

We Were Robbed

For legions of baseball fans, a single incident lodges in memory like a poisoned dart. The incident varies by team.

For lovers of the Chicago Cubs, the debacle never to be forgotten took place on Oct. 14, 2003 at Wrigley Field, in the eighth inning of the sixth game of the National League Championship Series, when a fan, Steve Bartman, inadvertently impeded Moises Alou as he reached into the seats for a foul ball. In that instant Bartman went from anonymity to eternal infamy. At the time, the Cubs were leading 3-0, as well as leading the series three games to two. They stood five outs from their first World Series since 1945. Their opponent was the Florida Marlins, a team that was only twelve years old and therefore did not suffer from its own history like the Cubs.

As if that history had come to life and taken possession of the present, the Cubs collapsed following the Bartman incident. The collapse was immediate, miserable, comical, and complete. On the next delivery the team's ace, Mark Prior, threw a wild pitch, walking the batter and allowing a runner to reach third, and by the time the Cubs recorded two more outs they had given up eight runs. They never recovered.

A schlemiel had tampered with destiny itself.

Seventeen years before, a moment of infamy struck another team that seemed cursed, the Boston Red Sox—except that in this case the guilty party was one of their own, not a member of the general public who suddenly became part of the game. The stage was

the World Series, with the Red Sox leading three games to two (like the Cubs in 2003). Ahead by two runs, they were within one strike of the championship when the roof fell in. As all the world knows, a ground ball that should have been the final out skipped between Bill Buckner's legs, and the Mets won the game and the series. Instantly and permanently, the image of the bowlegged first baseman who cost Boston a championship engraved itself in the memory of New England. Though Buckner was a fine player who hit over .300 seven times, the gods for some unknown reason decided to make a goat of him, and a goat he remained until, many years later, success made Red Sox fans generous and they forgave him.

The scriptwriters of *Fate* seem to like the idea of glory turning to ashes. A year before the Buckner incident, the St. Louis Cardinals were up three games to two against the Kansas City Royals in the World Series, on the verge of a championship, only to have victory snatched from them. This time the thief was not a player, not a fan, but an umpire: Don Denkinger. With the Cardinals ahead 1-0 going into the ninth inning, Denkinger called the leadoff hitter for the Royals safe on a play at first base—a glaring and instantly notorious mistake. The Cardinals, of course, proceeded to lose the game and the series, and in retrospect it was clear that the infamy known as The Call marked the beginning of their end. It is reported that Denkinger, the man who stole their championship, received death threats from Cardinal fans.

If the Cubs' undoing brought to mind that of the Red Sox, the undoing of the Cardinals at the hands of an umpire did not remind the world of a possibly even more flagrant missed call three decades before, in another sport. In the second game of the

1953 NBA championship series between the New York Knicks and the Minneapolis Lakers, before the eyes of the Commissioner of the NBA, Knick guard Dick McGuire was fouled as he shot from the top of the key. Because both officials on the floor somehow failed to notice that the ball went through the basket, McGuire was given two free throws instead of one in addition to the made basket. As recounted by the Knicks' announcer Marty Glickman, who narrated the incident in real time, the officials, Sid Borgia and Stan Stutz,

were two strong-minded guys. They were of the old Bill Klem school that "it ain't nothin' till I call it." So it was no basket. McGuire took the two shots. He made the first, then missed the second. The game wound up in a tie, and the Lakers won in overtime. The Lakers then went on to win the series in six games. What would have happened had McGuire been awarded the shot? Nobody knows.¹

Possibly because the sequence took place somewhere in the middle of the game, or because the Knicks were not on the brink of winning the series when they were short-changed, the McGuire incident did not become a theme of perpetual lamentation and outrage. Like the Cardinals, the Red Sox, and the Cubs in the years to come, the Knicks lost the series—as it happens, in five games, not six.

But at this point the story-line of a team robbed of glory by a single outrage begins to look like what it is—formula fiction. In high school English class we were told about

¹ Marty Glickman with Stan Isaacs, *The Fastest Kid on the Block* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 104.

something called a turning point, and three of the four narratives are framed just so, with each team destined for victory until a single uncanny mishap causes its downfall. The mystique of the turning point is so seductive that even the fortunes of the Knicks seem to have been ruined by a bad call, even though they won only two games over the course of the 1953 Finals by Marty Glickman's account, and in actuality only one. It is time to question the perversely appealing notion that a single incident, however shocking, doomed any of these teams.

Coincidentally, the Bartman and Buckner incidents as well as The Call took place in game six of a seven-game series, meaning that each team had another chance to win the series they were supposedly denied by the malice of Fate. What did they do with their chance? They threw it away. The Cardinals lost game seven 11-0. Denkinger didn't lose it for them. If they had regrouped and won the deciding game—if they had lived by Yogi Berra's wise maxim that something isn't over till it's over—Denkinger would have been a footnote instead of a headline. For that matter, the Bartman incident certainly didn't doom the Cubs to give up eight runs that very inning or nine runs in game seven. The Borgia-Stutz affair does not even qualify as a tale of stolen glory, in that the Knicks lost three games after the game in question, which they also lost. Glory was never in their grasp to begin with; at the time of McGuire's shot they had won exactly one contest, the first of the series. (Moreover, the same Dick McGuire missed five free throws out of nine in the game of the uncredited basket, a game the Knicks lost by two points, 73 to 71.) Though the imagination seizes on the notion that in each case a single perverse twist of events was responsible for

the loss of a championship, this notion does not stand up to inquiry. Each team lost on its own merits, not as a result of a stroke of misfortune that ruined its hopes like a curse.

In *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham's clock has stopped permanently, to mark the hour when her life stopped—that is, when she was jilted by her betrothed on the eve of marriage. For lovers of the Cubs or the Red Sox or the Cardinals who dwelled obsessively on the moment they were cheated of a championship, time stopped, too. But while Miss Havisham's clock stopped, her life did not; she only pretended it did. She is a powerful agent in the novel's present even as she dedicates her existence to a single moment of infamy that happened long before. The clocks kept going for the disappointed teams, too. In time they won a championship—in the case of the Red Sox several of them—regardless of any history of failure or blunder. As for the Knicks, when they won the NBA championship in 1970, who was thinking of an untallied basket in the second game of the 1953 series against a team then in Minneapolis?

Dickens was onto something. After all, it is not only in the realm of sports that we overinvest in victim narratives.

Stewart Justman
2024