

48 years as a Cubs fan

By Jeff Siegel

“Some of them came by their anguish honestly, over decades, wearing their fatalism as both a matter of pride and personal misery.”

– Brian Hamilton, Sports Illustrated.com

April 1968: My dad takes me to my first Cubs games at Wrigley Field, a double-header sweep of the Houston Astros. How much better can life get?

August 1969: Kenny Holtzman throws a no-hitter against the Atlanta Braves, and my brother Jim and I run out of the house to tell people on the street what happened. We have forgiven Holtzman for making us wait an hour earlier in the summer at an autograph session that he skipped.

October 1969: I lose a quarter to Kenny Fell when the Cubs stage their epic collapse against the New York Mets. I made the bet in the flush of sixth-grade optimism and unaware that the Old Testament speaks directly to the Cubs: “Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.”

Spring 1979: I graduate from college and move to an apartment at 3744 ½ N. Sheffield, a block and a half north of the bleacher entrance to Wrigley Field. It’s \$165 a month for 2 ½ rooms, a bed in the wall, cockroaches, no air conditioning, and the first time I live in a neighborhood that isn’t white and middle class. It was some of the best money I’ve ever spent in my life; how often do you get to drive past Wrigley Field to go to the grocery store?

August 1979: I take my sister Beth to a Cubs-Cardinals game, because she needs to know about Lou Brock before he retires at the end of the season. To her credit, she watches the game, listens to my stories, and doesn’t once tell me to find something more constructive to do with my life.

September 1979: John Grochowski, who works on the copy desk at the long gone Suburban

Trib newspaper, where I cover high school sports, conducts a PhD seminar in Cubs history. I learn about the wretched teams of the 1950s, players like Glen Hobbie, and the infamous college of coaches in the early 1960s.

Spring 1980: I take a girl – call her Liz Smith – to a Cubs game, where we sit in the right field bleachers. It's the only time in my life I don't pay any attention to the game. She later breaks up with me in her car under the El tracks at the Davis Street station in Evanston, echoing the line in Steve Goodman's "A Dying Cub Fan's Last Request."

August 1982: Ron Swoboda, who played for the 1969 Mets and does the sports for a New Orleans TV station, is at a preseason college football event that I am attending as the sports editor of the Courier newspaper in Houma, La. Swoboda, in an otherwise ordinary career, hit two home runs in a key September game as part of the Mets' miracle. I introduce myself, and jokingly say I will never forgive him for 1969. He answers, not in a joking tone or with a joking look on his face: "You'd better get used to it."

October 1984: The Cubs win the first two games of their playoff series against the San Diego Padres; I listen to the games on the radio at my job running the long gone Carrollton Chronicle newspaper in suburban Dallas. In game four, watching at home in a darkened bedroom, Cubs manager Jim Frey walks Tony Gwynn to pitch to Steve Garvey. "You idiot," I yell at the TV set. "You don't want to pitch to Steve Garvey." I turn the TV off and don't watch any more of this game or the next, knowing full well what will happen. Garvey hits a home run and the Padres win game four, and then they beat the almost unbeatable Rick Sutcliffe to win game five and the series.

Spring 1986: David Eden, the sports editor of the Dallas Times Herald, sends me to Wrigley Field to write a feature about Cubs fan and why we endure. I spend most of the assignment in a daze, though the story turns out well and I'm told I've managed to capture the existential angst of Cubness – in a newspaper style, of course.

October 1989: The Cubs play the San Francisco Giants in the National League playoffs. I am

visiting family in New Orleans, and can't find anyone to watch the games with me. Which shows their good sense, since the Cubs embarrass themselves, losing the series, 4-1.

December 1991: The Dallas Times Herald closes, and I get drunk at the wake at a bar in Dallas. The bar, called Louie's, is owned by Louie and Chris Canelakis, who grew up in Waukegan, 20 minutes from where I grew up. Louie is perhaps the most wise and compassionate Cubs fan I have ever met. "Being a Yankees fan is easy," he tells me. "Anyone can win. Being a Cubs fan is about losing, and how easy is losing? So we understand something almost no one else does."

October 1998: Sammy Sosa hits 66 home runs during the regular season, but he hits .182 with no home runs as the Cubs lose their playoff series, 3-0, to the Atlanta Braves. I only watch the first game, knowing that the Braves and their Hall of Fame pitchers will embarrass the Cubs and I'm tired of the humiliation.

October 2002: Another darkened bedroom, this time at a rented house on Argo Street in Dallas. I'm counting down the outs, opening the door and shouting to no one in particular, "Eight to go... seven to go.. six to go.. five to go." Which, of course, is when I stop shouting, because Moises Alou doesn't catch the foul ball and Alex Gonzalez blows the double play. I will never forgive Mark Prior or Dusty Baker. And I'm a Cubs fan, and we forgive everyone.

October 2007 and October 2008: Two playoff series, two embarrassing losses – neither of which I watch, and I pay little attention to what goes on during the season, either. The Bartman series did something to me, and not even hiring a real manager like Lou Piniella to replace Baker helps. My life is more complicated, too – starting the wine blog, trying to make a living as a freelancer in the worst recession in almost 80 years. I tell myself I don't care any more, but I also know I'm a lousy liar.

October 2011: The Cubs hire Theo Epstein to run the team. This matters not only for what he did in Boston, where the Red Sox ended their century-long World Series drought, but because he is the grandson of the man who co-wrote the screenplay of "Casablanca." Which I wrote a book about. Don't laugh – these things matter to Cubs fan. Still, as my brother says when I email him about the hiring:

“It’s the Cubs. What difference can it make?”

October 2015: I watch the first game of the playoff series with the hated Mets, a 4-2 loss, and know I don’t have to watch the next three games. Though I do enjoy the Mets’ failure in the World Series. I’m a Cubs fan; we take our happiness where we can find it.

Oct. 22, 2016: Kyle Hendricks, who pitches exactly like I would if I could pitch, treats the Dodgers – the mighty Dodgers – like one of the Cubs teams of my youth. Aroldis Chapman does not pull a Lee Smith. And the Cubs turn two of the prettiest double plays I’ve seen in 48 years of watching them. And then, for no reason at all, or maybe for every reason imaginable, I bawl like a baby.

Nov. 2, 2016: I am screaming at the TV, screaming even louder than I did during the Padres and Bartman games. Let Baez hit away in the ninth inning – all we need is a fly ball. But Joe Maddon, who has managed the last two games as if he is part of the college of coaches and not Joe Maddon, calls for a two-strike bunt. And Baez fouls it off for a strikeout. After Dexter Fowler’s soft line drive doesn’t fall safely, I turn the TV off. I am a Cubs’ fan, and I know what will happen.

Nov 3. 2016: It’s raining in Dallas, but you could have fooled me. I am 10 years old and sitting in Wrigley Field with my dad and the sun is shining and I am watching the Cubs sweep a double-header from the Houston Astros. I am a Cubs fan, and is there anything better than that?