

## DEPRESSION: Fans not used to extra time

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"It was like a morgue in here; everybody was devastated after that pass," said Madej, 57. "I've tried to remind everybody that people thought this team would only win four games, so be happy. But it hasn't worked."

The stunning loss to the Panthers in the NFC semifinals marked the end of an unprecedented run of sports success in Chicago, the first time the Bears, Bulls and a local professional baseball team had competed in the playoffs in the same season.

Add the Final Four appearance last April by the Illinois basketball team adopted by bandwagon jumpers locally and a year highlighted by the Sox's World Series title has left spoiled fans around here feeling unprepared for the sports abyss ahead.

The Winter Olympics next month likely will not excite the masses of a fan base full of people who hear the name of Chicago speedskater Shani Davis and wonder what round the Bears might take him in the draft.

Local alternatives exist Sunday in the form of the Chicago Storm soccer team (Bears kicker Robbie Gould will sign autographs after the 4 p.m. home game) and the Chicago Wolves (it's Scout Night) for the down-trodden in need of a sports fix. But that empty feeling might linger awhile.

The words "pitchers and catchers report" never have

warmed so many hearts in Chicago.

"For the next couple of months until baseball really starts, there's going to be a little bit of a void," said Deerfield sports psychologist Jeffrey Fishbein. "I would say it's a form of withdrawal emotionally that derives from the high expectations everyone had for the Bears. I think it's an inevitable part of being a hard-core sports fan in Chicago."

### A void to fill

The transitional phase affects more than just fans, encompassing bar owners such as Madej, cabdrivers, travel agents and other professionals whose job descriptions the last four months especially have been full of exclamation points.

Corey McPherrin of WFLD-Ch. 32, the station that benefited most in the ratings from the combined White Sox/Bears buzz because its mother network, Fox, carries Major League Baseball and most Bears games, called the recent run "intoxicating."

"You look at what's the next big thing after the Bears lost, and it's like we have to go to Sports Anonymous or something," McPherrin said. "You become addicted to it. You feed off it."

McPherrin faced an odd challenge last week preparing for his weekly 30-minute sports wrap-up show, "The Final Word."

"For the first time in seven months," the lifelong Chicagoan said, "I had to put real effort into deciding how to fill the show. It's a little strange."

After the White Sox won the World Series, McPherrin said he believes Chicago sports fans exorcised any feelings of dread that traditionally had been



Tribune photo by Nuccio DiNuzzo

**On the brighter side, it's only a matter of days before the words "pitchers and catchers report" are heard again to warm hearts.**

their birthright in a city not known for its champions.

So when the Bears started winning, the leap to making them Super Bowl contestants was shorter than a jump over a puddle.

"The Sox gave people here the idea that anything was possible and the hunger increased and you want it even more, like an addict," McPherrin said. "It's a change in viewpoint here. And that's made it harder to take now."

Chet Coppock, an observer of Chicago sports for a half-century and fixture on Sporting News Radio, blamed Bears coach Lovie Smith for the collective thud in the city caused by so many fans' spirits dropping last week.

Coppock pointed to Smith's decision to rest Grossman and other Bears regulars in the season finale against the Vikings as the cause for artificially enhanced expectations.

"In taking that approach with a young quarterback who needed the reps, Lovie created an environment that gave your fans a ridiculous feeling that you were something special," Coppock said.

He compared the comedown around the city to 1986 when the Bears lost 27-13 to the Washington Redskins in the NFC playoffs.

Fishbein likened the letdown locally to the late 1980s after the Bulls' season ended three straight times in the playoffs losing to the Detroit Pistons.

The Cubs' 2003 National League Championship Series collapse felt like a death blow for many their fans, but Bears defeats tend to cut a wider swath of pain across the city.

"In 1986, that was devastating, [but] this was only semi-demoralizing," Coppock said.

"I would suggest the entire city hibernate the next six

**'Dealing with reality is a difficult thing for some people. Now they can.'**

—Deerfield sports psychologist Jeffrey Fishbein

weeks because the Bears' coaching staff hibernated the entire game against Carolina."

### Look within

But more options exist for bummed-out sports fans than a deep sleep or depression.

Fishbein suggested this sudden sports respite provides people an opportunity to devote more energy to their families or studies as well as appreciate the Bulls and Blackhawks and local college men's and women's teams if they must use sports to occupy their time.

In other words, the doctor's advice for fans would be to get in touch with their inner Bartman.

"Keep things in perspective," Fishbein said. "There are worse things in life than losing a game and having a six- or eight-week void in your sports life, so take advantage personally. For the hard-core fans, focus on the Bulls putting together a strong second half, the Cubs getting better with Juan Pierre or the Sox adding Jim Thome. Nobody needs to dwell on the negatives."

Above all, Fishbein urged fans feeling distraught over the sudden end to the Bears' season to use the relative quiet of the next few weeks to examine their own lives to see why a sporting event matters so much.

"Sports is a fantasy world that is an opportunity for escape and distracts us so when you don't have that to focus on, you have a chance to look within instead of looking at the lives of

millionaire athletes you don't know," Fishbein said.

"Dealing with reality is a difficult thing for some people. Now they can."

Health clubs and churches around Chicago might be more crowded Sunday. Fewer dinners are likely to be eaten in front of the TV. More garages and basements are in danger of being cleaned.

At the White Pines Golf Dome in Bensenville, 16 miles west of the Loop, owner Michael Munro said he expects three times as many duffers to tee off at his indoor facility Sunday because of the Bears' playoff exit.

"I'm a huge Bears fan, but it was hard for me to root for the Bears because I know it affects my bottom line by as much as 75 percent," Munro said.

An hour before last Sunday's kickoff, for example, Munro said 40 of his 50 indoor tees were filled.

By the middle of the first quarter, only eight golfers remained.

"When Illinois was in the [NCAA] tournament I noticed a dropoff, but nothing like when the Bears play," Munro said. "I might be one of the few that doesn't think this was so bad."

Almost everybody else in Chicago will muddle through because sports fans coping with disappointment is the rule more than the exception here.

"We're so conditioned to getting our brains beaten in in this town," Coppock said, "that we'll be fine."  
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## DOWNEY: Seattle's no titletown

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Seahawks go for it Sunday, giving their true-blue fans a reward for all the suffering they have done since this organization was welcomed to the NFL in America's bicentennial year of 1976. It's great to see Seattle succeed at something every 200

years or so.

Professional sport is the one place where the state of Washington knows what it feels like to have a drought.

Those poor, damp creatures that live there spend good money on Mariners games but have little to show for it except old Junior Griffey, Randy Johnson and Alex Rodriguez bobblehead dolls now worthless on eBay.

The NBA's Sonics haven't won a title since 1979, and the Seahawks share with the Mariners a tie for America's lead in league titles with zero.

For some reason, Seattle

doesn't even have a National Hockey League team. You would think a circuit that puts teams in Phoenix, Anaheim and San Jose would stick one in a chilly clime on the fringe of Canada and Alaska. I even have a name picked out for such a team—the Seattle Iced Lattes.

Suffice it to say, this is Seattle's best chance in many a moon—including Warren Moon the quarterback and Fran Crane's sister-in-law Daphne Moon—to have a championship team. If natural-born losers such as the White Sox and Red Sox can be an in-

spiration to the Seahawks, good.

Besides, how can I root for the Carolina Panthers after what they just did to the Bears?

I'm still not sure what the Bears did wrong—except, you know, getting outpassed, outkicked, outhit and outcoached. I bet Steve Smith won't catch 12 passes in Seattle, especially with having to keep a hand free to hold an umbrella.

Something tells me the Panthers won't flap their traps, though, the way some of the Bears did.

A Seattle defensive tackle, Chuck Darby, has been keeping

a weekly diary. "We'll let everybody talk and say what they're going to say," the Seahawks lineman noted in it. "Carolina is going to come down here and talk that they're more physical than we are."

Chuck, I don't think so.

For starters, "come down here" is not a geographical picture I would paint for a team flying your way from North Carolina.

Carolina's players know better than to brag. You brag after you win one of those trophies with Vince Lombardi's name on it.

Darby's diary vividly said of

last weekend's Seahawks victory, "We came together and went into the forest and chopped that big tree down that we've been talking about. That was the biggest tree we've ever cut down."

Are these guys lumberjacks or what? I am beginning to worry that if the Seahawks win this game, it could be harmful to the environment.

But I believe they will indeed win, setting off the biggest celebration in Seattle since ... uh, since ... oh, man, I don't know. What do they celebrate in that town? Ichiro base hits?  
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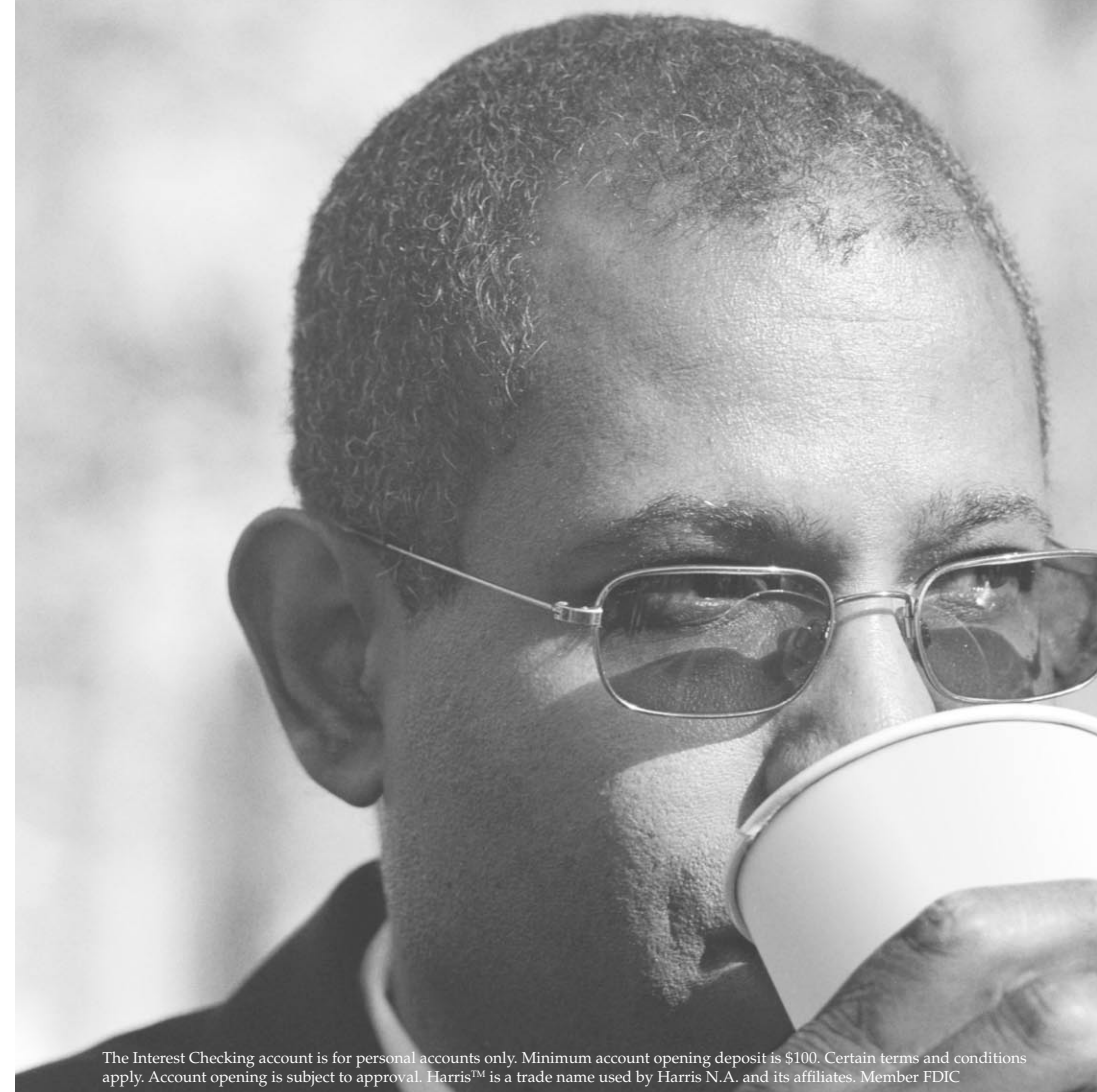
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