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The Chicago Cubs' Legend – Ernie Banks

By FR Penn

It is often difficult to compare the legendary players of Major League Baseball in that by making comparisons based on statistics, the focus generally falls on the sheer performance on the field. It also tends to reflect on what effect those numbers have had in the teams' success and how an individual players' success has bolstered a team to championship levels. Other players, no matter how individually successful, are too often viewed in an also-ran status because of the perception that their effort never was enough to allow the team to stand on a championship podium. Baseball is a team sport, yet a team sport loosely based on individual effort. Looking past the numbers to the intangibles of attitude and enthusiasm for the game, the greatness of a player cannot be judged merely on statistics. Ernie Banks is one such player in MLB history.

Ernie Banks was one of the greatest players, coaches and personalities to ever don a Cubs Uniform. Considered by many to be the most popular player ever, Banks was known to be a likable fellow. He was easy-going and was a friend to everyone he knew. Some sources say that he originated the phrase "I never met a man I didn't like." Banks was quiet and unassuming. He let his bat and his glove do the talking for him. He had an unending enthusiasm for the game of baseball. As the legend goes, after the Cubs finished getting stomped twice in a double-header, Ernie Banks reportedly suggested; "let's play three." On numerous occasions, Banks was quoted as having said; "It's a beautiful day for a baseball game. Let's play two!" Any picture of Ernie Banks from his playing days exudes the joy he derived from playing the game of baseball. There are none that don't feature that broad, infectious smile that he has become famous for. He was so popular, in fact, he became known as Mr. Cub. Many sources attribute the never-say-die and "baseball is fun" attitude of the Cubs organization directly to Ernie Banks.

Even though the Chicago Cubs' last World Series triumph was in 1908 and their last appearance in the World Series was in 1945 (which they dramatically lost in a seventh game), there still exists no greater hopeful and inspired team in MLB than Chicago's "lovable losers". Hope springs eternal, as they say, and after nearly 100 years, "eternal" is starting to live up to its reputation as being a very, very long time.

The Chicago Cubs' Legend – Ernie Banks

The woes of the Cubs have been compounded over the years. They produced a twenty-year stretch (1947–1967) of finishing in the lower half of their division for the regular season, partly during the Ernie Banks era. Yet, every new season brings with it the possibility of getting to the World Series and finally breaking the "billy goat curse", a curse put on Wrigley field and the Cubs during the fifth game of the 1945 World Series. As the story goes, a local Chicago bar owner attended the game and was allowed entrance under somewhat unusual circumstances. When ordered to leave Wrigley field for bringing his goat with him, reportedly a "foul smelling goat", Billy Sianis' curse was issued to the effect that a World Series would never again be played in the confines of Wrigley field.

As the myth surrounding the validity of the curse grows with each passing non-contention season, it has a simple and comfortable existence in baseball, the sport that prefers urban myth, legend and superstition to logic. In 2003, the curse was nearly broken when the Cubs matched up with the Atlanta Braves for the National League Divisional Series. With a 3–game to 2 lead in the series and winning game 6 at 3–0 in the top of the eighth inning against the Florida Marlins, the "billy goat curse" infused itself once again. The Cubs lost game 6 and then eventually lost game 7, which meant no chance for a

World Series game to be played at Wrigley Field. The Marlins went on to win the World Series in 2003.

Ernie Banks never had the opportunity to play in the League Championship Series, the World Series, or any post-season game. He did, however, take pride in himself, and his ball-club by consistently leading the league in many areas. Banks was an all-star every season from 1955 to 1962. He also made the all-stars cut in 1965, 1967 and 1969. Setting an early standard for future Iron Men, Banks played in 424 consecutive games from the day he became a Cub, a record at the time. His longest consecutive game streak stands at 717. He hit 40 homeruns in 1955, a record for MLB shortstops, and led the National League in homers in 1958 with 47 over-the-fence blasts. Banks hit 5 grand slams in 1955, and topped 100 RBIs. He was awarded the NL Most Valuable Player in 1958 and again in 1959. A mind-blowing accomplishment if we take into consideration the fact that the Cubs were no where close to being in contention for winning the division pennant. His 1959 MVP season boasted 45 homeruns and led the League with 143 RBIs. Ernie Banks earned the NL Golden Glove award at shortstop in 1960, and had the fewest errors in MLB. He also led the National league in homers and RBIs that year.

Over the course of his career, Ernie Banks became the Cub's all-time leader in:

* Games played (2,528) * At-bats (9,421) * Total bases (4,706) * Home runs (512)

Banks also established many NL records, entered into the MLB Hall of Fame in 1977, and his number 14 was the first to be retired by the Cubs. When finished with playing in 1971, he went on to coaching with the Cubs. In May of 1973, when Cubs manager Whitey Lockman was ejected for arguing a call, Banks managed the rest of the game. He was technically the first African-American to manage in Major League Baseball.

Infused into the heart of every Cub fan (and there are many) is the spirit and exuberance and the love for the game of baseball that was epitomized by Ernie Banks. He brought so much more than just outstanding performances and good statistics to the game. He did so with vigor, zest and a capacity to

enjoy the game that has incurably infected Cub fans all over this planet.

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Carlos Zambrano: Over–Shadowed by Greatness

By Kevin Bourassa

With Kerry Wood, Mark Prior, Greg Maddux and Matt Clement on his staff, Carlos Zambrano has been over–shadowed by other household name pitchers. After today's (May 13th) start, in which Zambrano pitched 8 innings giving up 0 ER and striking out 11 hitters, Carlos Zambrano is now 4–1. On May 7th, Zambrano pitched a 2–hitter against the Colorado Rockies and threw just 97 pitches in the shutout. In Zambrano's last 3 starts (24 IP) he hasn't given up an earned run. In 2 of his 3 starts during May, Zambrano has struck out more than 10 batters. Zambrano hasn't always been this good however.

Signed as a non–drafted free–agent by the Chicago Cubs in 1997, Zambrano was the first player born in the 1980's to play a game for Chicago. In his rookie season he was 1–2 with a 15.26 ERA which is not something to call home about. He then improved on his rookie season with a 3.66 ERA after joining the Cubs in July of 2002. Despite the good ERA, Zambrano only had a 4–8 record. Finally, last season, Zambrano broke out. He posted a 13–11 record with a 3.11 ERA. Zambrano solidified his part in the Cubs staff, and began his quest for stardome.

The Venezuela native has come a long way from being an un–drafted free agent in 1997, and is now a key part of one of the best staffs in baseball. Zambrano's 1.82 ERA is 2nd in the league right now, behind future hall–of–famer Roger Clemens. He has become one of the NL's more dominant strikeout pitchers, and his 46 strikeouts rank 8th in the NL. Zambrano is one of only 6 NL pitchers to have a shutout so far in the season.

Even with these great stats, and even though he has probably been the most impressive starter for the Cubs this season, Zambrano still isn't getting the attention he deserves. If Carlos Zambrano can keep up this amazing start to the season, he will have a great chance to make the all–star team. Soon, fans from all over will know of Carlos Zambrano, and they will mention his name right along–side fellow pitchers like Kerry Wood, Mark Prior and Greg Maddux.

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