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2013

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Recommended Citation

Bales, Jack. "The End Of The Billy Goat Curse: Why Cubs Fans Should Let It Go." ChicagoSide. Ed. Jonathan Eig. Accessed October 21, 2013. <http://chicagosidesports.com/the-end-of-the-billy-goat-curse-why-cubs-fans-should-let-it-go/>.

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The End Of The Billy Goat Curse: Why Cubs Fans Should Let It Go

By Jack Bales

The Friendly Confines have been decidedly unfriendly, lately. After Cubs owner Tom Ricketts unveiled his plans to renovate the 99-year-old Wrigley Field, few observers of the national pastime were surprised when die-hard fans objected. Ricketts in turn threatened to move the Cubs if his proposals were blocked, adding that [“all we really need is to be able to run our business like a business and not a museum.”](#)

Yet it is the iconic stadium’s museum-like qualities that Cubs devotees fear will be lost forever if Ricketts has his way. In a May 9 article for *USA Today*, [“Killing Wrigley Field Will Kill Chicago Cubs,”](#) George Washington University law professor Jonathan Turley undoubtedly speaks for thousands of the team’s supporters when he argues that “the one thing you should never do is threaten fans who have lived under a curse for 68 years and never . . . ever . . . mess with Wrigley.”

Professor Turley writes very well, and I admire both his prose and his passion. Like Bill Clinton and legions of my fellow Cubs fans, I feel his pain. I wish, however, that all of us would banish the curse of that blasted billy goat to the dust bin of mythology where it belongs. Although the Chicago Cubs’ history may be more star-crossed than star-filled, we do not need to mask a decades-old story as either a quaint anecdote or an excuse for losing seasons.

As even casual followers of baseball know, the story of the Billy Goat Curse began during the 1945 World Series. The Cubs were leading the Tigers two games to one as the Series moved from Detroit to Chicago. Among the 42,923 fans in Wrigley Field for Game 4 on October 6 was a West Madison Street tavern owner named William Sianis, nicknamed “Billy Goat” because of his goatee. Sianis had purchased box seats for himself and his pet goat, Murphy, but he was soon asked to leave because of Murphy’s objectionable odor. According to the October 9 *Chicago Sun-Times*, after the Tigers defeated the Cubs, “Sianis sent [team owner] P. K. Wrigley this wire: ‘Who smells now?’” The Tigers went on to win the World Series, 4 games to 3.

A Media Invention

As Chicago author Rick Kogan relates in his book, [A Chicago Tavern: A Goat, a Curse, and the American Dream](#) (2006), Sianis told reporters what occurred at Wrigley Field and they in turn wrote “playful items about Billy’s outrage” for the Chicago newspapers. Kogan points out that there was “no mention of a curse or a hex or a jinx.”

Nothing else about the curse was in the news for the next few years, either. With the Cubs mired near the bottom of the National League, Sianis’s newspaper friends occasionally joked that he must have hexed the team back during the World Series. The restaurant owner would play along with the gag, and when a *Sun-Times* sportswriter suggested that Sianis write a letter to Wrigley

saying that he will remove the hex if the team owner apologizes to him and Murphy, he agreed. A photograph of Sianis and his goat appeared in the *Sun-Times* on September 22, 1950.

The reporter in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* called it right: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." Over the years many other journalists appear to have adopted this adage when writing about the Cubs. From the casual banter between the restaurateur and his friends grew the tale that Sianis had placed a curse on the team, swearing that its players would never again make it to the World Series. With the passage of many losing seasons (and perhaps due to shrewd promotion on the part of Sianis, who is, after all, referred to as a "[publicity stunt master](#)" on the restaurant's home page), the alleged curse has gained international renown and has become a part of Chicago and baseball folklore.

The Lifting Of The Veil

Legends always make for good copy, and this one has been trotted out by authors of books and articles for decades. Although the Cubs organization has remained silent about the curse in recent years, in 2003 it acknowledged Sianis's dastardly deed with the article, "['Billy Goat Curse' Officially Lifted: Hex Off, but Respect for Goat Would Help Title Bid.](#)"

On the other hand, the ballplayers seem to have other ideas about the tale. For example, in June 2011 many team members wore T-shirts emblazoned with "[\[EXPLETIVE\] THE GOAT!!!](#)" on the back and a goat with the universal "no" backslash symbol on the front. "I've got news for you," then Cubs manager Mike Quade told the Chicago Tribune. "When you take the field, nobody is thinking about the goat, whether they're wearing the T-shirt or not. That's the way I look at it."

Cubs stalwart Phil Cavarretta held similar views. It was in 1934 when the 17-year-old Chicago native joined the North Siders, right after he graduated from Chicago's Lane Tech High School. One of his teammates said of the scrappy, tough competitor, who stayed with the Cubs for twenty years, that he was a "no-nonsense guy. Hard-headed and win at any cost."

Cavarretta, who had played on pennant-winning Cubs teams in 1935 and 1938 as well as in 1945, summarily dismissed the idea of using mythical curses as reasons for losing ball games. In October 2003, a [CNN reporter interviewed him](#) the day after fan Steve Bartman deflected a foul ball during a crucial playoff game, which the Cubs lost. The reporter repeatedly asked him about the Billy Goat Curse, and Cavarretta kept emphasizing that only the players were responsible for the outcome of the 1945 World Series. He finally told the reporter: "Actually, once again, the billy goat had nothing to do with it. I think we had more problems with Hal Newhouser, the [Detroit Tigers] pitcher out there, and Virgil Trucks and Hank Greenberg. No billy goat, whatsoever. And especially Newhouser, who we all know, may his soul rest in peace, [was a] Hall of Famer. He's the one that beat us, not the billy goat."

Baseball historians as well as players have come to the same conclusion. Glenn Stout and Richard A. Johnson include a two-page essay, "The Real Dope on the Real Goat," in their excellent [The Cubs: The Complete Story of Chicago Cubs Baseball](#) (2007). They conclude that "Sianis's curse is as spurious as Boston's 'Curse of the Bambino,' the utterly fictional claim that

Babe Ruth cursed the Red Sox after being sold to the Yankees. The notion of a ‘billy goat’-inspired hex or curse was a later product of the press, and Sianis was savvy enough to play along with it.”

Cubs fans pride themselves on their knowledge of baseball and their team. After all these years, I’d say that they are savvy enough to have played along with the so-called curse long enough