

Quick Summary: *The Cardinals entered last year as favorites in the Central and finished in last place. Can they rebound in 2024, and what does the future hold in St. Louis?*

ST. LOUIS CARDINALS

How did *that* happen?

For the fifteen years prior to 2023, the Cardinals had been one of the best teams in baseball, posting the third-best winning percentage (.554) and never having a losing season. They entered 2023 as the overwhelming favorites to not only run away with the NL Central division, but elope with it, buy a house in the suburbs, and raise a bunch of kids in the fine traditions of the Cardinal Way.

Instead they stumbled out of the gate in April.

Well, that happens. The season is a long one, and plenty of teams trip up at the start. The Cardinals ended April ten games out of the division, but it was the Pirates they were chasing. There was no reason to panic.

In May, St. Louis went 15-13, which is called ‘clawing back to respectability.’ The Pirates and Brewers and Cubs all had lousy months, so the standings had tightened considerably in the division:

| May 30th | W-L | GB |
|-----------|-------|-----|
| Brewers | 28-26 | -- |
| Pirates | 27-27 | 1 |
| Reds | 25-29 | 3 |
| Cubs | 24-30 | 4 |
| Cardinals | 25-32 | 4.5 |

That’s fine. A four-and-a-half game deficit heading into June? That’s not a significant obstacle, not for a team like the Cardinals. The Pirates and Reds were upstarts. The Brewers had a lineup of bailing wire and straw. The Cubs were the Cubs. What was there to worry about?

In June the Cardinals went 8-15. They were done.

Their collapse, as a team, was astonishing as it happened, and perhaps even more astonishing in retrospect. This is a team that had (and has) Paul

Goldschmidt and Nolan Arenado at the corners. They had a phalanx of young players of promise: Nolan Gorman, Lars Nootbar, Jordan Walker, and Dylan Carlson. They acquired the very talented Willson Contreras to take over the catching duties from Yadier Molina. In their rotation, they had Miles Mikolas and Jordan Montgomery and Jack Flaherty and Steven Matz and Dakota Hudson: no bona fide aces, but all competent pitchers. Their bullpen has arms galore.

So how did they lose?

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The notion of a scapegoat makes an appearance in Leviticus, part of the details that Yahweh delivered to Moses on the proper processes of how to sufficiently worship a deity. In ritual, two goats would be selected from a flock, one for sacrifice and the other to be driven out into the wilderness. A rabbi would transfer the sins of a community to the second goat, and then it’d be chased off. I heard in a religion course somewhere back in my youth that people would sometimes write down sins on papyrus and string them to the hair of the goat: I have no idea if that’s true, but you can imagine it’d make interesting reading for whoever encountered that lost goat in the wilderness.

While the ritual and useful term come from Hebrew traditions, you can bet that the principle behind it predates documentation by some millennia. I’d hazard that the first grouping of neo-humans totaling more than four individuals tried some version of scapegoating. It’s a natural component to how human societies function, that tendency or trait of marking one person as the cause of the failures of the collective whole. It might be innate to our species, one of those memes that are part of our cultural genetics.

Anyway: the Cardinals acquired catcher Willson Contreras last year, their big free agent signing from the rival Cubs. It took the team a solid month to mark him for the job of scapegoat.