

Cubs fans still trying to solve 1969

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By Tom Singer / MLB.com

This is what hangs over the heads of Cubs fans, the dark cloud that follows them everywhere, the creaking ceiling above them that could come crashing down any minute. This is why anxiety is their way of life, why they cringe the instant a Steve Bartman sticks out his glove or Kerry Wood starts picking at a blister.

This is why, for nearly a hundred years, for Cubs fans it's always brightest before the storm.

1969.

It was to be The Year of Deliverance for baseball's bums, a team with a Hall of Fame core managed by a Hall of Fame manager, turning Wrigley Field's ivy into a laurel.

The Cubs, owners of three modest winning seasons in their last 22, didn't have to wait long for "next year" to arrive. They won 11 of their first 12 games to sprint to a 2 1/2-game lead over the Pittsburgh Pirates in the newly-minted National League East Division.

It was a mere appetizer. With Leo Durocher not letting them ease up on the pedal, the Cubs opened up a nine-game lead by mid-June. It was still at nine games two months later, on Aug. 16.

In between those peaks, Cubs flooded the NL All-Star team for the Midsummer Classic in Washington's RFK Memorial Stadium. Chicago's infield went en masse, including catcher Randy Hundley and, around the horn, third baseman Ron Santo, shortstop Don Kessinger, second baseman Glenn Beckert and first baseman Ernie Banks, a future Hall of Famer.

There was no room on the All-Star roster for two other future Hall of Famers, outfielder Billy Williams and ace right-hander Ferguson Jenkins.

A tremendous team, playing at a tremendous pace, made Chicago's hearts race.

"There was no way we weren't going to win," Santo recalled recently.

And, then ... the laurel got thorns, the dream slowly dissolved into a nightmare, summer died.

The Cubs not only didn't win, not only were they beaten by the eight-year-old New York Mets -- losers of 737 games in their first seven seasons -- they were pummeled. Incredibly, the Cubs wound up eight games out, earning a singularly black chapter in the book of great baseball collapses.

Others who lost sizable late-season leads (1951 Dodgers, 13 games on Aug. 11; 1978 Red Sox, 8 1/2 on Aug. 20; 1995 Angels, 10 1/2 on Aug. 16) at least regrouped to force showdowns at the wire. But the 1969 Cubs ... they could not stop their rapid descent.

The debacle has been analyzed, hashed and rehashed countless times but, if asked, the late Satchel Paige could have offered the best explanation:

"Don't look back, something might be gaining on you."

The legendary pitcher's signature phrase illuminates how the Cubs' apparently firm handle was greased. In mid-August, the Mets began their furious charge on the wings of their exemplary starting pitchers. The Cubs heard footsteps that gradually became deafening.

The Cubs were 31 games over .500 at the Aug. 16 peak. On Sept. 2, they improved that to plus-32 -- but in the process had seen that nine-game lead shrivel to five.

The Mets, 15-4 over that same span, had already launched into a fabulous closing kick that would see them win 39 of their last 50 games. The Cubs simply couldn't keep up with that.

The "What happened?" question has been asked and answered often enough to have gained urban legend status, but it's time to debunk all the myths. Because, you know what they say -- admission is the first step to recovery.

• **Did the Midwestern summer just wear down the Cubs?**



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This was still in the era when Bleacher Bums said, "Let there be lights ... elsewhere." Wrigley Field's all-day schedule was suspected to have prematurely emptied the Cubs' tank, as it had so many seasons before.

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Not likely. Not so much because of how the 1969 schedule broke down: the Cubs had only 19 home games (of 81) past that Aug. 16 acme (compared to 24 on the road). But National Weather Service logs indicate the average Chicago temperature during the summer of '69 was a comfy and relatively mild 71.8 degrees.

So that still leaves the Mets supplying most of the heat.

• The black cat?

Seeing was believing, and the proof is still easily Googled: There it is, a black cat wandering across Shea Stadium on Sept. 9, passing Santo, who was in the on-deck circle, on its way to the Cubs dugout.

A great photo-op, to be sure, but a death sentence handed down by the fates? That's a stretch.

For one thing ... "At the time, I didn't think anything of it," Santo reflected. "The cat wasn't scared; it just walked around me and went through the dugout, with Leo there. He looked right at Leo and went underneath the stands."

For another ... By the time of this incident, the Cubs had already been declawed, already on a five-game losing streak that had melted their division lead to a game-and-a-half.

• Did "Leo the Lip" turn into "Leo the Whip"?

This is the one that tormented Durocher, who burned to be the one to deliver the Cubs, the one he took to the grave with him: That he was guilty of running the "old" veterans into the ground.

Also, it is the feeblest of all the alibis. Yes, it was true that the 38-year-old Banks sat out only seven games -- two after mid-August -- and the workload might have led to his .186 September while the Cubs went 8-17.

But that was Mr. Cub. He'd rarely *ever* missed a game, a legacy that Durocher merely maintained. And Banks was second on that club with his 23 homers and 106 RBIs.

Furthermore, the rest of the team had plenty of young legs. Five others played 131-plus games and had 500-plus at-bats (Hundley, Beckert, Santo, Kessinger, Williams); their average age was 28.

• The Curse of Joe Niekro?

Now, maybe we're talking. Niekro was a young lad of 24, coming off a 14-win season, when the Cubs dealt him on April 25 to San Diego for another right-hander, Dick Selma.

Selma did help the 1969 Cubs with 10 wins. But he went 0-6 on the other side of that mid-August hill. He never won another game for the Cubs, and only 15 for anyone else.

Niekro went on to 197 more wins across the next 20 seasons.

There was no shortage of explanations or excuses or examples of divine intervention for those who wanted to find them.

None of them changed the bottom line: The Cubs led the NL East for the season's first 154 days, then expired. Or, the final verdict: It hurt; it still hurts.

But it still was a great season, and it is still being thrown in the faces of the current Cubs. The team's daily pregame media notes brim with such references as "most since 1969," "best since 1969" and "first time since 1969."

Because, you know something else they always say: You must confront your fears in order to overcome them.

This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.