

# The Sports Section

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## Unscripted Entertainment

Victory is never a sure thing, but what was great about the Sox' victory is that it never even felt like one.

By Ted Cox

In hindsight, championships look inevitable. Of course the Bulls were destined to win six NBA titles in Michael Jordan's last six complete seasons with them, so the dangers they encountered along the way now seem minimal. All but forgotten is the way Scottie Pippen had to rally the scrubs with a 14-2 run to open the fourth quarter of the sixth game in 1992, setting the stage for Jordan to return and close out the Portland Trail Blazers, who would have had all the momentum going into the seventh game. So would the Phoenix Suns the following year, if John Paxson hadn't hit the trey that won that series in six. Lost to memory is the scare the mighty Bears faced in Super Bowl XX when Walter Payton fumbled on the opening series, allowing the New England Patriots to take a 3-0 lead. Because the Bears scored the next 44 points, that fumble seems inconsequential today.

The great thing about the White Sox' world championship was how rife it was with danger. Before this season, Sox fans had memories like the one of the Jerry Dybzinski fuckhead catastrophe in the 1983 playoffs, without which the Sox would have pushed a run across for Britt Burns and no doubt won the fourth game, which would have allowed LaMarr Hoyt to clinch the series the following day and send the Sox on to certain victory in the World Series against the aged Philadelphia Phillies. But 88 years of tragedy schooled fans in how to savor things going right. Jose Contreras's masterful start against the New York Yankees in August—which halted a seven-game skid and sent him on a personal nine-game winning streak extending into the playoffs—was one critical moment. Another was Joe Crede's game-winning homer in the tenth

inning against the Cleveland Indians in late September. Without that victory, the Sox actually would have fallen behind the Tribe two days later.

The nerviest moment of the playoffs was Orlando Hernandez, "El Duque," coming on with the bases loaded and no outs in the sixth inning of the clinching third game of the Red Sox series and somehow working out of the jam with two pop-outs and a checked-swing strikeout of Johnny Damon. The Championship Series would have been entirely different if A.J. Pierzynski didn't steal first in the ninth inning of the second game and Crede didn't follow with the winning hit. And in the World Series, what if Paul Konerko hadn't hit his first-pitch grand slam off Chad Qualls in the second game and Scott Podsednik hadn't hit his sayonara off Brad Lidge? The Astros would have stayed alive if they'd won the third game, but Crede rallied the Sox with his homer off Roy Oswalt and Geoff Blum finished off Houston with his homer in the 14th.

Even though the Sox led their division wire to wire and took the Series with only a single postseason loss, the moments that linger in memory are the ones where that championship was in grave jeopardy.

Cubs fans remain firmly in the mode of savoring tragedy, and the Sox' triumph—combined with the season's other top baseball story, the steroid scandal—prompted me to reassess the Cubs' loss to the Florida Marlins two years ago. Forget Steve

**The Sox' triumph—combined with the season's other top baseball story, the steroid scandal—prompted me to reassess the Cubs' loss two years ago.**

Bartman for the moment. What if Ivan "Pudge" Rodriguez hadn't followed the Bartman snafu with a run-scoring single? What if the Rodriguez who was named most valuable player of that series had been replaced by, say, the Rodriguez who caught for the Detroit Tigers this season? Rodriguez was a monster with the Marlins. Maybe he wasn't built up like Hulk Hogan, but his muscular back seemed a yard wide. Rodriguez was one of the players named as a steroid user in Jose Canseco's tell-all book this year—which gained in credibility when Mark McGwire, another of the names named, declined to deny using steroids in sworn testimony before Congress, and when Rafael

Palmeiro, who did deny use in the same hearing, tested positive during the season. Rodriguez, meanwhile, turned up in Detroit looking more like a shortstop in oversize catcher's gear than the beast who'd beaten the Cubs.

Rodriguez encountered the Sox in their division-clinching game in Detroit the last week of the season. When he seemed to have hurt himself sliding into second base late in the game, Detroit manager Alan Trammell was noticeably reluctant to go out and see how he was—or to pull him from the game for a pinch runner. There seemed to be thinly veiled animosity between the two, and while that was no doubt due to Trammell being in his last days as manager

and to Rodriguez being among his public detractors, allow me to read into it some personal contempt as well.

But Cubs fans who might bristle at the possible injustice should remember they had their own dubious star two years ago in Sammy Sosa, who was even more diminished in skills than in body this season while playing for the Baltimore Orioles.

Baseball finally got clean this year, and even if it did so largely by sweeping the past under the Astroturf, it avoided a public-relations calamity on the order of the 1919 "Black Sox." It went all but unnoticed that the White Sox, responsible for baseball's last great scandal, were the first champions of the reform era that's followed the steroid scandal. Whether by making their own breaks or taking advantage of their opponents' misfortunes, the Sox fully earned what they achieved this season. There was nothing funny, fixed, or foretold about it. **Q**



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