

Grief and hope: Cubs fans wait for next year

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 4, 2008](#) issue

When a Los Angeles Dodger hit a grand-slam home run off of the Cubs' most reliable pitcher in the first game of the National League division series, a great silence descended on Wrigley Field. I was there, one of 42,000 faithful who thought this might be the year our team would go all the way. After all, the Cubs had played good baseball all season and had the best record in the National League. Even the skeptics thought that the end of the team's century-long drought—the Cubs have gone longer without a championship than any team in professional sports—was in sight.

Then the Cubs lost three straight to the Dodgers and were out of the playoffs.

The century of futility has produced philosophic reflection and lots of bad humor. It also has given preachers and congregations a rich trove of theological illustrations: Cubs fans understand what it means to live in hope, to wait in the darkness until the light shines.

All those years have also produced interesting excuses for losing, the most famous of which is the Curse of the Billy Goat. William Sianis, owner of the legendary Billy Goat Tavern, brought his pet goat to a World Series game in 1945 at Wrigley Field (which the Cubs lost) and was denied entrance even though he had a ticket for the goat. Sianis, the story goes, placed a curse on the Cubs, declaring that the team would never again play in a World Series.

This year, Cubs management, perhaps in the spirit of Frederick Nietzsche, who supposedly always tipped his hat when he walked in front of a church just in case what was said inside turned out to be true, retained the services of a Greek Orthodox priest, who sprinkled holy water in the Cubs dugout before the first game. After the second loss, a group of Muslims assembled outside Wrigley Field to pray for a win in Los Angeles.

Among the more eloquent expressions of grief came from my 11-year-old grandson. Johnny has been fortunate—or maybe unfortunate—to awaken at a young age to the compelling beauty of baseball. He scans box scores in the morning paper, watches batting averages and pitching records and identifies with his team. Johnny's room was a veritable Cubs shrine, with pictures, game programs, pennants, autographed balls and Cubs napkins, place mats and key chains. He watched the final game all the way to the bitter end at about midnight, after his parents had gone to bed. When it was all over, Johnny went to his room, took down all the pictures, posters and pennants and assembled them in a neat pile in the hallway, closed the door and went to bed. It doesn't get any more eloquent than that.

And yet, the faithful will once again wait, in hope, for next year.