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ENTER THE GOAT

On Friday, October 5, 1945, the Chicago Cubs, after playing the first three games of the 1945 World Series in Detroit, returned by train to Chicago for the fourth game in the series with a one-game lead over the Tigers. A huge crowd at Union Station eagerly awaited the arrival of the National League Champions.¹ Excitement was high because it had been seven years since Wrigley Field had hosted a World Series game and thirty-seven years since the Cubs had won the 1908 World Series.²

In preparation for the gala event, Wrigley Field underwent an impressive makeover to attain a look of perfection—“from the bunting-swathed rails of the lower boxes and upper grandstand to the pennant festooned cables that do a two-way stretch from the top of the center field scoreboard to the bleacher corners.”³ The grass was trimmed and the infield was neatly manicured before two waterproof tarpaulins were laid out to protect the baselines, home plate, and the infield area.

Chicago fans were anxious to see their beloved Cubs finally win another World Series, and there was a rush in the city for tickets to the ballgame. Additional chairs were added to the box seat section, increasing the seating capacity to 41,700. Another 2,500 standing-room-only admission tickets were also to be offered. Scalpers were out on the streets, inflating ticket prices. “Choice box seats at Wrigley Field are said to be bringing scalpers as much as \$200 a set, and long-apportioned reserved grandstand seats are attracting upwards of \$75,” noted one sportswriter.⁴ Baseball die-hards stood in line all night in thirty-degree weather waiting for bleacher seats to go on sale in the morning.⁵

One fan with two \$7.20 box seat tickets was William Sianis, nicknamed “Billy Goat” for the goatee he wore.⁶ Sianis was a Greek immigrant who owned the nearby Lincoln Tavern on West Madison Street. Over the next twenty-five years he would earn a reputation in Chicago as a shrewd businessman, and his renamed Billy Goat Tavern would become a Chicago landmark.⁷ According to one story, Billy Goat Sianis purchased his tavern in 1934 “with a \$200 check from someone who owed him and \$5 of his own money.”⁸ The check bounced, but Sianis later paid it off with sales from his first week in business. When the Republican Convention was held in Chicago one year, he reportedly put up a sign at his tavern stating that he did not serve Republicans. The next day at lunch, the tavern, as one might expect, was filled with eager Republican customers who forced their money on him.⁹ Sianis at one point even wrote a letter to the State Department requesting the first “food-and-drink license” for the moon.¹⁰

But Sianis is most famous for the day he came to Wrigley Field with two box seat tickets for the fourth game of the 1945 World Series. One ticket was for himself and the other for his pet goat Murphy, which Sianis had reportedly taken in after the animal jumped off a truck near his tavern.¹¹ He apparently brought the goat to Wrigley Field to give the Cubs luck; however, it is likely that Sianis, a master of promotion, also conjured up the stunt to promote his tavern.

Some accounts claim that William Sianis’ pet goat was denied entry into Wrigley Field that day. In actuality, the combined effort of a squad of ushers at the stadium failed to keep “Sianis and his pet billy goat out of the ball park.”¹² The goat’s appearance on the playing field before the game caught the attention of rain-soaked fans who anxiously awaited the start of the game with hopes that it would not be cancelled due to the wet weather. Wrigley Field ushers, who were using walkie-talkies to communicate with each other for crowd control, intervened to end the stunt, converging on Sianis and his pet goat.¹³ The ushers then led the pair to the grandstand aisle, but the animal ran back onto the field.¹⁴ Recognizing the uproar the goat was causing, photographers began snapping pictures of the animal as it posed on

the field and roamed near the visiting dugout before finally being escorted off the playing field. The ushers attempted to remove the animal from the stadium, but Sianis argued that he had paid for two box seats and maintained that there was no disclaimer on the tickets preventing him from using one for his goat. After a heated argument, Sianis and the animal were allowed to occupy the box seats for which he had tickets.¹⁵

Rain initially delayed the game for about ten minutes, but by the fifth inning the sun began to shine through the clouds. Thirty-nine-year-old southpaw Ray Prim managed to get out the first ten Detroit batters in order before the Tigers began hitting the ball. Detroit's Paul "Dizzy" Trout used "a fast-breaking sinker which he mixed with a fastball so effectively that the Cubs could connect for only five hits."¹⁶ The Tigers beat the Cubs and evened the series at two games apiece.

The following day, October 7, 1945, the *Chicago Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* ran stories that mentioned the billy goat incident at Wrigley Field. An article by Gene Kessler, sports editor for the *Times*, featured a photograph of Sianis waving his hat at the crowd while in his box seat with his goat. The caption read: "This goat had a seat—This goat causes uproar in Wrigley field yesterday, but is permitted to stay put in box seat after owner, 'Billy Goat' Sianis, tavern owner, protests animal's being given bum's rush by ushers." Kessler's additional comments about the goat incident provided more detail regarding what occurred at Wrigley Field:

A goat wearing the sign: "We got Detroit's goat," was brought on the field. All the goat got was good and wet, but seemed to enjoy it until two Andy Frain ushers [employees of Andy Frain's security company] took him into custody. The ushers led Billy to the head of the grandstand aisle, but Mr. Goat balked, turned around and insisted on going back to the field. He got his wish when photographers asked that he return for poses and the goat wound up proudly roaming close to the visiting dugout while cameras snapped.

Finally, the goat was permitted to stay in his owner's box after a heated argument. The owner, Billy Sianis, who operates a tavern, argued that he had purchased a box seat for his goat and there was nothing printed on the ticket which said he couldn't use it for an animal.

While flourishing the ticket, Mr. Goat grabbed for it and Andy Frain remarked: "If he eats the ticket that would solve everything."

He didn't eat the pasteboard and stayed in the seat.

Although the *Times* article did not mention it, Sianis and his goat were ejected from the stadium prior to the end of the game, reportedly because of the animal's objectionable odor. About the goat's ejection, Arch Ward of the *Tribune* stated:

Andy Frain [head of the security company] employed 525 ushers and other attendants to handle the capacity throug He had trouble with only one fan, Billy Sianis, owner of a tavern near Chicago Stadium, who insisted on bringing a goat into the box seat section . . . Sianis had a ticket for the goat, which was paraded thru the American league area of front box customers The critter wore a blanket on which was pinned a sign reading 'We Got Detroit's Goat.' . . . Frain finally convinced Sianis goats should be with the Navy football teams.¹⁷

Sianis was outraged by the ejection, and in response, he placed a curse upon the Cubs. Some accounts claim that Sianis pronounced that the World Series would never be played in Wrigley Field again. Other accounts allege that "an indignant Sianis stood outside the stadium and cursed the team, vowing it would never again return to the World Series."¹⁸ Sianis' family maintains that he "sent a telegram to Mr.

Wrigley saying, ‘You are going to lose this World Series and you are never going to go to another World Series again. You are never going to win a World Series again because you insulted my goat.’”¹⁹

On Tuesday, October 9, 1945, *Chicago Times* columnist Irv Kupcinet described the goat incident in his “Kup’s Column:”

William (Billy Goat) Sianis the W. Madison st. tavern owner, created a stir at Wrigley field Sunday when he led his pet goat into the ball park and then insisted on having the animal occupy the seat next to him. He pleaded to no avail that he spent \$7.20 for a box seat for his pet goat . . . Ushers finally evicted the goat, over Sianis’ strong protests. After Detroit defeated the Cubs, 8-4, Sianis sent P. K. Wrigley this wire: “Who smells now?”

The Cubs eventually lost the 1945 World Series when they were soundly beaten in game seven. Publicly there was little talk, if any, of the so-called Curse of the Billy Goat being the cause of the Cubbies’ demise. Nonetheless, with the passage of time and repetitive losing seasons, the Curse of the Billy Goat gradually became an urban legend in Chicago and part of baseball lore. Today, it is generally accepted that the Greek tavern owner placed a hex on the Chicago Cubs during the 1945 World Series that they would never again play in a World Series at Wrigley Field. And the curse seemingly remains intact after fifty-eight years.

William “Billy Goat” Sianis, died at home on October 22, 1970.²⁰ About his death, Chicago columnist and Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaperman Mike Royko commented: “It was typical of Billy Goat that he would die during the only five hours of the day when his place wasn’t open for business. That’s how good a businessman he was.”²¹ More than thirty years after Billy Goat Sianis’ death, one wonders if he could have imagined that the Chicago Cubs would still not have won a National League pennant—or that his Curse of the Billy Goat would gain international recognition.

Whether Sianis intended it or not, he and his goat became part of the Cubs' lore and part of the folklore of Chicago itself. His Billy Goat Tavern became a Chicago landmark, made even more famous by the *Saturday Night Live* "Olympia Restaurant" comic routine featuring "Dan Aykroyd as short-order cook, Loraine Newman as unsmiling waitress, Bill Murray as happy-go-lucky counterman, and John Belushi as the boss who delights in letting people know exactly what they can and cannot eat."²²

Cheezborger

Cheezborger

No Fries, chips

No Coke, Pepsi!

(The Billy Goat Tavern original phrase was "No Pepsi, Coke." It is not known who changed the phrase in the sketch).²³

The Billy Goat Tavern now boasts a chain of seven restaurants, and when you visit the tavern on lower Michigan Avenue you will still hear the counterman shout "Cheezborger, Cheezborger? Double cheese, that's the best."²⁴ The walls are covered with photographs and newspaper articles from Chicago's past. Clippings of newspaper articles telling the story of the Curse of the Billy Goat are scattered throughout the tavern, and ephemera on the walls documents the famous clientele who have imbibed there over the years.

Despite the fact that the Curse of the Billy Goat was eventually lifted by William Sianis in 1969—and several times since by his nephew, Sam Sianis, who now owns the Billy Goat Tavern (including once on the *Tonight Show* with Jay Leno)—many people insist that a remnant of the original double-whammy still exists.²⁵ The hex supposedly not only prevents the Cubs from winning a pennant, but also prevents them from winning a World Championship because they cannot reach the World Series. Each time the Cubs fail to reach the World Series, the hex is blamed.

Today, the Billy Goat Curse has found a permanent place in baseball lore as one of the most famous sports curses of all time, and it is inextricably intertwined with the history of the Chicago Cubs.