



Miracle Collapse

The 1969 Chicago Cubs

DOUG FELDMANN

Foreword by Don Kessinger

A large, stylized graphic of a baseball cap, rendered in a dark gray color, serves as the background for the cover. The cap's brim is at the top, and its crown is at the bottom. A large white circle is centered on the front of the cap, acting as a backdrop for the title and subtitle.

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A solid white rectangular box is positioned in the lower half of the cover, overlapping the dark gray background of the baseball cap. It appears to be a placeholder for a photograph or additional text.

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*To my family and friends,
who have given me more
than I deserve.*

ILLUSTRATIONS

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Team photo of the 1969 Chicago Cubs

Don Kessinger, Cubs shortstop

Second baseman Glenn Beckert

Ernie Banks

Pitcher Ken Holtzman

Left fielder Billy Williams

Pitcher Ferguson Jenkins against the Mets

Ron Santo

Pitcher Bill Hands

“Head Shot Card” of the 1969 Cubs

FOREWORD

In July 1993 I was coaching baseball at my alma mater the University of Mississippi. While on a recruiting trip to the Chicago area, I was sitting alone down the first base line watching some prospective student-athletes play baseball. A very nice lady came up to me and asked, "Are you Don Kessinger?" When I answered in the affirmative, she said, "Happy Birthday." I was amazed that she would know it was indeed my birthday, and I asked her how she knew. Her simple reply was, "I am a Cub fan." It had been eighteen years since my last game with the Cubs, in 1975, but such is the nature of baseball's greatest fans.

Doug Feldmann has written a book on perhaps Chicago's most beloved team, the 1969 Cubs. Even though we did not win the pennant that year, losing to the dreaded New York Mets, it was an unbelievable summer in Chicago. Chapter after chapter and page after page of this book brought back memories, some that had long since retreated in my mind. It is a joy for me to recall those days spent with such great teammates and friends.

If you asked ten players on that team what happened to us late in the 1969 season, you very well might get ten different answers. However, I think each would tell you about the special relation-

ship that existed between the players, and about the special relationship between the players and the Cub fans. I hope as you read this account of that magical season, you will in some small way feel how great it was for those of us who were there.

This book is a personal journey, allowing me to experience all over again the peaks and valleys of 1969. Doug has precisely captured the emotions of leading the National League for most of the year and then watching that lead slip away in a painful September in Chicago. What hurts the most is our failure to finish what we started for the great fans of the Chicago Cubs.

Don Kessinger

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INTRODUCTION

For the first time in a Cubbie generation, without fear of ridicule or confinement to an asylum, I can safely say that I expect a National League pennant this year.

—Jay Mariotti, *Chicago Sun-Times*,
February 18, 2004

Over the last hundred years there has been no shortage of philosophy on the connective metaphor of baseball to “life.” In addition to serving all of the emotions that exist within the human condition, baseball has also long been viewed as an instrument for bringing subcultures of the United States together in harmony. Other institutions have tried to do the same, but few have been as successful. As one example, educational reformer Horace Mann claimed in the 1840s that a common elementary school experience for all citizens would be “the great equalizer of society; the balance wheel of the social machinery.” In relationship to baseball, the idea of a level social playing field has

been described no better than by President Ronald Reagan in a speech he delivered shortly after his final term in office. Addressing a group of aspiring sports broadcasters, he asked the audience to picture a downtown corporate office building late at night, with most of the workers gone for the day. A custodian is emptying the wastebaskets in each of the rooms, while the president of the company is working diligently on some final paperwork inside an office. In the midst of their jobs, however, both individuals are drawn to a radio that is sitting on a cabinet in the hallway. The home team is playing an important baseball game, and the two men stare transfixed at the motionless black box as the sounds of the ballpark pour forth. For a single instant, socioeconomic class is washed away as both men cheer wildly for a big hit, holler with anger at a bad call by the umpire, and question the removal of the starting pitcher by the home team manager. It is a moment in time when race, age, gender, and social class do not matter—the only thing that does is allegiance to the home team.

This scene exemplifies the small, nearly unnoticeable events that draw people together within the great exchange of individuals within the United States of America. More of such lessons were needed in the turbulent American society of the 1960s, a society burdened by growing mistrust between the “Establishment” and the younger generation, as issues of war, poverty, and civil rights dominated the American consciousness.

But once again—as had been the case during the Great Depression, World War II, and the Korean Conflict—baseball helped stabilize American society by providing a diversion from the unpleasant issues that overshadowed everyday living. In 1941, with Joe DiMaggio of the New York Yankees chasing the consecutive-game hitting record, a new phrase entered the nation’s “cultural literacy,” as former University of Virginia English professor E. D. Hirsch calls changes in social dialect. While stopping at a roadside café in Rolla or Omaha, in Durham or Dallas, the traveler always asked the same question: “Did he get one today?” In 1969—a year that culminated a decade of national unrest—different types of people could walk into the very same cafés and

ask, “Did the Cubs win today?” It was a topic on the minds of many, and—in line with Dr. Hirsch’s definition of cultural literacy—one needed to know how to “speak the language” to stay in communication with the rest of society.

In writing books about baseball seasons, I have always tried to weave the happenstances of sport into the milieu of society at the given time. Baseball, as much as any other American institution, places our lives in an historical context that enriches our existence and serves to remind us that our lives are divided into increments of time. I pull the stories for the following pages from the events of 1969, a year for which anyone old enough to remember can recall his or her circumstances in one of the most uncertain epochs in the nation’s history. Like most annual occasions, the arrival of the baseball playoffs, the Super Bowl, or New Year’s Eve prompts us to remember the same event from the previous year and to mark the progress in our lives over the past 365 days. For while we sometimes can’t remember the names of all our relatives, we can certainly remember where we were when Vinatieri made the kick or when Bartman and Alou collided.

Miracle Collapse

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The Lip, the Windy City, and a Society on the Move

Leo Durocher is a man with an infantile capacity for immediately making a bad thing worse.

—Branch Rickey

The crackle of the voices through the microphone could barely be heard over the airwaves. WDAP was just a tiny radio station on Chicago's North Side, struggling to survive, when on June 1, 1924, a man named Elliott Jenkins from the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper marched in and announced that things were about to change. The station's facilities soon received a complete overhaul—including its call letters. Jenkins spoke to the masses with a few, simple words that would change Chicago broadcasting forever.

"This is WGN, formerly WDAP."

The letters were short for "World's Greatest Newspaper," a moniker that was placed at the top of every edition of the *Tribune*. The paper's venture into radio had actually begun three years earlier, when the city's first station, Westinghouse's KYW, starting receiving many of its stories and market reports from the news-

rooms of the *Tribune*. From the time that KYW opened for business until WGN took over, the sale of radio sets in Chicago had increased fivefold, as the Tribune Company had found a great investment opportunity in another—albeit competitive—medium. WGN's first order of business in the summer of 1924 was to cover the Republican National Convention from Cleveland and the Democratic National Convention from New York. In October of that year WGN would broadcast its first professional baseball game, a crosstown match-up between the Chicago Cubs of the North Side and the Chicago White Sox of the South.

Another powerful early station in the city, WMAQ, received the first loosely defined "rights" to broadcast both Cubs and White Sox home games in 1924, although the concept of property law in sports broadcasting had not yet surfaced. It was the work of Hal Totten that secured the "contract" for WMAQ. Totten, a young writer with the *Chicago Daily News*, had personally broadcast almost every Cubs and White Sox home game that season, an amazing feat. Although broadcasting alone, Totten still had plenty of company, as small-scale, "pirated" broadcasts were being heard around Major League parks in addition to the formal broadcasts from radio stations covering the games. One of the more famous pirates in the early days of baseball on the radio was Tom Convey in St. Louis, who sat atop the YMCA building across the street from center field at Sportsman's Park, home of the two local teams, the Cardinals and Browns. Convey was constantly being chased away by Cardinals owner Sam Breadon, who wanted no outside transmission of his team's games whatsoever. Since no station held exclusivity rights for broadcasting the contests, listeners could tune into any number of announcers who seemed appealing. By the end of the 1920s nearly ten stations at any given time were piping the sounds of professional baseball in Chicago through the airwaves.

Radio was a growing, amazing phenomenon that promised to change the nation. The public's fascination began with station KDKA in Pittsburgh when a group of individuals first broadcast the results of the United States presidential election on November 2, 1920, from the top of the Westinghouse building

in East Pittsburgh. They used one hundred watts to announce to a handful of listeners the news—received via updates phoned in from the *Pittsburgh Post* newspaper—that Warren Harding had defeated James Cox. Eager to learn their broadcast's geographic radius, the announcers strongly encouraged any listeners to call and reveal their locations. The historic event had its origins four years earlier with the construction of a special transmitter in the garage of a Westinghouse engineer. Soon after the election results were broadcast from atop the building, the novelty of the radio set had spread quickly, soon becoming a veritable family member in most U.S. homes. Historical records indicate that around four hundred thousand sets were in use in private residences and stores in 1922, a figure that exploded to 4 million in 1925 and to 13 million by 1930—comprising nearly two-thirds of American households.

However, baseball broadcasting of the hometown Pirates by KDKA remained quite primitive. A “runner boy” would sit atop the wall at old Forbes Field and scribble the happenings of the game onto a piece of paper. He would then drop the paper to another boy, who would sprint to a nearby telephone to tell the station the “play-by-play.” Using a similar method in 1921, WJZ in New York broadcast the World Series over the radio for the first time. The widespread arrival of radio in the 1920s—although still in its infancy—reinforced a long-held fear of Major League Baseball owners who envisioned empty, profitless ballparks, with the masses staying at their comfortable homes while being told about the game through the microphone.

It took a forward-thinking owner of the Cubs named William Wrigley to change attitudes about broadcasts and, in turn, alter the future of sports forever. In contrast to the philosophy of his contemporaries, Wrigley imagined substantially growing the fan base by bringing the ball game into homes. He wanted entire households to become fans of the sport—and, thereafter, paying customers. Wrigley firmly believed in the proliferation of radio broadcasts for baseball, and he passed his aggressive pursuit of airtime on to his son, Phil, who enjoyed a great surge in attendance at the family's Los Angeles park in the Pacific

Coast League (PCL) after putting the PCL games on the radio. The Wrigley family, who had made a fortune in the chewing gum business, now applied their successful business principles to marketing their baseball teams. William never wanted to limit creativity—for example, he was also the first to have a “Ladies’ Day” at his ballpark, whereby women would be admitted free of charge (typically on Fridays). Although not receiving any admissions revenue, the club would instead enjoy increased beverage, food, and cigarette sales at the park with the extra customers. Pressure from women’s groups ended the practice by the 1980s, but with the idea, William Wrigley had accomplished what he had set out to do: use the radio to make entire families of fans at home and, in doing so, to “invite” all members of the family—not just the lone man of the house—out to the stadium to see a game for themselves. Not long after putting his plan into action, Wrigley became the first owner to have all of his team’s games sent over the airwaves. Almost immediately, stations began lining up at his door for the privilege.

Before Walter “Red” Barber took a job as a broadcaster with the Cincinnati Reds in 1934, he rode on a bus all night to Chicago and tried for an interview at WGN but was denied. After two seasons in Cincinnati the twenty-seven-year-old Barber became the announcer in 1935 for the first networked radio broadcast of the World Series between the Cubs and the Detroit Tigers. He remembered the experience well: “Nobody was even thinking about television in 1935. But that [the World Series] was the first sporting event that was ever on the Mutual Broadcasting network. That was a network then of four stations: WGN in Chicago, CKLW in Detroit, WOR in New York and, of course, the mighty, half-million watt transmitter of WLW in Cincinnati.” Baseball fans in Chicago regularly heard the voices of Pat Flanagan on WBBM, Bob Elson and Quin Ryan on WGN, and even comedian Joe E. Brown, who made appearances on various stations from time to time. Ryan was a local product, brought into the WGN studios from the campus of Northwestern University, where he had been a drama student. Cubs games were easily heard throughout the Midwest, including the far reaches of rural Iowa—where a