

The Sun

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Curse Control

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April 15, 2008

URL: <http://www2.nysun.com/article/74697>

Honestly, Yankee Brass: You really think you had to dig up that jersey?

Maybe you want to start sticking pins in a Manny Ramirez doll while you're at it.

Sure, a Red Sox shirt has been extricated from near the foundation of what is slated to become the new Yankee Stadium's behind-home-plate restaurant (and if that's not sacred ground, what is?). But it is quite possible that removing the shirt was precisely the wrong thing to do, curse-wise.

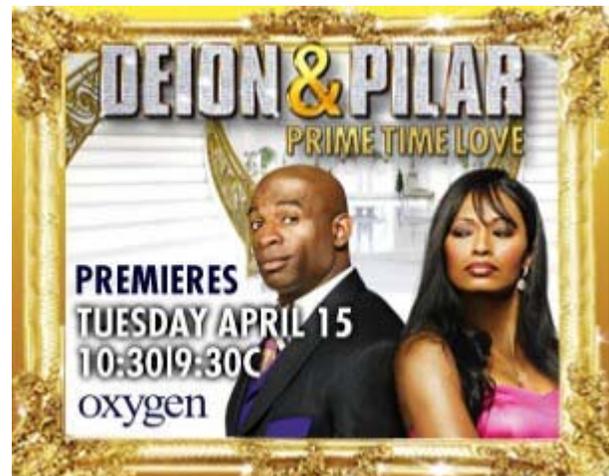
Not to mention symbol-wise. And psychology-wise.

As a Yankees fan, I'm not worried about this jersey and the team shouldn't be either.

"I've talked to several fans who said we could easily have taken it the other way and said, 'This is how we are going to bury the Red Sox,'" the

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coauthor of "Haunted Baseball," Mickey Bradley, said. "If the team really wanted to run with it, they could have gone out and gotten jerseys from every other team and buried them, too."

Now that would have been a truly baseballsy move.

Instead, team honchos took the timid way out and spent \$50,000 (otherwise known as the probable price of a 2009 season ticket) to dig up the David Ortiz jersey. Why?

Curse-control. So shaken was the head office by this puny piece of polyester that Yankee Chief Operating Officer Lonny Trost actually pondered legal action.

Hey — how about showing those Bo-Sox who's boss by believing in your team, instead? For gosh' sakes, you've got the pope coming to bless the place! You've really got your bases covered.

The problem with taking any kind of curse seriously (even while pretending you're not) is that a team that's this worried about witchery is a team that's worried, period.

Consider the 1970s treatise, "Baseball Magic," by anthropologist George Gmelch. In studying the belief systems of baseball players, Mr. Gmelch found much more superstition in the infield than in the outfield.

In the infield, "We're talking about situations where there are more possibilities of error, quicker decisions are required and there are more precarious situations," another anthropologist, SUNY Buffalo Professor Philip Stevens Jr., explained. All that uncertainty is the perfect petri dish for superstition.

"In the outfield, they have a lot of time to gauge the flight of the ball and their position," Mr. Stevens continued. With that kind of control, the outfielders can rely on their skills, not magic, to win.

A strikingly similar study of fishermen in Melanesia (yes, fishermen in Melanesia, a real place) found that the ones who went fishing in the nice, calm lagoon were much less superstitious than the ones who went fishing in the wide and terrifying sea. The seafarers, Mr. Stevens said, "are subject to all kinds of rituals before they go out, because that's where things can go either way, no matter how much you prepare."

By trembling before the jinx of the jersey, the entire Yankee team is acting like a bunch of worried infielders (or, if you prefer, worried Melanesian fishermen). They are saying they can't trust their skills to save them.

The thing is, some worried fans agree. "Let's just say that jersey was buried under second base," sports psychologist Jay Granat, founder of StayintheZone.com, said. "Imagine a baseball taking a bad bounce over second base. People will say, 'The shirt is acting up.'"

His point: Why not get rid of the "curse," before fans start believing in it? Or, worse, before the players start believing in it?

My point: Why not get rid of the fear of the curse instead? That's what the Red Sox just did.

Remember that all those decades the Red Sox were down, they blamed the Curse of the Bambino. It was an excuse, and maybe a balm, but it also seemed self-perpetuating. If you think you can't win, you can't. And one time the team astonishingly didn't was in 1986.

That's the year they faced the Mets in the World Series. "The Red Sox were one out from winning the game that would have put the curse to rest," the other coauthor of "Haunted Baseball," Dan Gordon, recalled. The Sox had won three games and had a two-run lead with two outs in the bottom of the tenth. Victory was nigh!

"We had gone 78 years and it just seemed like all the stars were aligned and we were one out away," Mr. Gordon, a Red Sox fan, said. "Then Mookie Wilson hit a ground ball roller to first baseman William Buckner and it bounced through his legs and the Mets won that game and that's the scene replayed like a horror movie in the minds of Red Sox fans over the years."

The Mets went on to win game seven and Mr. Buckner moved to Idaho. Then, in 2004, the BoSox curse was broken. The Red Sox came back from a three game deficit to win the World Series against none other than the Yankees. So this year, who got to throw out the first pitch of the season at Fenway Park?

William Buckner, who got a standing ovation.

That's a team — and fan base — that's not scared of any stinkin' curse. So why are we?

Don't be afraid of the jersey, boys.

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