

COMMENTARY

# In a splendid moment of Chicago baseball symmetry, White Sox and Cubs clinch 2 minutes apart

BY PAUL SULLIVAN  
*Chicago Tribune*

CHICAGO

It was a moment of serendipity no one could’ve imagined when the baseball season began six months ago.

Cubs and White Sox clinchers, dueling champagne parties and thousands of fans celebrating in living rooms, offices and bars from Mount Greenwood to Edison Park.

On a crisp fall afternoon in Chicago, the Cubs beat the Miami Marlins 2-1 at Wrigley Field to clinch a postseason spot, while the White Sox did likewise in Kansas City with a 9-1 trouncing of the Royals at Kauffman Stadium.

The timing seemed almost preordained. The Sox got the job done at 3:45 p.m. on a short toss from second baseman Chase Medroth to first baseman Munetaka Murakami. Two minutes later, the Cubs finished off their own clinching on a short toss from reliever Ryan Zeferjahn to first baseman Michael Busch.

That’s Chicago baseball symmetry in an asymmetrical season.

“That’s cool,” Cubs second baseman Nico Hoerner said of the clockwork clinchings. “It’s a big deal for Chicago. Our games against them this year were incredibly fun, and it’s good for everyone.”

The last time Chicago enjoyed such a beautiful baseball bounty was in 2020, when both teams made the postseason in the pandemic-shortened season. But because fans weren’t allowed into the parks, it felt like empty calories to most fans, and when both teams bowed out quickly, it was treated with a collective shrug.

The last time it happened in a real season was in 2008, when the Cubs were swept by the Los Angeles Dodgers in three games in a National League Division Series and the Sox lost in four games to the Tampa Bay Rays in an American League Division Series. The dream of the first crosstown World Series since 1906 was over almost before it began.

That Improbable Dream is still not on many fans’ minds, but at least it’s theoretically possible, just like sunbathing on the lakefront during a polar vortex.

The idea of both Chicago teams getting a bite of the postseason seemed laughable before the Wrigley ivy turned green.

The Sox were 6-13 in mid-April after getting swept by the Rays, and the talk was more about avoiding a fourth straight 100-loss season than getting into the postseason.

The Cubs went through a miserable 10-game losing streak in late May, negating a couple of 10-game winning streaks earlier in the spring, and everyone was wondering when the offense would wake up.

It wasn’t pretty at times. In fact “Winning Ugly” could’ve been the slogan for either team. But these two Chicago teams persevered, overcame all the doubters and did whatever it took to get the job done.

Cubs center fielder Pete Crow-Armstrong, who became the seventh member of the exclusive 40-40 club Thursday with his first-inning steal, put it in easily digestible terms that no doubt will become an Obvious Shirt slogan.

“We’re just built for the weird s—,” Crow-Arm-



MATT MARTON IMAGN IMAGES via Reuters Connect

The Chicago Cubs sit for a team photo after clinching a playoff spot Thursday after the game against the Miami Marlins at Wrigley Field in Chicago.

strong said after the win.

There are still things to be settled for the Cubs and Sox, including where they’ll be seeded in their respective league playoffs, whom they’ll face and where they’ll start out. Not to mention who in the world will start on the mound.

They have one final weekend of baseball to figure things out, with the Sox returning home to play the Colorado Rockies and the Cubs going on the road to Boston - and perhaps parts unknown, depending on the no-r’easter hitting New England.

But the main worries are over. They’re both officially in the 12-team tournament, and after all the hyperventilating on both sides of town over the last week or so, it was nice to see everyone take a deep breath and smile again.

Celebrating this season was never a question. Ian Happ remembered the Cubs not celebrating their clinching in 2018, then losing in the wild-card game.

“We learned a lesson from that,” Happ said. “It’s the longest season in sports. It’s a grind. To get through 162 isn’t easy. You have to celebrate the regular season and what it means.”

There will be plenty of time for more fan angst, and each team has its specific issues heading into the playoffs. But Thursday was a day to celebrate what a mad, mad season this was. The Sox were dead last in The Athletic’s baseball rankings in early April, based on reputation and a roster of kids and castoffs, from Sam Antonacci to Randal Grichuk.

When New York Yankees outfielder Grichuk arrived May 1 after hitting .194 in the Bronx, Sox fans wondered, “What’s the point?”

But he soon became a clubhouse leader and the catalyst of the lineup in September.

“It means even more that we were doubted by everyone,” Grichuk said Thursday. “And it’s one of those things where this clubhouse didn’t doubt. I got here the first week in May and they were confident, and it’s one of those things where confidence and playing the game hard, the right way, goes a long way.”

Manager Will Venable said watching the Sox progress was special for Chairman Jerry Rein-sdorf, who watched them lose a record 121 games two years ago and promoted Chris Getz to general manager to fast-forward the rebuild.

“Certainly a couple tough years there where I know the group was not playing at the expectations that everyone expects,” Venable said. “Just so happy for Jerry, so happy for everyone in the organization that all the hard work has led to

on May 8 after their second 10-game winning streak to .500 on June 10 (34-34), manager Craig Counsell was getting grilled like the Wieners Circle onions.

“Alex Bregman at the All-Star break in Cincinnati used the word ‘caloused’ to describe the team,” Counsell said Thursday. “That describes where we’re at. It hasn’t been all smooth, but you develop some resiliency through that and calluses through that, and it gets you through a lot of stuff. And you’ve got to keep responding to that stuff, and that’s what this team has done.”

Crow-Armstrong believes the Cubs are “weathered” from all of their highs and lows.

“We have taken a lot of hits this year, and we still found our way here with a

pitching staff that’s had to jump through so many hoops and go through so many obstacles,” he said, referring to injuries that put so many pitchers in new roles. Anonymous relievers such as Ryan Rolison, Trent Thornton and Jacob Webb became bullpen saviors over the summer, while Ben Brown dominated as a starter before a devastating neck injury.

Crow-Armstrong and Bregman were the main attractions, but this truly was a team effort in every sense of the word.

And now the dream of 1906 is back. The possibility of the second crosstown World Series, albeit remote, is still alive.

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