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IN THIS ISSUE:

Peter Schilling Jr. sees GHOSTS IN CHICAGO

Jeff Kallman bids adieu to BOB MURPHY

Kelly Candaele & Peter Dreier wonder WHERE ARE THE JOCKS FOR JUSTICE?

CHICKENS COMING HOME TO ROOT

MUDVILLE PAGES:

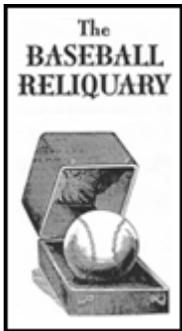
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THE SOUTHSIDE SHALL RISE AGAIN

by Peter Schilling Jr.

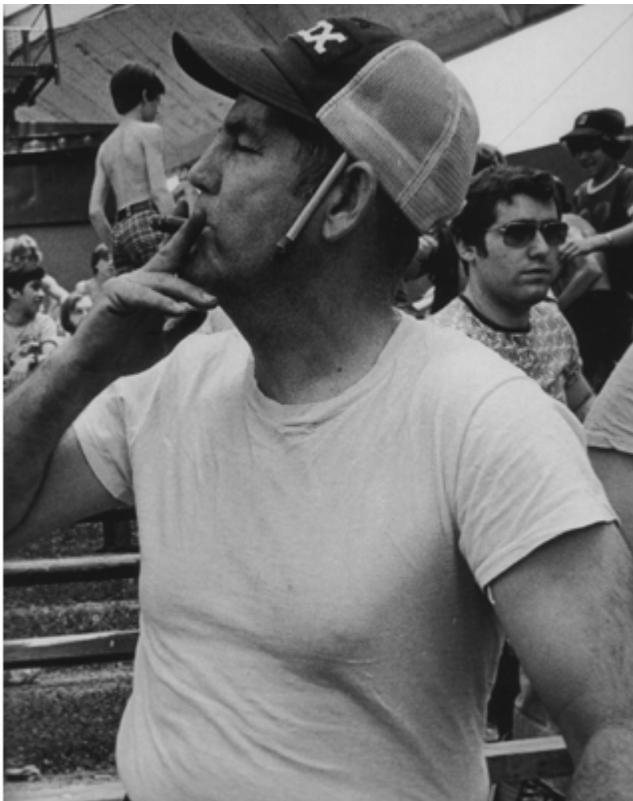
"A man said to the Universe, 'Sir, I exist!' 'However,' replied the universe, 'The fact has not created in me A sense of obligation.' —Stephen Crane

Baseball is a spirit-haunted and superstitious sport. Fans and player alike have

their weird amulets, utterances and gestures against bad luck; stadiums are referred to as cathedrals, for reasons owing more to their spiritual power than any real resemblance to a church; thanks to curses, teams are damned by the past to live the present in futility. This is unique to baseball. No one claims that the Vikings or Bills are cursed, in spite of their inability to nail down a championship year after year. There are no shrines to Wayne Gretzky, and the Halls of Fame of the other lesser sports don't incite fans to off-season pilgrimages like ours does in Cooperstown. Last year baseball fans were treated to a double dose of spiritual angst: the teams from New England and the City of Big Shoulders didn't just lose their playoffs in the last game of the Championship Series—the Red Sox and Cubs were victims of a curse. We pity the Red Sox nation. We pity the cranks who love the lovable losers of Wrigley Field. How can they endure?

Well, probably better than White Sox rooters do. Lost in the hoopla surrounding those two tormented clubs is the fact that the White Sox have tasted at least as much futility, maybe more. Consider: this year, as in seasons past, the Sox are toast and now this poor team, plagued by injury and ineffective management and toiling in the last of the ugly stadiums, will add one more year to the eighty-six that stand between their last World Championship. That, stat-heads, is one year longer than the Red Sox.

As a Michigander and now Minnesotan, it occurred to me that I didn't know any White Sox supporters, especially not here in Minneapolis, where the Sox are generally hated. I know Cubs fans. I've met Red Sox fans. Both of them are doubly vexed and entertained by the mystical futility of their clubs. White Sox fans seem rather quiet in comparison. Being a Tigers guy myself, and used to a degree



of manginess in my club, I got to thinking how nice it would be if I could wax mystical on the Tigers, point to some crazy voodoo that's keeping them from success. But I have a World Series memory in my lifetime, while generations of fans of the White Sox do not. It begs the

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question: do the White Sox have a curse?

"Hell no!" says Hal Vickery, a writer for the fan-based, online publication [White Sox Interactive](#). "I teach science, I don't believe in curses." Hal is passionate about his White Sox, and, much to my surprise, reflective of the Sox partisan in general—pragmatic almost to a fault and toiling each season in the same obscurity that fans of other lousy teams do. Like my Tigers.

Except that in Detroit we're not defined nationally by our National League counterpart. You can sense, from listening to Vickery or reading some of his (and others) articles on [White Sox Interactive](#), a subtle bitterness, a frustration both over the continued futility of the Sox and attention that Wrigleyites receive. "Cub fans that I really dislike are the ones who come to Comiskey Park dressed in their jerseys, caps, etc. and start cheering for the team the Sox are playing," Vickery explains. "When a Cub fan starts ragging on this friend of mine, he asks them to name five starters in the Cubs lineup. Cubs fans can't do it. When you challenge and beat them on anything, their claim is suddenly 'we draw more than you'. They need the security of numbers."

Vickery reflects the feelings of most White Sox faithful I spoke with. For Southsiders, the endless losing boils down to a simple case of poor management. "Generally, over the years, we've had rotten ownership," Vickery explains. "We are always one or two guys short of what we need. This was even the case with Bill Veeck. After '59, he traded away all his talent for a bunch of has-beens. He traded in one off season Earl Battey and Don Mincher to the Senators for Roy Sievers, John Romano to Cleveland for Minnie Minoso, Johnny Callison to the Phillies for Gene Freese (who couldn't throw the ball to first base) and Veeck actually made a good team weaker. They finished in third place. We're too poor or too tight to finish the deed and win a title."

But there's more than just ownership refusing to get that last player, or making bad moves. Consider the troubles the Sox have endured over the years (summarized from one of Hal's recent [columns](#)):

In 1906, the Sox win the World Series over the Cubs, four games to two. Supposedly, Charles Comiskey gave all of his players bonuses, then decided later on to make the bonus an advance on next years' salary, a typical Comiskey move, if my memory serves. Vickery contends that this made the players lackluster in their disdain, and they dropped to third place the following year.

In 1917 the Sox won a hundred games, won the Series decisively over the Giants, and then, again according to Vickery, the next year "the draft or wartime industries broke up that team and they finished sixth."

Then there was 1919. The Sox win the pennant, then go on to throw the series in what still remains the worst blight on the sport. By now we all know the results: eight men banned, and the Sox don't win again until 1959.

Despite that ignominy, Vickery points out that the Sox had some decent teams in **the late 30s**, but they fell apart when promising young pitcher Monty Stratton blew his leg off in a hunting accident and second baseman Jackie Hayes went blind. You know, stuff that happens to every team.

In 1959, the Sox finally win a pennant under Bill Veeck. In a panic the next season, he dumped a number of his young players for aging sluggers that never took hold. That was the last time they won a pennant.

And in 1994 the Chisox were leading their division by a game when Bud Selig cancelled the season.

But, Vickery maintains, there is no curse. "A curse is a product of the imagination," he writes. Vickery points to all the Sox bizarre injuries to key players (falling off ladders, broken bones, the aforementioned hunting accident) as the result of "natural law" as opposed to some hex. Somehow, Vickery argues, the laws of nature are designed to work *against* the White Sox.

Still, suggesting that the laws of nature somehow conspire against one team strikes me as about as far fetched as any curse. Besides, curses and luck are as



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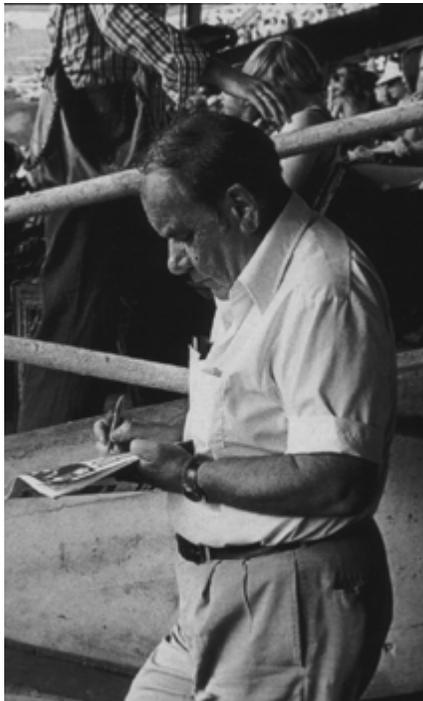
much a part of baseball as bats and balls. In my book, a curse might be a selling point: if the White Sox weren't so grounded in their miserable reality, they might actually draw more. While it's true that the Cubs have their beautiful, ivy-walled stadium in a brownstone neighborhood, a cute logo and a curse (not to mention a decent team this year), the Sox have fielded winning teams, and their stadium's not a dome. Wouldn't it be easier to compete with the Cubs if, say, there was some sort of mystical weirdness surrounding the Sox?

"No," says Scott Reifert, Vice President of Communications, Chicago White Sox. "See, you're either/or in Chicago: A Cubs fan or a White Sox fan. We don't see them as competition, we think that's an opportunity.

"A curse is just not something you hear with us," Reifert explains. "Why do they accept their fate? Because there is a working-class mentality about our team. The idea that you show up each day at your job, and are you guaranteed to get that ring? No. It's not promised to you. Our fans have been disappointed, like in '83. Part of it is the mentality of our fan base. A mix of pragmatism and pessimism. You don't want to get your hopes too high, but at the same time, when we've had a magical season, our fans really respond. I do believe the Red Sox and White Sox have comparisons: but our combatant is baseball fate, whereas theirs is the Yankees.

"You were born a White Sox fan. Even if you don't come to a lot of games, if you're asked, you're a Sox fan. It identifies who you are. And I think that's unique to Chicago. They're fightin' words here. And I think that's why our fans often won't go to Wrigley, even when our team plays there. And that's why I really don't think we're competing with the Cubs."

Although I think that the average baseball fan is moving away from being 'working class', White Sox bugs do look upon themselves the hard nosed blue collar types. Like the blue collar worker, there's a reluctance to embrace romance, to crow about yourself as Red Sox and Cubs fans do. In many ways, the traditions of the South Side of Chicago still linger to this day.



Peter Elliott is a photographer and White Sox fan whose outstanding book *Park Life*, captures the old Comiskey Park in that magical '77 year when the Sox were known as the Southside Hit Men. Elliott is a Sox fan, now living in Nashville.

"The whole environment of old Comiskey really was the embodiment of Chicago. Very industrial, near the stockyards, blue-collar park and fans. People would come to the park an hour and a half before the game and linger an hour afterwards. Comiskey was really another living room for a lot of people. There's something about them, I don't know what it is. They're a dark horse.

"That describes the White Sox fan as well. There's a tragic hopelessness about them. The Cubs, on the other hand, have a commercial underdog sense about them. So when you see a White Sox fan, you'll see they are relaxed in their environment, they know who they are. There's no pretension about them, even today. Who are Cubs fans? I don't know. They come to Wrigley looking for an identity."

Elliott's photos are reflective of the type of grit and gristle that used to show up in Tiger Stadium in my youth. Crumbling concrete, battered seats, and the fans coming in with cigars in their mouths and a stub of a pencil behind their ear. Looking at the faces of the men and women in Elliott's book, you can sense that these guys probably don't have their imaginations triggered by the tragic ironies of Hawthorne and Melville, as Red Sox writers claim their fans do. Chisox supporters like their players to eat their lunches from a pail and drink the same lousy beer that they do. These fans don't have time for a curse—they're too busy working and coming to the park to watch others work.

The White Sox are a storied team, although most times the story is

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dark and dismal, as in the case of the Black Sox. Where Sox fans might shrug, screw their faces into a bitter scowl, and cry "Fate!", I think there has to be darker forces afoot.

And in fact there is *one* White Sox fan who does not believe in natural law, and his name is Dr. David Fletcher. "There *is* a Black Sox curse," he says, emphatically. "The White Sox haven't won since Buck Weaver was banned from baseball. And they won't win until he gets reinstated." Dr. Fletcher is an occupational medicine specialist in Champagne, Illinois, and the founder and director of [Clearbuck.com](#), an organization dedicated to clearing former White Sox third baseman—and banned Black Sox member—Buck Weaver.

Dr. Fletcher is, literally, a man possessed. "This hit me February 1, 2003. I was standing at home plate and I was overcome with the spirit of Buck Weaver." Feeling Buck enter his soul, Dr. Fletcher decided that he had to go find Weaver's family and enlist them in the fight to clear Buck's name. "It was really bizarre. I drove down to see Buck's surrogate daughter in Missouri. I told her that I had to get him cleared and I needed to know everything about him. She thought I was crazy, but I finally convinced her, and brought her up to the All-Star game."

Dr. Fletcher's organization has been working overtime to clear Buck's name, going so far as to hire a full-time public relations advisor. Fletcher even wants to build a Black Sox museum near Comiskey. "I've got fifty thousand bucks into this thing," Dr. Fletcher admits. "I'm kind of a crazy baseball fan. I even got remarried at that home plate. And as you can see, I've been haunted by this story."



Clearing Buck Weaver's name could be just the thing for the White Sox. Everyone deserves to have some mythical fight in their lives, some kind of ghost or spirit to ease the suffering that baseball inflicts during the winter to so many fans. Why don't Sox fans embrace this? Liven up their dreary existence and the past at the same time? Certainly there is a spirit of Buck Weaver who is unhappily prattling around the afterlife, no doubt riled due to the lionization of Comiskey. Not to mention the spirits of the kranks of long ago, those men, women and children who saw their heroes of '19 tarnish the game—and the team—forever. Many of those people died before seeing the Sox take another pennant. They haunted old Comiskey Park, and now they've drifted across the street to wreak havoc on the new generation.

I'm a romantic at heart, and maybe that is why I had to leave Michigan, with its soul crushing blue collar pessimism. Suggesting natural law, or fate, cuffs the spirit. You can't beat natural law, you can't beat fate, but you can fight a curse. You can wear the same t-shirt to every playoff game and not eat in the fifth through seventh innings to bring good luck to your pitcher. You can pray to your god, kiss a rosary or hold séances in center field to appease ghosts. Curses are meant to be endured... and broken.

Baseball, merely a game, is about hope and promise and even silly things like good luck and bad. But the White Sox faithful feel that rally caps and appeasing a dead ballplayer won't beat a mediocre stadium, won't defeat the drawback of trying to attract quality players to the Sox, won't erase injuries, plain or bizarre. Sox fans suffer from the same sort of blue collar angst that keeps places like Chicago's South Side, Detroit, Michigan, and Gary, Indiana in the doldrums, seemingly forever. Good luck won't bring jobs and rebuild a downtown. It won't rebuild old Comiskey. This is life, and that's nothing you can do about it. And that's pretty sad.

Still, White Sox fans cling tenaciously to the small glories. Like Detroiters claiming that their downtown is still vibrant even though over half of it is abandoned, the rooters I spoke with take pride in new Comiskey and believe that someday, somehow, the Southside shall rise again. "Don't forget, we have the last championship," Scott Reifert points out. "That's baseball for you. It's all relative."

*All images are details of larger images from **Park Life** by Peter Elliott. Used with his kind permission.*