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## Fade to 'Black'

By Pat Rooney, Special To The News  
 July 14, 2003

There was a peculiar odor in many of the darkest corners of old Comiskey Park. Some might have dismissed it as the stale remains of eight decades worth of spilled beer, as well as the greasy runoff from countless Italian sausage sandwiches.

But fans of the Chicago White Sox know better. They understand that smell was just the lingering stink of the curse of the "Black Sox," which has hovered over the club like a dark cloud since 1919.

That year members of the White Sox committed the biggest crime in baseball history, throwing the World Series against the Cincinnati Reds. In the 84 years since, the curse has allowed the White Sox to return to the World Series only once and has denied the club a world championship.

The saga detailing one of baseball's darkest hours has been retold in books and movies. It began late in the summer of 1919, as the South Siders were driving toward their second American League championship in three years. Motivated by the stingy practices of owner Charles Comiskey, the heavily-favored White Sox lost to the Cincinnati Reds five games to three. (The World Series was a best-of-nine affair from 1919-1921.)

Bettors were tipped off in the hours leading up to Game 1, when the odds shifted abruptly toward the Reds. Eddie Cicotte, the Sox's starter in Game 1, let both gamblers and his teammates know the fix was in immediately.

Cicotte went 29-7 in 1919 with an earned-run average of 1.82. He hit exactly two batters in 3062/3 innings that season, but in the Series promptly plunked the first Reds batter he faced, signaling the start of the scandal. Cicotte did not last past the fourth inning as the Sox lost 9-1.

The Black Sox players implicated were Buck Weaver, who maintained his innocence and is not thought to have participated, though he knew of the plot; Cicotte; Lefty Williams; "Shoeless" Joe Jackson; Happy Felsch; Chick Gandil; Fred McMullin; and Swede Risberg. The conspirators were smart enough to make sure their effort, or lack thereof, was not obvious. The Sox were down four games to one after shutout losses by Cicotte in Game 4 and Williams in Game 5.

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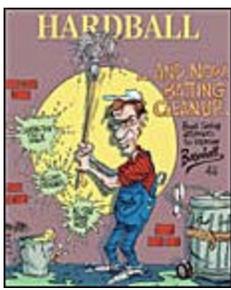
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Rookie pitcher Dickie Kerr, who actually was trying, won his second game of the Series in Game 6, while Cicotte saved face with a victory in Game 7 that trimmed the Reds' lead to 4-3. But in Game 8, Williams decided enough was enough, failing to survive the first inning as the Reds clinched the Series with a 10-4 victory.

Although the scandal was not made public for another year, some of the numbers were eye-popping. Risberg went 2-for-25 in the Series. Felsch and Gandil, both of whom hit at least .275 in the regular season, combined to go 12-for-56. And while Jackson hit .375 with six RBI, his alleged involvement forever became part of baseball lore.

The Black Sox eight were acquitted in court because self-incriminating grand jury testimony disappeared, but in 1921 commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis banned all eight from baseball, a punishment that still is keeping Jackson out of the Hall of Fame.

"Regardless of the verdict of juries," Landis declared, "no player that throws a game, no player that entertains proposals or promises to throw a game, no player that sits in a conference with a bunch of crooked players and gamblers where the ways and means of throwing games are discussed, and does not promptly tell his club about it, will ever play professional baseball."

Before the scandal, the White Sox went 2-for-2 in World Series. In 1906, the White Sox defeated the crosstown rival Cubs four games to two. Nicknamed the "Hitless Wonders," the Sox played true to form, managing only six runs and 11 hits through the first four games. Hall of Fame pitcher Ed Walsh posted two wins while allowing only two earned runs in 15 innings.

The White Sox were victorious again in the 1917 Series, defeating the New York Giants 4-2. Jackson (.304, four runs) and second baseman Eddie Collins (.409, four runs) paced the offense, while pitcher Red Faber pitched two complete games and recorded three victories.

The Curse of the Black Sox continued in 1959, the franchise's first appearance in the World Series since the scandal. Facing the Los Angeles Dodgers, the Sox recorded a resounding 11-0 win at home in Game 1 but lost four of the next five games, including two at Comiskey Park.

A division championship in 1983 ended in a playoff loss and another failure to break the curse. Old Comiskey was demolished in 1991, but the dark spirits moved with the team to the new field across the street. Division championships in 1993 and 2000 also ended without a World Series appearance, perpetuating the curse.

Baseball is a sport with a history like no other, steeped in superstition and myth. No fan needs to look any further than the Curse of the Black Sox to understand baseball folklore.

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