

Cubs World Series edition

October 24, 2016

In the end, in the game that meant the most, there was no drama. The Cubs scored early and often enough, the pitching was dominant and efficient, and the defense was mostly flawless. There was no perilously small lead heading into the late innings. It was as though the Cubs decided to take it easy on us this time. They were out to angst-proof the final inning. They mostly succeeded. Cubs fans have vivid and twisted imaginations, so we could still conceive of ways that the 5-0 lead could go bad. But it didn't. It was never in any jeopardy. On a crisp night, the Cubs played a crisp game, and they did something that at many times in most of our lives didn't seem possible.

The Chicago Cubs are going to the World Series.

Take your time and just stare at that last sentence for a while. Let it rattle around your brain. Let it lie there.

It took until the fourth inning of the fourth game of the National League Championship Series against the Dodgers for the best team in baseball to truly show up. But when they did, they were a sight to see.

After turning an opening game win into a 2-1 series deficit thanks to back-to-back shoutouts by the Dodgers, the Cubs had even the most fervent of believers concerned. The fans most prone to doubt and paranoia were already scurrying for the life rafts. This was going to be the last year's NLCS versus the Mets all over again. The offense was disappearing when the team needed it the most. Doom and despair began to creep in.

And then it was expelled as quickly as it arrived. Ten runs in game four, which included much needed awakenings from the bats of Addison Russell and Matt Szczur.

What?

OK, it was Szczur's bat, but Anthony Rizzo was the one swinging it. The return to form of the Cubs shortstop and first baseman lengthened the Cubs lineup to a point where the Dodgers bullpen, already taxed from a long season of bailing out a conga line of injury replacement starting pitchers as well as yeoman's work in the NLDS, could not find enough exits from innings. The Cubs offense that had bludgeoned teams all season had arrived when needed most. Eight more runs followed in game five, and the 2-1 deficit had become a 3-2 series lead and a return to Wrigley Field for a game or two.

That was important because surely the Cubs could not beat the great Clayton Kershaw. Kershaw is with little doubt the best pitcher in the game, but he has never been known for postseason excellence, and while he had delivered a great effort in the Dodgers' game two win, he had been anything but invincible in the Division Series against the Nationals where he allowed 15 hits and eight runs in 12 and a third innings (two starts and a two-out relief appearance).

A dominant pitching performance was in the cards for game six, but it wasn't from Kershaw. In the game two loss to the Dodgers the Cubs treated Kershaw like most other pitchers they'd faced. They tried to get ahead in the count on him, but he kept pumping strikes. The Cubs spent their seven innings against him trying to take balls that never came. In game six, they attacked early, and did damage. Two runs in the first. Another in the second. Homers from Willson Contreras in the fourth and Rizzo in the fifth. By the time Kenley Jansen came in to the game in the sixth the Cubs had enough runs to win with. A good thing, because the Cubs didn't touch Jansen...again.

While Kershaw was being force fed his own mortality, Kyle Hendricks was pitching the game of his life. He allowed a leadoff single to Andrew Toles and an eighth inning single to Josh Reddick and nothing in between. Kershaw is great, but Hendricks is no slouch. Even if that's exactly what he looks

like as he walks on and off the the field. Both managers, Joe Maddon and Dave Roberts, wanted, ideally, to go straight from their starter to their dominant closer. Both did. It worked out better for the Cubs.

Aroldis Chapman entered in the eighth with one out and Reddick at first. Compared to his other eighth inning entrances in the playoffs this year, this situation was a piece of cake. Thanks to some savvy fielding by Javy Baez a sinking liner turned into a 4-6-3 double play.

Thus, the relatively stress-free ninth inning. Chapman was in the game with a five run lead, and the Dodgers showed no signs of being able to mount an actual rally.

Fox Sports 1's cameras surveyed the scene in the ninth. White W flags were at the ready. Some fans were already crying. Nobody could sit or stand still. Thoughts of many Cubs fans in the stands or around the world were focused on previous generations who wanted to see their Cubs go to a World Series, but hadn't lived to see it. A one out walk to Carlos Ruiz set the stage for a slick 6-4-3 from Russell to Baez to Rizzo. Cheering, screaming, guttural noises and unintelligible shouting erupted—and that was just from me in my basement.

The wait was over. Seventy-one years for one National League pennant. You wonder how that's even possible? Can you really try to do something for seven decades and never accomplish it? Apparently you can. Cubs fans, like the current team, hardly need much reason to party, but this occasion demanded it. The Cubs, a charter member of the National League, had finally won it again. Wrigley Field will finally host another World Series.

How did they do it? How did the 2016 Cubs avoid the weight of history when other teams before them had collapsed? How did a 2-1 series deficit turn into a springboard instead of a cinder block chained to an ankle?

The answer, as it turned out was surprisingly simple. They

just kept playing. From April until October they had been the best team in baseball, and they never got away from what made them great. They never seemed concerned with all of the ineptness that had come before them and defined their franchise. These Cubs are new. None of that morbid history resonates with them. In their minds, being a Cub means playing for a first-class organization and expecting to win. So why would they panic? We're the ones who carry the weight of the Cubs' past failures around like a bag we refuse to check at the airport. When it was 3-0 in the second inning, how many of us immediately flashed the fact that Rick Sutcliffe and the 1984 Cubs blew a 3-0 lead in the decisive game five against the Padres? How many of us cringed at the knowledge that the 2003 Cubs had Mark Prior on the mound with a 3-0 lead in the eighth inning of game six?

What did these Cubs do? They scored a fourth and then a fifth run. They didn't know about that past and they didn't care. They were too busy trying to win a baseball game so they could have a party on the field and then get a chance to play for a ring.

These Cubs didn't play to "do it" for past Cubs great who never got a chance to play in a World Series like Sandberg or Ron Santo, or Ernie Banks, or Billy Williams. They didn't do it for the long suffering fans. They did it for themselves and they did it for each other, and in return, it got done for everybody else.

While we lost our minds and celebrated, it was the team that reminded us that the job's not done. The NL pennant is great, and it is to be celebrated and cherished, but it's not the end. There's another series and four more wins to get. They won't play those games to end the 1908 references. For them, it doesn't matter if the last Cubs World Series championship was 1908 or 2008. It makes no difference, none of them were around for either season. Just like it didn't matter to them that past failures had been blamed on a scape goat and a real goat. They'll do it to win a World Series for themselves and each other, and we'll get to go

along for the ride.

While the Cubs were winning the pennant and celebrating at Wrigley, one of the most popular Cubs—both to his teammates and to the fans—was 1,700 miles away doing what almost nobody thought was a possibility. I mean, it must have really blindsided those of you who refused to believe all along that Kyle Schwarber's season wasn't really over.

The Cubs are going to need a DH for any game played in Cleveland, and if Chris Coghlan and Jorge Soler aren't exactly doing it for you, how about Schwarber, the franchise's all-time leader in postseason home runs?

Sure, it's ridiculous to think that a guy can spend almost exactly six months rehabilitating from serious knee surgery, play two games in the Arizona Fall League (where he currently has one fewer hit than Tim Tebow) and then bat in the middle of a lineup in the World Series. It is ridiculous. It's also awesome, and just might be crazy enough to work.

The Cubs will likely add a hitter to the roster for the World Series, and leave lefty pitcher Rob Zastryzny off of it. He was added because the Dodgers had been helpless all season against lefthanded pitching. The options for that spot would figure to come down to Szczur or Tommy La Stella. Or Schwarber. Szczur's a nice player and a good pinch hitter. La Stella gives them more depth in the infield and a lefty bat off the bench. Schwarber would be strictly a designated hitter and pinch hitter, and would need to be pinch run for if he reached base late in a tight game. So, is it worth it? His doctor wouldn't have cleared him to play if he was at serious risk of re-injuring himself. So let's take that out of the equation.

It comes down to whether or not you think Schwarber can take six months off from live pitching, get a few days of simulated games and two fall league games worth of at bats

and be a legitimate threat at the plate in the World Series.

The Indians will likely only have one lefty in their bullpen, and it's Andrew Miller who nobody can hit anyway. So it's probably down to La Stella or Schwarber. It seems pretty easy to me. Schwarber's the upside play. He could turn a game around with one big hit.

This doesn't come down to rewarding him for his hard work in rehab or his sunny disposition. All of that is great. It comes down to adding a big time bat to your roster and trusting your manager to deploy him at the right time in the right way.

Maddon calls La Stella "three a.m." because he thinks he could roll out of bed in the middle of the night and hit a quality big league fastball.

Schwarber's nickname could be "72 hours" because that's all the time he'll have to get ready to launch some rockets in the postseason.

Is our desire to just see him back in action clouding the reality of what the likelihood of success is here? Probably. But who cares? It's going to be awesome.

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It may seem like a surprise that the Indians are the team the Cubs meet in the World Series. They seemed to be a poor matchup for the Boston Red Sox in the ALDS, but they swept the mighty Red Sox. Then they knocked out another team with a potent lineup in Toronto. Their formula is pretty simple. They ride their one good, healthy starter, Corey Kluber as far as they can. Other starters are on a short leash (or they bleed profusely from a drone repair accident wound²²⁸) and they turn it over to a dominant bullpen led by the ultimate weapon in Miller.

The Indians offense was less than potent in the ALCS against Toronto, and the Cubs boast a much better pitching

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staff than the Blue Jays. The Indians will do a better job of pushing the running game against Jon Lester than the Dodgers did (hard to do worse). But Lester is really in his element now. In three World Series starts, Lester boasts the third lowest World Series ERA in history at 0.43. Is that good? That seems good.

The Cubs will have a decided pitching advantage in every game not started by Kluber and even in those starts, if it's Lester, they have an edge, albeit smaller. The Indians will have to get creative in the games at Wrigley to not lose either Carlos Santana or Mike Napoli from the lineup. They probably can't, because neither guy offers anything defensively anywhere but first.

Both teams should be lauded for their resiliency. Each franchise has weathered the loss of Luis Valbuena in recent years to make it to the World Series.

Isn't it just the Indians' luck that they have a chance to end the second-longest World Series championship drought in baseball...and they run into the team with the longest one? Hard to get much sympathy when your winless stretch is forty years shorter than your opponent's.

I think we can all agree that the best thing about postseason Cubs baseball is getting to enjoy Ryne Sandberg's electric personality on both TV and radio pre- and post-game.

The Cubs win in game six at Wrigley was only the second time they have won a sixth or seventh game at home since the park opened 102 years ago. Have I mentioned that the team's been bad for a long time?

My wife is not a huge sports fan but she was really impressed during the postgame celebration on Saturday night. What she was impressed by was that Eddie Vedder was in the Cubs' clubhouse.

As happy as I am for the players and of course the fans,

it's pretty great that Pat Hughes finally gets to call a World Series. His call of the pennant clinching double play will be replayed forever...unless it's replaced by a successful end to this World Series. Your favorite team's local radio play by play announcer is the soundtrack to your summers (and hopefully your falls), and Cubs fans have been pretty lucky to have Pat all these years.