

So long, Mad Dog



Greg Maddux won 133 games in a Chicago uniform.

The retirement of Greg Maddux has left Cubs fans to wonder what might have been, but it's unlikely that he would have changed World Series history alone.

*By Paul Ladewski
Posted on Tuesday, December 9th*

From 355 career victories to four Cy Young Awards, the numbers vouch for the greatness of **Greg Maddux**, who retired after 23 seasons on Monday. It was the way that he accomplished it that separated him from the rest, though.

An underrated athlete who posted a respectable .171 career batting average and collected 18 Gold Glove Awards in his career, Maddux could think the game as well or better than anyone. Even more remarkable, the man known as Mad Dog did it in the steroids age, a time when brawn trumped brains all too often.

To understand the true brilliance of Maddux, one only had to witness the first game of a scheduled doubleheader at Wrigley Field on July 22, 1997. Well aware of plate umpire Eric Gregg and his supersized strike zone, the Atlanta Braves ace painted the corners like da Vinci did *The Last Supper* on that afternoon. He threw all of 76 pitches in a five-hit, 4-1 masterpiece that took two hours, seven minutes to complete. Two Cubs batters advanced past first base. AutoMaddox, indeed.

Yet as dominant as Maddux was in his own low-key, methodical way for the better part of three decades, it's a stretch to believe that he would have significantly changed Cubs history by himself.

In the first 10 years after Maddux signed with the Braves as a free agent, the Cubs won as many as 90 games only in the 1998 season. In the NLDS, they were swept in three games by a Braves team that had totaled 106 victories in the regular season. If Maddux had switched teams, the balance of power undoubtedly would have shifted somewhat, but not nearly enough to make up the 16 1/2-game difference between them.

In 2003, when the Cubs extended the Florida Marlins to a seventh game in the league finals, Maddux experienced a subpar season by his standards. His 16-11 record and 3.96 earned run average were comparable to that of **Matt Clement**, who had a 14-12 record and 4.11 ERA as the Cubs fourth starter. In his only NLCS start, Clement pitched 7 2/3 solid innings in the fourth game, an 8-3 victory against the Florida Marlins that gave his team a 3-1 stranglehold in the series.

The Cubs captured division titles the last two seasons, but it's doubtful that the 40-something Maddux would have been a factor in either one of them.

This much is more certain: The failure of team management to make a long-term commitment to Maddux ranks as the worst personnel move in modern franchise history.

Never mind the **Lou Brock** trade, which is No. 1 on the list in the minds of many. The Cubs were premature to trade Brock to the St. Louis Cardinals in June, 1964, three days before he was to turn 25 years old. At the same time, the outfielder had rarely showed flashes of stardom in his brief stay here. At the time of the move, his .251 batting average, two home runs and 10 stolen bases in 52 games weren't much different than that of the previous season.

Not so in the case of Maddux, however. In 1992, the right-hander came off a brilliant season in which he led the league in victories (20) and innings pitched (268) and ranked third in ERA (2.18). While no one predicted that only Warren Spahn would win more games in the Live Ball Era, the 26-year-old Maddux figured to have a long and successful career ahead of him.

So will there be one fewer Hall of Famer in a Cubs hat than there should be in five years? Count on it. But will the Cubs have at least one fewer World Series championship at the same time? Probably not.