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October, 2007

## The Fall of the 1977 Phillies: How a Baseball Team's Collapse Sank a City's Spirit

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**THE FALL OF THE 1977 PHILLIES**

*How a Baseball Team's Collapse Sank a City's Spirit*

**By**

**Mitchell Nathanson**

(Excerpt)

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## **PROLOGUE**

From the start, Wednesday October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1980 promised to be the sort of day that makes liars out of everybody. Bright and crisp yet still with the warm sweater of summer hovering in the air, it beckoned people out of their cubicles, away from their desks, cajoling them to think up something quick as an excuse. Even those with no routine to break would consider their lot more fortunate than common sense would otherwise dictate after inhaling the brilliant morning. For the hundreds of thousands of people who lined Broad Street and filled creaky JFK stadium that morning, the feeling was only amplified. Only hours earlier, Tug McGraw threw a pitch, Kansas City's Willie Wilson missed it and a 97-year-old black cloud lifted over the sorriest franchise in American professional sports history. Standing there, jammed together, the congregants basked in the incandescence that finally engulfed them after decades of nothing but darkness. At last, they were now converted. They were finally believers.

Such transformations oftentimes come at a cost, however, as perspective becomes skewed through the kaleidoscope of the conversion, truth fades and is eventually replaced by guilt-edged, sepia memories. Such was the case with the mass gathered in South Philly the day of the historic victory parade, along with the multitudes there in spirit across the region. Because on that day, there wasn't anybody south of New York or north of Baltimore who wasn't living and dying with the Phillies through each gut-wrenching moment of the glorious 1980 championship season. From that day forward, the Vet was

filled to the last yellow seat with loyal and supportive fans all through that season; from opening day through the last home game of the year and especially for the dramatic, you'd never believe it if you didn't see it, 15 inning, season-saving, come-from-behind win against the Chicago Cubs only a few weeks earlier. Everyone was there. And everyone was with them. Every step of the way. "We Win!" read the Daily News headline trumpeting the Phillies' inaugural World Series championship, held high by McGraw that morning to thunderous ovation.<sup>i</sup> We win. All of us. Together. That's what it said and on this morning, nobody was going to question its veracity.

In truth, there was nothing communal about it. In truth, the Phils played many of the key games down the stretch of that taut 1980 season before brutally hostile fans. In truth, many of the fans present for that 15 inning game on September 29<sup>th</sup> viciously booed the home team even though it was a mere half game out of first with just a week remaining in the season.<sup>ii</sup> In truth, this game was similar to the one the day before -- the one against the Montreal Expos -- the team the Phils had been battling for the NL East lead -- which was repeatedly interrupted by angry partisans showing their support for the Phils by tossing so many paper airplanes on the field that it took six grounds crewmen just to clean up the resurgent mess between each inning.<sup>iii</sup> In truth the Phillies faced two different types of opponents throughout the 1980 season: the players in the other dugout and the fans in their own stands.

The divisional crown provided not a hint of détente between the team and its city. During the postseason, the Vet was filled with enmity, replete with fans salivating for an opportunity to vent their rage. In the midst of the pomp and merriment that typically accompanies the pregame festivities before the start of a League Championship Series,

boos thundered down on four of the nine announced Phillies starters.<sup>iv</sup> Victory over the Houston Astros in a playoff series many still believe to be the single most exciting post-season series of professional baseball ever played quelled this rage only in degree. Game one of the World Series contained its share of boos directed toward the first Phillies team to deliver a pennant to Philadelphia in 30 years.<sup>v</sup>

In the more than quarter-century since that championship season, as the darkness quickly returned, dissipating only briefly in the mirages of aberrant pennants won in 1983 and '93, the wistfulness for a return to the communal joys experienced throughout the 1980 season has only intensified. If only to spend another summer so engaged with the daily machinations of the Phillies, many believe, would be truly exhilarating. However, while many Philadelphians may remember the details of those thrilling games, the warm feelings of attachment they so long for is derived not from that season but rather, from the parade the day after. Truth fades. Sepia memories take its place.

Rather, the 1980 season, from its fitful start to its glorious end, was a surprisingly typical one in the team's historical relationship with its fans. Only the parade (due, perhaps in large part, because there was in fact a parade at all at season's end) was out of the ordinary. Philadelphians, as they had done for decades, expressed their hostility toward the Phillies loudly and demonstrably all season long. Although Philadelphia fans have been known to boo all of their professional sports teams, few would deny that there's usually more than a little extra gusto reserved for the Phillies. The Eagles, Sixers and Flyers may hear it from the rafters when they're not going well but only the Phils will hear it when they are. The 1980 pennant race was merely another chapter in the uniquely uneasy relationship between the city of Philadelphia and the Phillies. For

although the Phils were consistent winners for the first time in their forgettable history, loaded with all stars and two future Hall of Famers, although they spent their money as freely as the Yankees, snaring - in Pete Rose - the most coveted free agent ever up to that point, and although they played in a stadium that was considered state of the art (criticism of it would not come until many years later), a fan transported from 1959 or '69 would be eminently familiar with the friction rising from the stands. Save for the earth tone plastic seats, it was as if nothing had changed. Six consecutive winning seasons had had little effect.

A little more than a month after the season, Mike Schmidt, the Hall of Fame third baseman who was just named league MVP, reflected on the unique relationship between the Phillies and the city of Philadelphia. Although his comments centered on the media, they would apply just as accurately to the fans themselves:

I think the writers that cover the Eagles probably as a whole want to see the Eagles succeed more than anything in the world. I'm not so sure that's true with...the Phillies. I may be wrong, but my opinion is (that) not everyone is totally, 100 percent happy for the guys on the Phillies....I think in the end, some writers were hurt that they had to put "world champions" behind the Phillies name. It would have been a much more Philadelphia-type story had we lost...<sup>vi</sup>

Despite the drama of the season, despite the glorious seasons of Schmidt, McGraw and Cy Young award winner Steve Carlton, and despite the first world championship in the history of the franchise, resentment remained. Schmidt's frustration with the writers -- the conduit to the city of Philadelphia and the face of the pulse of the city -- highlighted a dark yet unmistakable reality: the city of Philadelphia is a baseball town that passionately hates its baseball team. To dismiss Schmidt's comments as nothing more than a recognition that a century-old baseball town had morphed into a football one would be to

ignore the obvious and unrelenting passion, negative as it is, that has been directed toward the Phillies from the days of the Whiz Kids of the 1950's to the present. No, the city of Philadelphia cares about its Phillies. That much is obvious. Exactly why it hates them so vehemently is much less so.

The story of the relationship between the Phillies and the city of Philadelphia is ultimately one of an unhealthy marriage. Borne out of contempt, in 1954, after a seven decade engagement that inflamed passion on neither side, and consummated only because the city's true love, Connie Mack's mythical and magisterial Athletics, were whisked away that year to serve the greater interests of the New York baseball establishment, the wedding of the Phillies to the city has, more often than not, only served to confirm the inferiority complex Philadelphians have historically maintained with regard to their neighbor to the north. Due to the circumstances surrounding the departure of the Athletics as well as their perennially blundering teams, the Phillies have become to many Philadelphians a symbol of all the many ways their city comes up short and the embodiment of the perceived second-class status of Philadelphia, the eternally poor relation to New York City. As the face of a city's discontent, the Phillies have suffered continual abuse for a half century and counting.

*The Phils and Philadelphia* provides a social history of Philadelphia through the lens of its professional baseball teams. It examines the roots of the city's inferiority complex and how, over time, it manifested itself in the negativism that has so characterized the city for decades – a negativism that eventually found in the Phillies a perpetual whipping boy. It likewise charts the rise and fall of the Athletics and shows how the seeds of their demise were planted very early on in their existence. As such,

when the early 1950's saw a remarkable confluence of events surrounding the Athletics, Phillies, Major League Baseball and the United States Congress, it was the Athletics, and not the largely ignored Phillies, who packed up and left town. Because of this cruel hand of fate, only Philadelphia, unlike its brethren in Boston and St. Louis, which were likewise stripped during that time of the status that went with being two-team cities, suffered the additional indignity of seeing the wrong team leave town.

The social forces that undermined the relationship between the city and the Phillies ironically worked to repair it along with the city's image of itself, however, so that, for a brief time during the 1970's, the city shed its inferiority complex and truly embraced the Phillies – who now became the face of a city reborn -- for the first time. The chapters that follow examine the effect of urban renewal during the 1950's and '60's on the city and how surprisingly, Philadelphia was seen as one of the few success stories amid the failure of urban renewal in virtually every other major American city – most notably New York. By the early 1970's, urban renewal had sparked in Philadelphia a cultural, social and gastronomical renaissance that, particularly when compared against the troubles then ensnaring the city of New York, made Philadelphians feel good about themselves on a national level. The Phillies, through a change of management, relocation to Veterans Stadium, and an influx of infectious new talent, caught this wave and put a red pinstriped face on this new feeling of optimism. It would be the first, and to date, the last, time the Phillies would ever be so embraced in their history.

The good feelings swelled during the 1970's and reached their peak during the summer of 1977, when Philadelphia thrived while New York teetered, occasionally in the dark, on the brink of bankruptcy. On the field, the Phillies, division winners in 1976, put

together what many believe to be the best team in their history, 1980 included. A team that excelled not merely in pitching, hitting and defense, but boasted perhaps one of the deepest benches and bullpens in the history of baseball. A team that not only won 101 games but brushed off the demons of past Phillies teams, having survived a near catastrophic collapse that recalled the horrors of 1964, and the tempestuous return and ultimate departure of Dick Allen, a year earlier.

By the start of the 1977 League Championship Series against the Los Angeles Dodgers, it seemed clear to everyone that this Phillies team, much like the city of Philadelphia, bore no resemblance to its inglorious, hard-luck past. Rather, a new era was in bloom, one in which Philadelphia took a back seat to no one. The past was past; the Phillies, along with their city, were looking forward to a glorious future. After splitting the first two games of the five game series in Los Angeles, there was no reason to question this optimistic view. The Phils were coming home for the final three games, their fans were demonstrably raucous but wholeheartedly behind them (in ways that would become apparent to the nation very soon), the demons had been exorcised. Black Friday (as game three of the 1977 League Championship Series came simply to be known in Philadelphia) would change everything.

The events that unfolded during the afternoon of Friday October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1977 would forever change how Philadelphians viewed the Phillies, recast old events in a harsher, more critical light, and lead to a collective change of mindset that would result in the end of Philadelphia's urban renaissance of the 1970's. After Black Friday, Philadelphians would question whether things really were as different with both their team and, ultimately, their city, as they had been led to believe. By game's end, it would become

clear that these Phillies had much in common with the bumbling teams that came before them and by Opening Day of 1978, they would once again become the image of a city whose identity was less than favorable. For in the succeeding months, events would unfold in the city that would only further demonstrate that in fact Philadelphia had not, as assumed, escaped the racial and economic problems suffered by New York and other large Northeastern cities. Rather, it had, at most, done a better job of hiding them through the redevelopment policies of Ed Bacon and his Philadelphia Planning Commission and the bluster of Mayor Frank Rizzo. As the 1970's came to an end and the social and economic woes of the city crept back to the forefront, it was plain that the new Philadelphia wasn't much different than the old one. Very quickly, the old insecurities and inferiority complex returned. And very quickly, the Phillies returned to their familiar role as the face of all of this.

In the pages that follow, Black Friday, the histories of both the A's and the Phillies, and the roots, rise and fall of Philadelphia's urban renaissance all unfold together as the connection between the city's perception of itself and its relationship with its professional baseball teams are inexorably intertwined. Because this is a book that examines the divergence of feelings from fact, events are organized in an effort to recreate the mood of the time; although the reader has the benefit of hindsight and the ultimate championing of reality over perception, those living in the moment oftentimes do not have as many tools so readily available to them, or if they do, may be less willing to make use of them out of fear for what they may reveal, subject as they are to the consequences of such knowledge. As the pages, chapters and years turn, however, truth unavoidably emerges from the shadows, casting new light on old events and ideas,

exposing folly for what it is and inevitably repainting the landscape in retrospect. Today we see only that which has been retouched through time; *The Phils and Philadelphia* utilizes the tools of history, sociology, psychology and linguistics in an attempt to scrape away this layer, to unearth an earlier era in its original hue.

Through this process, it becomes clear that the city of Philadelphia has seen its reflection in the Phillies more than any other team or institution, finding in them support or blame for its opinion of itself more often than not. That it is the Phillies and not the NFL's Eagles who have been this public face of Philadelphia ever since the Athletics left town in 1954 says much about the city itself. It says foremost that despite chatter to the contrary, Philadelphia always has been and always will be a baseball town first. It says that, with the notable exception of the mid-1970's, given the hostility reserved for the Phils even during their brief good times, the circumstances surrounding the departure of the Athletics has left significant and telling scars on the city that remain to this day. And it says that, while Philadelphians may love the Eagles, they identify with the Phillies.

This, then, is the story of one city's identity.

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*Prologue*

<sup>i</sup> Frank Fitzpatrick, *You Can't Lose 'Em All* (Lanham, Maryland: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004) 232.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Boswell, *Failure Shadows Second-Place Phillies*, *Washington Post*, September 29, 1980, C1.

<sup>iv</sup> Fitzpatrick, *You Can't Lose 'Em All*, 176.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>vi</sup> Frank Dolson, *Soured: Writers Tarnish a Great Year for Schmidt*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 5, 1980, C1,7.