

When baseball turns ugly—Chicago Cubs fan vilified following ballpark incident

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For Major League Baseball fans in North America, the month of October holds special interest and excitement. Fans whose teams have made it to the postseason playoffs flock to the ballpark, or gather around their television sets, to watch what can be a thrilling competition—with various levels of nail-biting, exhilaration or despair (depending upon who wins or loses).

This year's run-up to the "Fall Classic"—the World Series—has been particularly dramatic, with two teams—the Chicago Cubs and the Boston Red Sox—vying for their respective league championships after enduring decades of disappointment. The Red Sox have not won the World Series since 1918; the Cubs not since 1908—and Boston and Chicago baseball fans are known to be passionate about their teams.

In general, the rivalries between competing sports clubs in the US—and the destiny of one's hometown team, whether good or bad—are a source of relatively good-natured competition and entertainment. After all, "It's only a game," isn't it? But an incident at Wrigley Field in Chicago this past Tuesday—and the disturbing events that ensued—have shown a darker side to sports that should be a cause of concern for any serious and decent-minded fan.

The episode occurred in Game 6 of the National League Championship Series, which would determine whether the Chicago Cubs or the Florida Marlins would advance to the World Series. In the top of the 8th inning, with one out (and Chicago leading), a Marlin batter hit a foul fly ball in the direction of the stands. As Cubs left fielder Moises Alou drifted in from his position and tried to jump up and catch the ball, fan Steven Bartman grabbed for it and knocked it away, preventing what could have been—but was not guaranteed to be—a potential second out in a crucial

inning.

The Marlins went on to score eight runs in the inning, and won the game, forcing a winner-take-all 7th game the next day. The Marlins won that game as well to secure their World Series berth, and the Chicago Cubs and their fans were once again denied a chance at a league or world championship.

Moments after the foiled play, thousands of Cubs fans began chanting obscenities at Bartman and hurled cups of beer and bags of peanuts his way. Some in the stands shouted that they wanted to see him dead, and one fan cried out, "Lynch him!"

In the bottom of the 8th inning, Cubs authorities decided that they needed to remove Bartman from Wrigley Field for his own safety. As off-duty Chicago police officers escorted him to the security office amid jeers and thrown objects, Bartman covered his face. He was given a new jacket and conducted through the stadium's front gates several minutes later, undetected by fans.

By the next day, newspapers had published Bartman's name, photo and address—and disgruntled fans had plastered "wanted" posters with his likeness around town. He was ridiculed on national television and talk radio, and several Internet sites sprang up essentially calling for his blood. The *Chicago Sun-Times* reported Friday that state police were investigating death threats called in to Bartman's workplace.

Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich chimed in helpfully, calling Bartman's action "stupid," and the president's brother, Jeb Bush—governor of Florida, home of the Marlins—suggested unamusingly that Bartman might want to seek asylum there.

Reporters gathered outside the home where he lives with his parents, and Bartman reportedly went into

seclusion for his own safety. “It’s been a tough 24 hours,” commented his brother Martin. “He’s really hurting right now. I love him so much I’d give up a piece of my anatomy for him.”

According to friends and family, Bartman has a great love for baseball and grew up in a family of “avid, avid” Cubs fans. He played both high school and college baseball and has coached a local youth baseball team for 13- and 14-year-olds.

On Wednesday afternoon, Bartman released a written statement, read to the press by his brother, which said in part, “I had my eyes glued on the approaching ball the entire time and was so caught up in the moment that I did not even see Moises Alou, much less that he may have had a play... I am so truly sorry from the bottom of this Cubs fan’s broken heart.”

In fact, Bartman did what any fan would have done under similar circumstances. He was not only motivated by the thought of taking home a souvenir from an important game, but was confronted with a projectile heading straight at him. While Moises Alou initially reacted with anger to Bartman’s actions, he later said he “felt bad” for Bartman because it was a natural reaction for a fan to try to catch a ball. Cubs players overwhelmingly defended Bartman, saying they were ultimately responsible for both the Game 6 and 7 losses. Fans sitting in nearby seats, who also instinctively reached for the ball, also came to Bartman’s defense.

What then accounts for the reaction, bordering on the pathological, which followed Tuesday night’s incident? It should be noted, first of all, that the media bears a good deal of the blame for the frenzy whipped up against Bartman. They chose to publicly identify him and to provide incessant coverage, with video footage of the incident shown repeatedly on local and national television. The same media giants that make hundreds of millions of dollars broadcasting sporting events are quick to exploit such incidents to boost ratings and revenues. (The network carrying the event was Rupert Murdoch’s Fox Television.)

Sports is big, big business in the US. Vast quantities of money are spent promoting and hiring athletes and marketing sports-related merchandise. But while raking in fortunes for club owners and sponsors, sports also serves the social function of deflecting the attention of the public from pressing questions of the day—the attack

on social conditions, democratic rights, the government’s criminal military exploits. In times of considerable turmoil and confusion, concentration on sports can serve as a means for masses of people to *not think* about the more complex and difficult problems they collectively face. This process is of course encouraged by the powers that be.

Spectator sports—whether baseball, football, basketball, soccer or hockey—is a form of entertainment and diversion. But the incident at Wrigley Field says it is something more, and serves another social function. To the extent that fans are so hugely invested emotionally that a fluke like a missed foul ball can provoke such bitterness and anger, it points to a deep sense of alienation and frustration pervading society. If a trivial incident takes on such significance, something else must be missing from people’s lives.

The cultural level of American political life is at an all-time low. The “historic” meeting of George W. Bush and new California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, two thoroughly empty vessels, took place two days after the ballpark uproar in Chicago. No political party or politician has a base of genuine mass support in the US. A widespread sense exists, consciously articulated or not, that politics and the media, particularly television, represent a vast and unsatisfying emptiness.

To the aficionado, a baseball game or any sporting event is worth getting passionate about, but the level of venom and even irrationality exhibited in Chicago suggests that sports has taken on a significance in the US that it should not and cannot have. Through being sports fans, layers of the population are “filling in” the vacuum experienced in public and social life in an inevitably false and distorted manner.



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