

SPORTS

Tuesday, March 24.

Futility gets measuring stick Cubs, Cardinals rank at top of index of lovable losers

By Kent Somers
The Arizona Republic

Attention fans of lovable losers everywhere. To those who have suffered with the Cardinals, died with the Cubs, cried with the Red Sox and anguished over the Blackhawks, take heart. There are people out there who not only feel your pain, but measure it.

It's called the Futility Index Ratings, devised by two lawyers, it ranks the ineptness of professional sports franchises and promises to settle more tavern arguments than a barkeep with a Louisville slugger.

As you might have guessed, the Chicago Cubs, who haven't won a World Series since 1908, are the most futile franchise in professional sports.

The dubious "champion" of the NBA is the Rochester/Incinnati/Kansas City/Sacramento Kings. In the NHL, it's the Chicago

Blackhawks.

And the NFL champions? Our very own Chicago/St. Louis/Arizona Cardinals, who haven't won a title since 1947.

The Cardinals' ranking did not surprise Gene Spolar of Racine, Wis., a Cardinals season ticket holder since 1972.

"Oh, no, I knew they were bad before that (the index)," he said. "But I love the Cardinals and I can't get away from them."

Since issuing the index earlier this year, Rick Climman and Eric Reifschneider, lawyers based in Palo Alto, Calif., have been besieged by interview requests. The Futility Index seems to have struck a chord.

"I think it's a combination of two things," Climman said, "the penchant of American sports fans for ranking things and for obscure statistics."

The idea for the Futility Index germinated in a Boston bar in the 1970s and grew over a few fermented beverages. Climman,

then a student at Harvard, was an avid fan of the New York Rangers, and he tired of hearing Bostonians argue that no one had suffered more than Red Sox fans.

The Sox, they argued, hadn't won a World Series since 1918. The Rangers, Climman argued, had caused more suffering because they hadn't won a Stanley Cup since 1940 and played in a much smaller league for many years.

There had to be some way to quantify the suffering, Climman reasoned. Always intrigued by mathematics, Climman came up with a formula for measuring the anguish.

It's based on two key assumptions. One is that each year, each team in a league has an equal chance of winning the championship. Second, it assumes that each season is independent of every other season. In other words, everyone starts anew every year.

— Please see FUTILITY, Page D3

LOSS LEADERS

Pro sports' most futile franchises, according to the Futility Index Ratings, developed by two California lawyers:

BASEBALL

Chicago Cubs

NBA

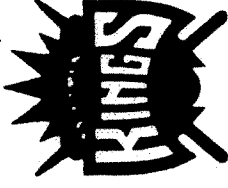
Sacramento Kings

NHL

Chicago Blackhawks

NFL

Arizona Cardinals



Futility Index topped by Cubs

FUTILITY, from Page D1

The chances of a team not winning a championship in a given year is $(n-1)/n$, with "n" being the number of teams in a league. You multiply that fraction again and again for every season a team doesn't win. Then, take the reciprocal and you have the Futility Index.

Got that?

Don't feel bad, just take the word of Climan, a Harvard grad, and Reifschneider, a former math major at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. They also had their formula checked by mathematicians.

The formula proved Climan's argument. Until they won the Stanley Cup in 1994, the Rangers had a futility index of 583.2. The Red Sox streak, still current, merits them a 69.4 rating, third in baseball behind the Cubs (132.4) and the White Sox (74.1). The difference, Climan said, is that for many years, the NHL had just six teams, increasing the Rangers' odds of winning a title.

"The Red Sox might have been bad, might have been futile," Climan said, "but they were not even close to being the most pathetic professional team of that era."

The index is not a product of two sports geeks with too much time on their hands. Climan is a partner and head of the mergers and acquisitions group of Cooley Godward, a large firm in the Silicon Valley, where mergers and acquisitions are as numerous as computer chips.

"I do deals," he said.

Reifschneider is an associate in the firm's business law department. Neither has much spare time, but starting in January, they devoted

FUTILE GESTURES

Futility Index of Phoenix's pro franchises:

3.99 — Phoenix Suns, No NBA title, 1969 to present.

3.29* — St. Louis, Arizona Cardinals, No Super Bowl, 1966 to present.

2.30 — Winnipeg Jets, Phoenix Coyotes, No Stanley Cup, 1980 to present.

*-If the pre-Super Bowl era, before 1966, is counted, the Cardinals' index jumps to 15.1.

OTHERS OF DISTINCTION:

132.4 — Chicago Cubs.

74.1 — Chicago White Sox.

69.4 — Boston Red Sox.

30.8 — Rochester, Cincinnati, Kansas City, Sacramento Royals/Kings.

15.7 — Chicago Blackhawks.

13.0 — Milwaukee, St. Louis, Atlanta Hawks.

10.0 — Cleveland Indians.

much of it to compiling the index.

When Climan approached him to work on the project, Reifschneider instantly grasped the index's emotional and intellectual challenges. He is a recovering Cardinals fan.

"I grew up in St. Louis in the '70s, and my parents started taking me to Cardinals games when I was 6," he said.

Together, they completed the project in less than a month, and they have expanded it along the way. For instance, they ranked the three professional teams in Arizona — the Suns, Coyotes and Cardinals. There obviously is no rating for the Diamondbacks, who haven't played a real game yet.

Curiously, the Suns, who haven't won a title in their previous 29 years in the NBA, rank as the most futile with a 3.99 rating. The

Coyotes/Winnipeg Jets, who haven't won a title in 18 NHL seasons, are at 2.30, and the Cardinals, who haven't won a Super Bowl ever, are second at 3.29.

Suns fans, don't scream in outrage yet. If the Cardinals' index includes pre-Super Bowl years, their rating soars to 15.1, the highest in the NFL. And remember, the index uses championships as its goal.

"There are lots of ways to slice and dice it," Reifschneider said. "But professional sports are all about winning the ultimate championship. That's the objective every team has at the beginning of the season. No one remembers who came in second place."

Spolar remembers when he was a newlywed and a senior in college. One Sunday he was watching the Cardinals take a 14-0 halftime lead against the Eagles and enjoying some of his new wife's delicious sandwiches.

"I'm smiling, I'm eating and I'm married and everything is good," he said. "In the second half, the Eagles score 28 points and the Cardinals don't score. My wife couldn't believe I threw one of her really good sandwiches against the TV screen."