey's choice of starting pitchers in Games 4 and 5 of the 1984 NLCS.



**William L. Veeck's premature death at 56 was the top example of bad fortune in Cubs history.**

These three examples are pretty outstanding, given the constant bad fortune – not curses or anything supernatural – that beset the Cubs, especially since 1945. Jack Brickhouse was famous by stating “Every team can have a bad century” in relation to the franchise he helped sell so adeptly on TV. But behind that statement was a telling Brickhouse analysis. He said on several occasions the Cubs were never the luckiest team around, adding bad vibes to bad management.

What held the Cubs back that the opportune events of 2011-16 overcame? In a year-end style, in this case a championship-drought end look-back, are our Top 10 examples of bad fortune. We can easily go Top 30:

**1.** The premature death of Cubs president William L. Veeck at 56 in 1933. The elder Veeck was the Cubs’ most dynamic executive pre-Epstein. Granted virtual ownership power, Veeck built up a perennial contender. It’s safe to assume he would have groomed his son Bill to take over when he retired. But fast-spreading leukemia, beyond the treatment capabilities of 1933 medicine, claimed his life at an early age. Cubs owner Phil Wrigley, frustrated in not being able to find “another Bill Veeck,” appointed himself team president. That led to No. 2...

**2.** Too much meddling by ownership in baseball operations. Wrigley injected too many oddball ideas, but not enough fundamentals, quality management and financial support, into the personnel side of his team. Successor Tribune Co. followed suit, as media execs Stan Cook, John Madigan and Don Grenesko undercut Dallas Green, fired Don Zimmer and bungled Greg Maddux away, among other transgressions. Nobody in either set of owners could simply hire the best baseball mind, give him the most adequate budget in the game and let him work without interference.

**3.** Pitching injuries. The young late Fifties hard-throwing quartet of Dick Drott, Moe Drabowsky, Glen Hobbie and Bob Anderson were rated by Brickhouse as “our horses... but they came up lame.” Add lefty Dick Ellsworth to that group, his post-1963 effectiveness cut by tendinitis after a 22-win, 2.11-ERA season. Had at least three of the group escaped injury, the Cubs could have had a contender with the likes of Ron Santo, Billy Williams, Lou Brock and Kenny Hubbs emerging from the farm system. Later, in 1985, Rick Sutcliffe came back too soon from a partially-torn hamstring and was never a power pitcher again. The Mark Prior/Kerry Wood aches are well-known, screwing up the best-laid plans for the top of the rotation in the mid-2000s.

**4.** Late-inning meltdowns in Game 5 of the 1984 NLCS and Game 6 of the 2003 NLCS. Conquering all the other bad fortune, the Cubs could taste a World Series entrée both times. But mass depression was let loose on the Cubs Universe via the bounces, bobble and deflection of baseballs at just the wrong times. Even after 2016’s dream season, these pratfalls won’t ever lose their sting.

**5.** Durocher's managing in 1969 and 1970. The Lip pulled off the greatest botch job in Cubs history by running his first-place team into the ground in '69. He did not trust his bench players, end of his rotation or bullpen. Paul Popovich hit .312 as a Cub in '69, though, capable of spelling Ron Santo, Don Kessinger and Glenn Beckert. Durocher also overworked his starters in 1970, under-trusting the bullpen, while allowing the lineup to devolve to station-to-station status on the bases. Don't feel totally bad, though. The '69 Mets finished 37-11. Nothing much the Cubs could have done about them with only four head-to-head games from Sept. 8 onward.

**6.** No home-grown position players sticking in the Cubs lineup for 20 years from 1965 to 1985, and then only very few from 1990 to 2010. C'mon, not even one every five years, by accident? No team can prosper with such little production from its farm system.

**7.** On that subject, the firing of Gordon Goldsberry as player development guru late in 1988. Under Dallas Green, the courtly, respected Goldsberry finally got the moribund scouting/farm operation going, with Maddux, Rafael Palmeiro and Mark Grace his prime products. But ticky-tacky politics from Green successor Jim Frey, an often negative man, spun Goldsberry out of the organization. Green was expendable; Goldsberry was not. Wonder if Epstein and Jed Hoyer have ever heard of Goldsberry, who died in 1996?

**8.** Poor oversight by media. Soft coverage by Cubs media has been criticized in the 21st century. But that pattern dates back to the 1930s, when writers – happy that Phil Wrigley was accessible – covered up his statement he did not know anything about baseball. Mike Royko, the Babe Ruth of columnists, could have crusaded to get better ownership into Wrigley Field in the 1970s, but opted to play his favorite Cubs for laughs.



**Jack Brickhouse called (from left) Dick Drott, Moe Drabowsky, Glen Hobbie and Bob Anderson the Cubs' "horses." But he added, "They came up lame."**

**9.** The all-day schedule. By the mid-1970s, everyone around Wrigley Field knew the daytime-only home schedule was a detriment to the Cubs' season-long competitiveness. But as long as the Wrigley family owned the team, lights were not added. There were exceptions, of course – the 1984 Cubs with overwhelming talent won 96 games with an all-day schedule as Tribune Co. ran into community opposition against lights. Still, there was a direct correlation between the most eccentric schedule in the majors and repeated late-season collapses. Maddon was a rare bird trying to ameliorate the schedule by canceling a lot of second-half batting practices in 2015-16.

**10.** Just plain ol' bad luck, baseball style. It's the ultimate game of failure. Bad things will happen to any team through no fault of the players and managers. The Cubs simply never had seasons where everything broke their way, a la the '69 Mets. With a deep talent base and competent baseball management, the good luck outweighed the bad in 2016, serving as the cherry on the sundae.