

At Last! Here's a Way to Measure Just How Pathetic Your Team Is

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Some towns love a winner. But there's pride in being a loser, too.

Tired of sports-bar debates over whose team is the biggest all-time failure, two lawyers have devised the Futility Index. It measures the probability of a team *not* winning a championship over a period of consecutive years.

The current title-holder should shock no one, but comes just in time for spring training: The Chicago Cubs, who haven't won a World Series in 90 years, rate a Futility Index of 132.4. Their cross-town rivals, the Chicago White Sox, championship-less since 1917, are second with a 74.1 rating, followed by the allegedly accursed Boston Red Sox, losers since 1918, with a 69.4.

"It's nice to know you're No. 1 in something," says Ed Cohen, founder of Cubs Anonymous, a group of long-suffering fans. "And yet it's very sad."

Not to Rick Climan. The 44-year-old mergers and acquisitions partner with the Palo Alto, Calif., law firm Cooley Godward LLP, created the Futility Index with the help of Eric Reifschneider, an associate at the firm and math major from M. I. T. Mr. Climan says the idea evolved from arguments during his student years at Harvard

over which was the sorrier team, the local Red Sox or his beloved New York Rangers.

"They were all crying in their beers over the Red Sox, and I kept pointing out that the Rangers hadn't won a Stanley Cup since 1940 in a smaller league," he says.

Turns out Mr. Climan was right. In math terms, the probability of a team not winning a championship in a given season is $(n-1)/n$, where n equals the number of teams in the league. Multiplying that fraction over and over for every year a team doesn't win and then taking the reciprocal yields the Futility Index. With only six teams in the National Hockey League for three decades, the Rangers' 53-year losing streak racked up a Futility Index of 583.1. But the team won the Stanley Cup in 1994, removing it as the biggest "active" loser.

Of all sports, baseball holds the highest Futility numbers because it is the oldest pro sport—thus, the opportunity to amass amazing losing streaks. Among other sports, the reigning sad sacks are the Rochester-Cincinnati-Kansas City-Sacramento Kings in basketball (30.8 Futility Index); the Chicago Blackhawks in hockey (15.7); and the Chicago-St. Louis-Arizona Cardinals in football (15.1).

If Chicago looks like losersville, just remember two words: Michael Jordan.