

Can big season emerge from Cubby hole?

by Chris Jenkins

MESA, Ariz. - Spring-training performances are like, well, jinxes and curses and other such nonsense involving billy goats. Simply, they are what you make of them.

With that understanding, consider the following sequence from a recent Cactus League game at HoHoKam Park:

- For openers, high-priced (and converted) center fielder Alfonso Soriano badly mistimed his failed lunge at a first-inning line drive that gave the Colorado Rockies a 1-0 lead.

- Same inning. With Rockies on first and third, new left fielder Cliff Floyd made a running catch of Matt Holliday's looper into no-man's land. Inexplicably, Floyd flipped the ball backward toward Soriano in an attempted double-play relay home, but Soriano never saw it coming and the ball fell to the ground as another unearned run scored.

- Next inning. Colorado's Troy Tulowitzki lofted a high fly deep to right-center that Soriano appeared to have well-tracked, but he never made a try to catch it. The ball dropped between Soriano and right fielder Jacque Jones.

- Floyd later would be charged with a second error and Soriano let another liner outplay him for a double.

Introducing, the new Cubbies. The new and supposedly improved Cubbies. Pay them all the money you want, but dress 'em up in that uniform and they truly become Chicago Cubs. Enough to make you wince.

Then again, before the same meaningless Cubs-Rockies exhibition would end in a 4-4 tie, the Cubs would get home runs from Soriano, Aramis Ramirez and Derrek Lee, potentially the most devastating power trio since Green Day.

"If they pitch at all, they're gonna be tough," Padres starter Greg Maddux said of the revamped Cubs. "That's some lineup."

A year ago at this time, Maddux was on his second go-round with the Cubs, who were about to embark toward the worst record in the National League at 66-96. While Cubs fans are more patient than a 40-man roster of guys named Job, the 2006 season was too much to take, especially right after those infernal White Sox went and beat the Cubs to the long-lost World Series and even won the whole schmear.

Figures. A year before that, the Boston Red Sox actually gave renewed hope to Cubs fans, a reason to believe it was possible to overcome curses. Making matters worse last year, too, was the fact the Detroit Tigers made it to the World Series that now has been denied the Cubs since 1945.

Talk about piling on, too. The Tigers lost that World Series to the club that won the Cubs' division, the St. Louis Cardinals, who are almost as despised on the North Side as the White Sox.

"(Cubs fans) have plenty of reasons to be upset, plenty of reason to be frustrated," said Jones, declining to delve back into the racial epithets he heard among the verbal abuses heaped down upon him at home games. "Some of these fans been fans since little kids, growing up at Wrigley, wanting to win so bad their whole lives. To not win so long, that's hard. Then the Red Sox win and the White Sox win and ... yeah, it's understandable.

"But people also have to understand that guys like Soriano or (Ted) Lilly or Derrek or Cliff or any of us didn't come here wanting to lose. They came here knowing this was a good chance to win."

Not to put too crass a point on it, but the money isn't bad, either. That's how the Cubs got everybody's attention over the offseason. They shelled out approximately \$300 million in an over-the-moon market to keep Ramirez, then added Soriano, Lilly, fellow starting pitcher Jason Marquis and second baseman Mark DeRosa. They bought both leadership and entertainment value in manager Lou Piniella.

"They have an interest to win the World Series, and that's why I came here," said Soriano, signed by the Cubs for \$136 million over eight years. "The other teams (that pursued him) - the Giants, the Dodgers, the Angels - all have good teams. But I think this team has more of a chance."

Perhaps only the most indomitable of Cubs fans would fully buy that reasoning. For all the money they spent, there are still considerable holes in the Cubbies. Of course, they wouldn't be the Cubbies without holes.

The temptation is to start the list with defense, where the Cubs ranked 22nd in the majors last year, especially now with Soriano botching plays left and right in center. It's a new position for him, clearly, and he hasn't even set up shop amid Wrigley Field's tricky winds and treacherous brick walls behind the ivy.

In making the difficult transition from second base to left field, Soriano was both great and terrible, leading the majors by far with 22 assists in 2006 while committing 11 errors. The way he swings the bat and sparks an offense, though, is there anybody on the North Side who really cares what he does afield?

"He's a fearless hitter," Jones said. "Put him in the front of the lineup, plug those numbers into last year's lineup and we're 15 to 20 games better than we were."

Indeed, little question exists that the Cubs' bolstered batting order will rough up pitchers, particularly in a

Central Division where no clubs boast NL West-type depth on the mound.

But that also goes, still, for a Cubs staff trying to recover from the perennial health issues of former co-aces Kerry Wood and Mark Prior. The former is on the disabled list for the 11th time and the latter, coming back from arm troubles and struggling with mechanics in spring training, has been sent to Triple-A to work out things.

In their place are Lilly and Marquis, imported at a combined cost of \$61 million, more a reflection of supply and demand than wins and losses. Pitching for different teams last year, they were a combined 29-29, Marquis posting a 6.02 ERA and 14-16 mark for a World Series championship team. Marquis gave up 35 homers, fourth-highest in the majors, and Wrigley is no place to fix that particular problem.

Even if both prove as masterful as staff ace Carlos Zambrano, the unshakable faith of the eternally faithful will be tested. Back at the back of the bullpen is closer Ryan Dempster, who went 1-9 last year.

Truth be told, though, the Cubs could start the season with 12 rummies on their pitching staff and there'd still be a buzz in the Windy City about the onset of another Cubs season. Surely, this is the year. Winter, be gone. Let's play 162.

"It's the Cubbies, man," Maddux said. "There's always a vibe with the Cubbies. Greatest vibe in baseball."

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