

THE CHICAGO SPORTS PAGE

Cubs Bears Sox Bulls Blackhawks
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THE LAST STAND AT SOLDIER FIELD

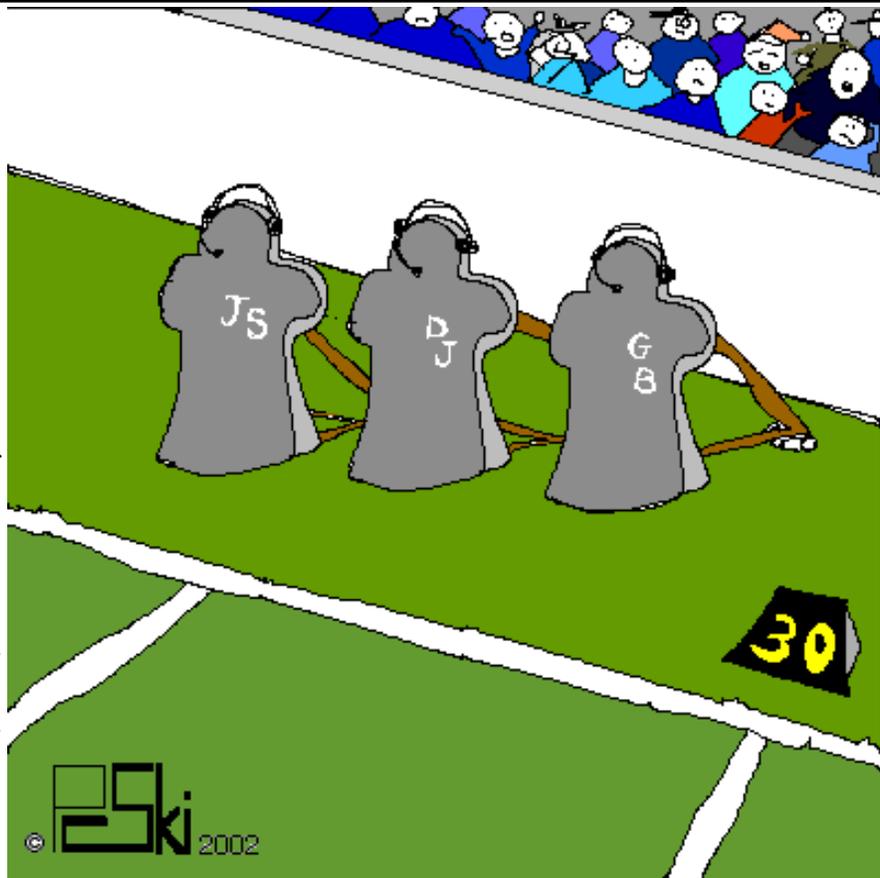
January 19, 2002-- The Bears had to lose. Badly. This is Chicago. Enduring bad winters for the external hope of Spring.

The populace, under the spell of an extremely warm and mild winter season, mistook the swagger of the young Bears for that of the Super Bowl 1985 team. But in reality, the swagger was that of a drunken longshoreman on leave from his senses.

The Philadelphia Eagles came into Soldier Field and hit, chipped, taunted, and beat up the beloved Bears into a bloody stew of charred tailgate roadkill.

In a city where sports icons are put on pedestals taller than the Sears Tower, the New Bears were filled with alleged pro-bowl talent earmarked for preseason failure to NFC Central champions.

But on Saturday afternoon, the 3-13 club showed up to the play the underdog Eagles. It was a homecoming, of sorts. Local prep star Donovan McNabb ran and passed his team to an easy victory over the vaunted monsters of the midway defense. It was like the 49er drubbing of the Bears in the season before its Super Bowl run to New Orleans.



No one thought that the Chicago coaches could get more conservative, but it is turned on an awful, timid, shameful display of Fear of Failure. Parking lot vendors should have easily sold out of ceremonial rope after the Game. The only offensive play was the play selection called by John Shoop. The only creative play was a basic reverse to a practice squad wide receiver who sprinted for a touchdown.

On three consecutive plays, the Bears lost three starters to injury. But their collective psyche was more brittle than Jim Miller's separated shoulder. Philly blocked, tackled, and executed ten times better than the Bears. It was like a gapers traffic jam at an accident scene.

When Quarterback Jim Miller was planted by the Eagles, there was no fire in the bellies of the Bear players. There was no pushing, shoving or retaliation. The team was on its heels and totally manhandled by a team that was supposed to be inferior.

In all four elements of the Game, coaching, adjustments, execution and mental toughness, the Bears failed. Badly. And often. The three main coaches were non-beings on the sidelines during the game. Zombies.

The wrecking ball cranes were towering over the north endzone throughout the Game. The workmen scurried in afterward like sewer rats to restaurant dumpster feast; dismantling the stench left in the stadium.

Though the park is in contested litigation, no injunction stands against the razing of Soldier Field by the park district. An end of an Era would quickly be erased and replaced by another public monument to private greed, a new stadium for the McCaskey family.



So the end of Soldier Field left a bitter taste in the collective sport soul of Chicago. The Bears played a weak schedule to a division crown. Next season, with a first place schedule, people are thinking repeat. They are still drunk or hungover. The repeat may be the 5-11 Jauron season that preceded this last run.

There is no identity. The defense was supposed to rekindle the Monsters of Old. But it was a shellish whimper with no claws as the Eagles slow tight ends ran off huge chunks of yardage. The happy college style of the Croton offense had been replaced by the dink conservative pop warner football playbook. And immature, stubborn coordinator pride refused to adjust the game plan.

It cost the Bears the

game, and should cost the offensive and defense coordinators their jobs. Even Coach Jauron has no contract extension. It would not be beyond theory to find that the parties could not work out the final contract package before the team reports to training camp this summer.

If the Bears are truly set on winning, they could bring in high powered talent like Norv Turner to run the offense and Tony Dungy to run the defense. But those guys are head coaching material, and cost money. The Bears are the NFL coaching day care center; hire on the cheap.

The Bears have caught themselves too competitive prior to their new stadium sales pitch. The new digs were supposed to thrill season ticket holders into parting with \$3800 for seat licenses, permission to buy the overpriced game tickets. But Chicagoans are not ready, willing or able to meet those demands. And the bean counters may have caught wind of this, as the actual seating of the new configuration is less than the current capacity of old Soldier Field.

In addition, the alleged skybox revenue may be a pipe dream. Fox cannot sell out the Super Bowl. At 25% discount, there are at least 10% unsold ad space (excluding Fox's own house ad promotions). The recession has destroyed corporate luxury spending, including new skybox commitments.

It will be a tougher sell if the Bears fall flat in Champaign

next season. McCaskey can't claim that they are waiting for the new stadium money to be competitive, because this season destroyed that myth. McCaskey can't claim you can't get enough talent without a brand new stadium to attract players; the defensive free agents were signed under the salary cap.

If the team was bad, they could always market the team's "hope and expectations." The White Sox tried that marketing ploy last year, and failed to draw flies to rotting bacon. The Bulls marketing plan was worse; a plea to come out and watch the kids play (not even to win). No sell-outs except for the Michael Jordan contest the afternoon before the Bear-Eagle game. However, since the Bears made the play-offs prematurely, fans will expect BETTER next season. Even though next season, in essence, all road games. Ouch.

The bosses could go through a truckload of chalk and several broken green slate storyboards trying to figure a way out of this pickle. A briny, sour and rotting pickle. Just deserts for a team that prizes the mantle of tightwad Chicago ownership like mother's milk.

So Soldier Field gets wrecked as quick as the false hopes of the overburdened, overfed, tailgated Bear faithful. Don't believe that the blood sausage bled by the fans will not be taken, ground and sold by the team if it could generate enough revenue to make the crime of destroying the lakefront worth it.

THE CUBS SET TO BATTLE THE CUBS

January 19, 2002 -- It was ironic that the Chicago Cubs fan convention was held at the same hotel that the Chicago Bears stayed in the night before their big playoff contest against the Eagles. Losers flock together? (Maybe this explains why the Bears were so flat, pathetic and hopeless like a Bill Buckner grounder. Oh, that's unfair, Buck was scheduled to be at this year's Cubfest. Yikes!)

The biggest off season moves by Cub management was to threaten city hall and the neighborhood business community. Trib beancounters were fed up with the \$100 ticket prices that the roof top owners were getting on game day from their corporate-type clientele. Dusted off were the Blueprints. Park renovation. Oh, dear, extending the bleachers and putting up new scoreboards and wind breaks "could" interfere with the outside sightlines, but who cares.

Well, the neighbors cared. City hall cared because each of the those rooftops was now licensed, and generating revenue for da mayor's budget.

Well, too bad, said the boys in the Gothic Tower. We

will move the club because we need to make more revenue. Take out a box of Kleenex for the tired old non-productive ballpark and current sports economics tearjerker. We need to add 2300 sets in our new "Decapitation" section behind home plate, and another 4000 bleacher seats since we raised the price to more than \$20 per game for those solar spa barstools.

The Trib claims that this extra revenue is needed to maintain a competitive product on the field, but that is doublespeak. The Cubs don't want a competitive product, or pay for one, when Wrigley Field is the draw. Have the team around .500, give the people the glimmer of hope, throw in a few young arms, and the recipe for success is golden.

So the Trib is not stupid to kill the Golden Goose by moving the franchise to new digs. The White Sox moved across the street and have never recovered from the (bad) old days. Wrigley Field is a landmark institution. Half the crowd comes to the park not to watch the game, but mingle and people watch like the (good) old days on Rush Street or North Avenue Beach.

But the trump card by the city is that the Trib does not own the player's parking lot (it is an old abandoned trolley line lying in a platted city street) so any expansion onto city property needs city approval.

At first, the Trib bought the club from the Wrigley estate sale because it would be cheap

programming for its superstition. But that drive waned when the Trib thought it could be a bigger broadcast player (and money maker) as a fourth network anchor on the WB.

But the WB network never has taken to the numbers of viewers to sustain the heady profit margins of say, a local newscast. So the Cub broadcasts have turned into a nomadic Where's Waldo on local cable television, UHF stations and network filler spots.

But now, the Heads at the Masthead realize that the Cubs franchise is not that much different than the Twins or the Expos. If the magic goes, who cares about 5,000 litterbugs yawning through a professional sports contest. So maybe, the ball club should win more games, but stay under budget.

There lies the battlefield for all the turf wars, in the ballclub itself. Andy McFail brought in Don Baylor, an experienced manager, to get the Cubs into the winner's circle. However, this conflicts with McFail's job of making a profit. Cheaper ballplayers are young players, especially rookies. Baylor hates rookies. He hates playing rookies. He hates developing rookies. So you have a management stalemate on the direction of the ballclub. McFail tells young players are told they have a fair shot at making it, but the manager makes up the line-up card without them in it. This battle will be the bloodiest of all.

THE LOST ICE TRIBE

You can tell it is so bad that Indian rights groups have yet to protest the large image of Chief Blackhawk on your team's hockey jersey. You are the stealth sports franchise in Chicago. And like the honor of the Blackhawk Indian tribe, you are figuratively extinct from the modern scene. You are a footnote in history. A throwback throw-a-way story in the agate type of the sports section.

Even though the Wirtz family apparently wants to hire every Sutter brother to coach the team someday, the average person would equate a Sutter to a bottle of California wine than a hockey player-coach. The Wirtz fortune is pinned on liquor distribution, a territory that they protect like fierce jackals over fresh carrion. It is a pre-television hangover that Hawk games are not broadcast on television, under the assumption that Wirtz can't sell HIS beer to people who are not sitting in his ice rink.

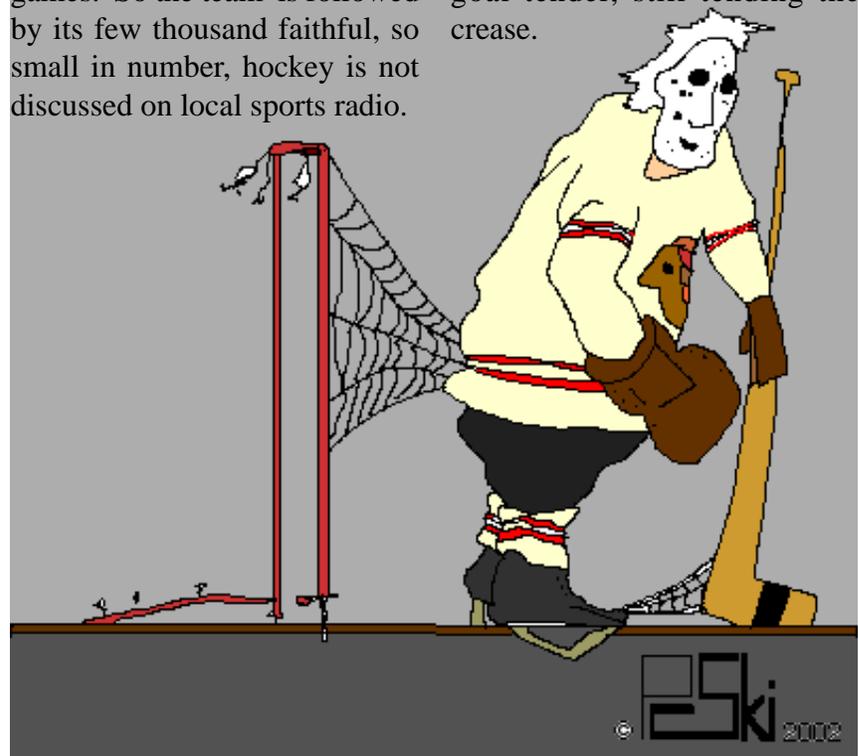
If you said Norris Division, the average person would think it was a part of a celebrity karate tournament. If you said they are playing for the Stanley Cup, it could be confused with either a young child's lidded milk container, or kids were messing with some high schooler jockstrap. In either case, the connotation is bad... for hockey, too.

There was a glory era for Chicago hockey. Bobby Hull, Tony Esposito, Stan Mikita. But those memories are more than thirty years old. That's a generation and one-half. People can't remember what they ate for breakfast yesterday, let alone who is the Hawks current back-up goalie.

When they played in the old Chicago Stadium, a first balcony seat caught all the action at a reasonable price. Hockey is meant to be seen in person, because the perspective of television is lacking, and the speed of the game is lost. But the lack of exposure is killing off new fans, even though youth hockey leagues are at an all-time high in the area. But in the tradition of Chicago owners, the Wirtz family refuses to bend its own ancient rules on telecasting home games. So the team is followed by its few thousand faithful, so small in number, hockey is not discussed on local sports radio.

Blackhawks rank on par with the lesser sports in this town, like college basketball and women's chess. Hell, major league soccer gets more airtime. But there is no pride to pry loose the reigns of power. It is not truly an American sport, some say, its Canadian. The best players are Euro-Russians who don't speak English well. The sport does not fit in with the average sports fan.

Except that Chicago is still a large ethnic melting pot. You would think that the sport would churn new immigrants into the fan base. But it has not. The Lost Sports Tribe continues to fade farther and farther away from the mainstream, to its self appointed reservation exile on West Madison Avenue, where if one comes early enough before the ice is laid, you can see the faint ghostly outline of a oldtime goal tender, still tending the crease.



BULL SHOOT!

January 19, 2002-- I rush home from work late Saturday morning to catch the Return of Michael Jordan to the United Center. MJ left Chicago on bad terms with management. And, the fans, seeing their team be flushed into the septic tank of the NBA, could be bitter about his return on another team.

There is good fodder for the jeering rabble. MJ's divorce papers just hit the local press. Charles Oakley is trying to act bizarre enough to get tossed off the team. Coach Floyd left before he had a nervous breakdown.

With a few minutes to spare before the opening of NBC's first and only Bull telecast, I get the pangs of domestic engineering. I load the ecosphere sitting in my kitchen sink into the dishwasher. Pour in some power, and turn the machine on as the theme music begins to play in the living room. It was like hitting all net with the 24 second clock expiring at the half. It felt good.

I watch the rare sold out crowd act like a hushed tennis crowd during warm-ups. Then the player introductions; and when MJ was introduced, there was polite applause. That continued on a steady, respectful plain. And continued. And Mike got a little teary. It continued for about two minutes until Bulls



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management rudely cut off the lights for the home team intros. The boos were loud then. The people were not ready to stop applauding their vanquished son.

I had hoped months earlier that the Bulls would send out the slowest white guy on the roster to guard Jordan. Don't take off the warm-ups until at the jump; and reveal the Bull player wearing "23." The ultimate in psychological warfare!

But neither team needed any help at playing really, really, pathetically, junior high school bad. As the first waves of clunky shots spat off the rims, I went into the kitchen to get a refreshing Coke.

Squish.

Huh? Squish.

I look down. My dishwasher had vomited onto the floor its first foamy wash cycle.

I spent the rest of the first half mopping and soaking up the sudsy water in the kitchen. I was cursing, babying the machine through its rinse cycles, as water dripped lightly through the paper towels stuffed in where the gasket had failed.

I am still assuming the warm weather and lack of humidity may have dried out the seal; otherwise I will be more peed-off than Bill Cartwright at his teams less than 20% first half field goal shooting.

How could the Bulls be so bad for so long? GM Jerry Krause was not at the Return Game; he is hiding from the Past. He fails to understand that it is the players who play and not organizations who win games.

Maybe manual labor will straighten out management, like mopping floors.

THE BASEBALL LORDS BOILER ROOM

It is now like the boiler room from The Sting. Except that it is out in the open. Grossly trying to flim-flam the public like a too-clever, but too slow witted grifter.

The baseball owners, through their used car salesman spokesman, the Commish, Bud Sealegs, has changed course, once again, in the non-stop voyage to ruin America's Past Time.

It was only weeks ago that Selig decried the financial state of the Game, and mandated that two franchises would be contracted before next season. After a lawsuit in Minnesota, and an injunction, the contraction argument has as much legs as Enron stock.

Then, the Yawkey Trustee accepts the lowest bid, from Selig's friends' group, in the sale of the Red Sox. A Trust has a fiduciary responsibility to the beneficiaries of the trust, and in a sale, to get the best price for an asset. Two other bidders bid more than \$60 million more than the winners! We know that Massachusetts is a liberal state, but can't they add numbers?!

The Old Poor Owner routine did not play well in Congress either. If baseball is in such dire straits, why are men bidding hundreds of millions of dollars for franchises? Common sense tells us that something is rotten. It's baseball accounting.

There is no doubt that the franchises are a valuable property, cash flow aside. The Twins are guaranteed from Bud to make \$120 million in a league buy-out. This is the same owner who

ers of baseball have a trust with the cities and fans of the Game.

But I don't think the current owners respect that notion since they are running the game like a substandard used car lot.

The latest outrage is that another of Bud's friends now owns pieces of three franchises, on the way of reshuffling the deck to purchase the Marlins, while selling the Expos. Now, the League may buy out the Expos and run the franchise for 2002. Wait! You said before it was not profitable, so why run a team as a league when you want to axe it?

Because after saying there are no markets to move teams to in the contraction argument, suddenly Bud sees Northern Virginia and D.C. prime real estate. Whose franchise would be worth maybe \$500 million with a stadium. And who would take it? Bud and the other owners, if they run the Expos, would pay \$120 million then divide the difference as pure profit. A classic bait and switch!

The League owners are only after one thing: more money. Owning weak franchises and extorting new locations, then selling the polished old team in a new locale, what a great annuity. And with \$300 million league warchest, that's maybe more than two teams that can be ground up for Profit.



loaned Bud \$3 million, which was a violation of the baseball charter. There were alleged other Buddy loans, which stinks of more and more conflict of interest in the management of the Game.

Just like the Yawkey Trust has a duty, so does the own-