




3-31-2014

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Gimbel, Steve. "An Ernie Banks Season." The Baltimore Sun- Opinion (March 31, 2014).

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# An Ernie Banks Season

## **Abstract**

The dawn of the baseball season is an existential moment. For big market teams with owners willing to pay for marquee players, and general managers who build playoff-bound teams, it is a time of great anticipation.

It's also a time of hope, albeit dim, for those die-hard fans of teams who are off the playoff pace by double digits year in and year out. Their cautious optimism is one that illuminates the human condition. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Baseball, Ernie Banks, Chicago Cubs. Mr. Sunshine

## **Disciplines**

Cultural History | History | Philosophy | Sports Studies | United States History

# THE SUN

## An Ernie Banks Season

By Steve Gimbel

March 31, 2014

The dawn of the baseball season is an existential moment. For big market teams with owners willing to pay for marquee players, and general managers who build playoff-bound teams, it is a time of great anticipation.

It's also a time of hope, albeit dim, for those die-hard fans of teams who are off the playoff pace by double digits year in and year out. Their cautious optimism is one that illuminates the human condition.

French philosopher Albert Camus contended that life is absurd, that most of us are like the Greek tragic figure Sisyphus, who was condemned to roll a huge boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll back down as he reached the top. The essence of humanity, Camus argued, is in the moment where Sisyphus turns around to see the boulder once again at the bottom of the hill knowing he must trudge down to his toil once more, aware that this effort will again be both great and futile.

As a lifelong Orioles fan, I've had my share of euphoric victory. But when your team is down, I prefer the wisdom not of Camus, but of the great American philosopher and hall of fame shortstop Ernie Banks.

If anyone understands Sisyphus' situation it would be Ernie Banks. Mr. Banks knew that we are what we do — you are a painter only if you paint, you are a writer only if you write. We have no intrinsic nature, but become what we are by doing what we do.

One might think that in losing his humanity, Sisyphus is miserable. But Camus contends he chose to resent the gods and rail against his fate. Mr. Banks would have advised him to

simply decide that he wants to roll the boulder. In making that choice, he is free. His actions are his own. They are powerless to punish him. Take that.

Mr. Banks' boulder was the Chicago Cubs from 1955 through 1971, a team beset by frustration, but a team he was thrilled to play for every day.

A 14 time all-star, Mr. Banks played for the Cubs during a time when they never won the World Series, the league pennant, or even the division title. Indeed, they never even came close, only winning more games than they lost once and two years losing more than 100 games in a season. Yet, Mr. Banks, known as "Mr. Sunshine," would famously say "It's a beautiful day for a ballgame. Let's play two."

Remember that he was playing in Chicago, where April and late September evenings can have a chill that stings with every hit and catch. He wasn't playing in San Diego. To Mr. Banks, "a beautiful day for a ballgame" meant it was so regardless of what Mother Nature is throwing at you. The beauty is to be found in your approach to the game, not in the reading of the thermometer. It comes from within, not without.

And when Mr. Banks said, "let's play two," rest assured he was not anticipating a pair of victories. Statistically, he knew the Cubs would most likely lose at least one game in a doubleheader. Friedrich Nietzsche argued that we give our lives meaning through triumphant self-affirmation, but Ernie Banks' affirmation was so powerful that it did not require the likelihood of triumph. It was not whether you won or lost; in his case the joy sprung from playing.

Ernie Banks lived for moments on the ballfield, for the chance to be in the game, batting with men on base, anticipating a ball hit in his direction, striving to take that extra base. He played not with scorn for the baseball gods who once again cast the Cubbies in the cellar, but with gratitude that he could play the game.

So we begin another season idolizing winners, gushing over champions. I'm suggesting a different fan perspective this season. As in life, let's not judge success on the diamond by the box score or fawn over winners who too often drown in their own scorn (are you listening A-Rod?)

More teams are out of contention than in contention every season. This year, if you're team is dwelling in the cellar, remember Mr. Banks and appreciate that it is a beautiful day for a ballgame.

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