

Phillies join a crowd of doomed favorites

By William C. Kashatus

Fans are still mourning or fuming at the Phillies' underachievement loss to the St. Louis Cardinals in last week's National League division series. But as a historian who began following baseball — and the Phillies — during the heartbreaking 1964 season, I've learned to expect disappointment and to glory in the triumph whenever the Phillies win anything, whether it's a division title, a pennant, or a world championship. Besides, life is too short to be miserable over something as inconsequential as baseball.

History has a way of putting these losses in perspective. Over the last decade, the teams that have been most successful in the postseason generally overcame great adversity during the regular season just to get a playoff berth. Those teams' underdog status eliminated whatever pressure the players might have felt if they were expected to win. The Phillies enjoyed that status in 2008 — just as the Cards do this year.

In fact, the Phillies have never prevailed in a postseason in which they were favored to win it all, as this year's team was.

The 1977 Phillies, then considered the best team in franchise history with 101 regular-season wins, were favored over the Los Angeles Dodgers in the best-of-five National League Championship Series. But they lost in four games, including a nightmarish Game Three on what has come to be known as "Black Friday."

In the strike-abbreviated 1981 season, the defending world champion Phillies were heavily favored to repeat, but they didn't even make it past the Montreal Expos in the divisional playoff. Two years later, the Phillies coasted to a National League pennant over the Dodgers, three games to one, but were almost swept in the World Series by the Baltimore Orioles, who won in five.

It was the underdog Phillies teams that provided the fans with the most lasting memories. No one could have predicted that the 1950 Whiz Kids would steal the pennant from the Brooklyn Dodgers on the final day of the regular season. Similarly, both the Sporting News and Sports Illustrated had picked the 1980 world champion Phils to finish third, but they got hot in mid-September and stayed that way throughout the playoffs and World Series.

The 1993 Phils caught lightning in a bottle, climbing from last place to first and winning the NLCS over the 104-win Atlanta Braves, who were bidding for their third consecutive World Series appearance. In 2007, general manager Pat Gillick told the fans not to expect the Phillies to compete in the postseason for a few years, but they clinched the division and went on to win the World Series the following year.

Today's Phillies are no longer powered by the offense of Jimmy Rollins, Ryan Howard, and Chase Utley. Their strength now is the starting pitching of Roy Halladay, Cliff Lee,

and Cole Hamels. By the start of spring training next year, nearly two-thirds of the 2008 roster will have departed, and the Phillies will almost certainly have to rebuild.

If we've seen the end of these glory years, then the 2007-11 Phillies will go down in baseball history as a perennial contender, on par with other teams that made regular appearances in the postseason but only won a single world championship. They were certainly not a dynasty — a team good enough to capture two or more world championships in a five-year period. That takes clutch pitching, hitting, and fielding, as well as exceptional management and single-minded focus.

By that measure, these Phillies aren't even the best team in Philadelphia baseball history — a distinction that rightfully belongs to the old Athletics, who produced two championship dynasties: 1910-14 (three world championships and four pennants) and 1929-31 (two world championships and three pennants).

But none of that should detract from the memories and joy these Phillies have provided the fans. Instead of lamenting or complaining about their defeat, we should be grateful for the front office's efforts to build a winning team and the exciting ride the players have given us these last five years.

William C. Kashatus is a writer and historian. He can be reached at bill@historylive.net.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Tuesday, Oct. 11, 2011