



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 5, 2012

Hope Springs “Infernal” on Opening Day

Will, a league-leading conservative columnist and commentator, usually bats and throws right, but he occasionally baffles even his most loyal fans by showing up in a column or TV show as a switch hitter. He has, from time to time, enraged conservatives with shocking heresies, including a declaration that the Tenth Amendment is "dead as a doornail," and an insistence that Americans are under-taxed. He seems to enjoy producing columns that incite readers to send him angry letters that, he later delights in telling us, promise to have him horsewhipped. I have no access to horsewhips, but armed only with a word processor, I once sent the esteemed Mr. Will an email in which I compared him to the great Socrates. That was in response to a column he had written in which he suggested pro-life conservatives get over their obsession with abortion and back "pro-choice" Rudy Giuliani for President. I recommended to Mr. Will, or whoever receives his emails, that he "drink hemlock and die." I received no reply. But I gather from the uninterrupted publication of his columns and his weekly appearances on television that he declined to take my advice.



I'm glad he did. Despite my occasional pique, I continue to regard Will as a national treasure. There may be other Pulitzer Prize-winning political columnists who have written bestsellers about baseball comparable to Wills' *Men at Work* and *Bunts*, but I am not aware of them. But calling them "bestsellers," while accurate, does not do justice to Will's baseball books. A lot of bestsellers would have better served mankind if they had remained trees in the forest, which might later have been converted to lumber for something useful like tables or chairs. But Will's writing on baseball is both informative and entertaining. And they lend an historical perspective to the national pastime. A long-suffering Cubs fan, Will grew up in a Chicago suburb with a love of history and a tragic sense of life. His Little League baseball team, he recalls, was the Mittendorf Funeral Home Panthers (The uniforms were black). Perhaps that contributed to the frame of mind that inspired him, years later, to look at his beloved country and his favorite baseball team and write an essay with the foreboding title, "The Chicago Cubs and the Decline of the West." Will, who appreciates the misfortune of writers who lived before the world was blessed with baseball, has declared that baseball writer Tom Boswell (not to be confused with that "other" Boswell, who wrote about lesser subjects, like Samuel Johnson) is "what Dante could have been,



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had Medieval Italy had sportswriters."



Other writers may know baseball's prodigal sons, otherwise known as the Chicago Cubs, last won a pennant in 1945, when most able-bodied ball players were away at war. But it took Will to declare history's verdict: "World War II was fought to make the National League safe for the Cubs." Cubs fans, Will explains, learn early in life to face dark realities, unrelieved by a sunny, but false optimism. You don't whistle past the graveyard when you know your team is buried there, as the Cubs were in 1966 when they pushed past two expansion teams (the Houston Astros and the New York Mets) and claimed sole possession of tenth (and last) place. "Candor is the Cubs' only passion," Will explained in a 1980 column, which is no doubt why that year's manager, Preston Gomez, on the brink of a new season, gave fans the following headline: "Gomez Evaluates Cubs: No Speed, Bad Arms, Leaky Infield." The standings at the end of the season confirmed Gomez as Chicago's Cassandra. The Cubs, with 64 wins and 98 losses, finished last in the National League East.

One year, a couple decades ago, the Cubs began the season in style, losing their first eight games. They were home at Wrigley Field for game number 9 when they had to face the Atlanta Braves and baseball's premier pitcher, Greg Maddux, a former Cubs hurler who had escaped via free agency. One undaunted fan, under the influence of youth and perhaps a few too many Old Style beers, hung a sign from the bleachers with a bold forecast of how the Cubs would fare in that 162-game season. "154-8," it said. "The Streak Begins Today!" It didn't. And hasn't.

Another baseball season begins for most major league teams today and the Boston Red Sox, who when last seen in regular season play were doing a rather convincing imitation of the ill-fated *Titanic*, have the unenviable assignment of opening the season in Detroit, where they must face Justin Verlander, the best pitcher in baseball. Yet hope springs infernal, as Archie Bunker (a Mets fan) might say. Despair is said to be a sin against the Holy Ghost and a stain upon the memory of former Red Sox owner Tom Yawkey. So whaddaya say, Sox fans?

162-0. The Streak Begins Today!

Top photo: Jack Kenny, Bottom photo: George Will attending a Nationals-Cardinals baseball game, on Labor Day 2006





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