

Phillies having a tough year

By Rob Maaddi
AP Sports Writer

PHILADELPHIA- The Philadelphia Phillies are playing their worst when it matters most.

Careless baserunning, sloppy fielding, inconsistent pitching, untimely hitting and poor managing decisions have cost the Phillies during their five-game losing streak, in which they went from leading the NL wild-card

standings by a half-game to trailing Houston by 2 1/2 games.

The Astros completed a three-game sweep over the Phillies on Wednesday night when Craig Biggio hit a three-run homer off All-Star closer Billy Wagner with two outs in the ninth inning.

It was a gut-wrenching loss that left the Phillies searching for answers and wondering if they can get back in the playoff chase.

After the Phillies scored three runs in the eighth to take a one-run lead, Wagner came in trying to earn his first save against his former teammates and end Philadelphia's 11-game losing streak to Houston.

The hard-throwing left-hander retired the first two batters before Jose Vizcaino reached safely when third baseman David Bell booted a grounder for his 19th error. Speedy Willy Taveras beat out an infield single to shortstop, and Biggio followed with a shot into the left-field seats in his first at-bat against Wagner.

Boos rained down from the skeptical fans who weren't sold on the Phillies being a legitimate playoff contender and didn't fill two-year-old Citizens Bank Park for any of the three games against the Astros, even though the team came into the series leading the

wild-card standings.

"We have to come out Friday and go at it harder," manager Charlie Manuel said. "We're not out of this. They know what's at stake. If they don't, we're in trouble."

The atmosphere inside the Phillies' clubhouse after the loss seemed like a funeral parlor. More than 30 minutes after the game, only Wagner and Bell were around to answer questions.

It might be difficult for the Phillies to recover from such a heartbreaking loss, especially considering the Florida Marlins are coming in for a three-game series starting Friday night and the NL East-leading Atlanta Braves follow for a four-game set.

"If we dwell on it and wait for things to happen when we play Florida, we're really going to be out of this," Wagner said.

The Marlins entered Thursday night's game at Washington leading the Phillies by 1 1/2 games and were one game behind Houston. Philadelphia doesn't have to face 20-game winner Dontrelle Willis or Josh Beckett in the Florida series.

But the Phillies got swept by the Astros even though they didn't face Roger Clemens, Morgan Ensberg played just one game and Jeff Bagwell was out.

"We should be aggressive, have fun playing," Manuel said. "We definitely shouldn't be tight. I can't figure whether we try too hard or we get too tight in situations. I can't determine which one."

Manuel, too, has made some curious moves. In Monday's 4-3 loss to Houston, he didn't start left-handed hitting Ryan Howard against left-hander Andy Pettitte only to use the slugging

first baseman as a pinch-hitter against lefty reliever Mike Gallo with the bases loaded in the sixth inning. Howard struck out, but he homered in the next two games.

The Phillies are used to second-half collapses. With eight games left in the 2003 season, Philadelphia had a half-game lead over Florida in the NL wild-card race. But then the Phillies lost two straight at home to the woeful Cincinnati Reds and were eliminated from the playoff race with a three-game sweep in Florida.

Philadelphia led the NL East by one game after beating Florida on July 21 last year. But the Phillies lost seven of their next nine games and fell out of the race for the division title. They were in the wild-card chase in August until a disastrous homestand in which they went 1-9.

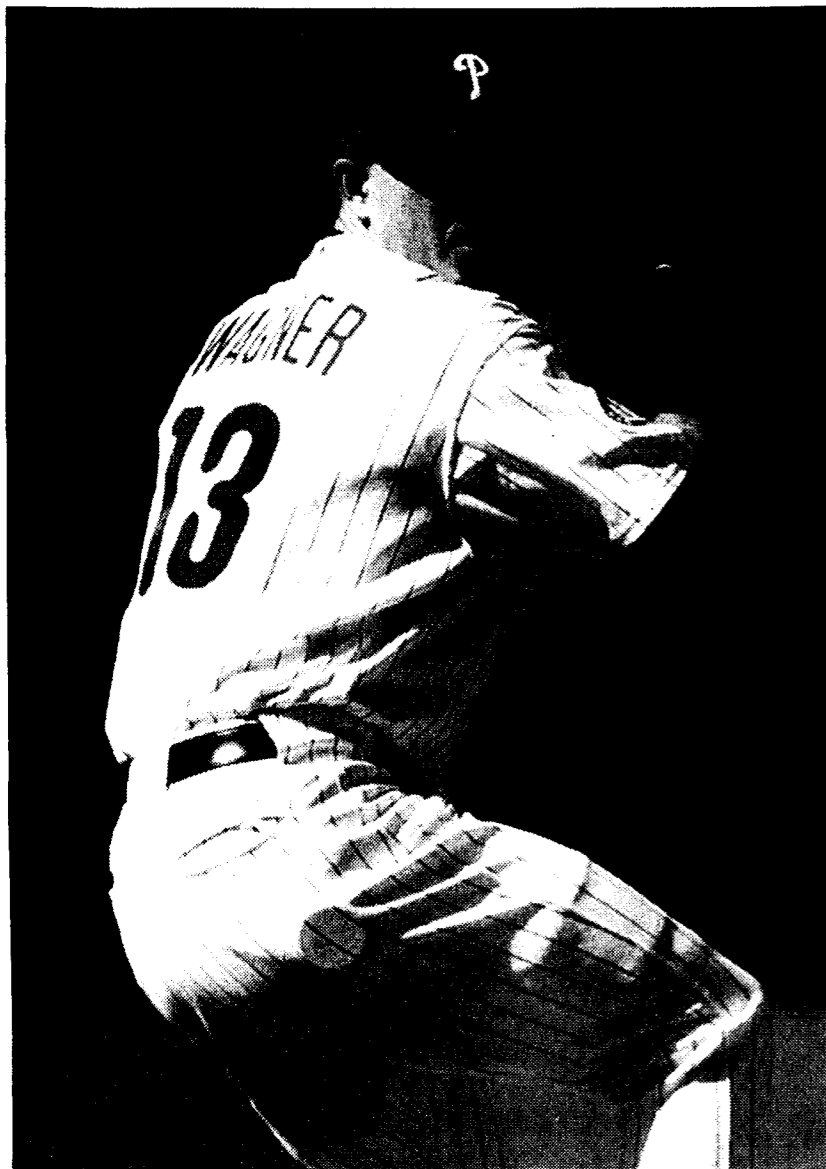


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Billy Wagner takes one for the team Friday after a tough loss to the Astros. Although he played a good game the boos and shouts of disappointment from the crowd fell on his shoulders.

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On game day, State College becomes a sea of navy blue and white. Students walking in all directions make their way toward the stadium. Girls with blue and white painted fingernails and ribbons in their hair move in tandem with guys wearing khaki shorts and letters painted on their chests.

From Erie to Delaware Valley, students from all campuses come together in Beaver Stadium to cheer on their team. Although students from other campuses are far from the usual campus atmosphere at University Park, they possess a strong sense of Penn State pride in their hearts. Bonded together in the infamous Penn State student section, they make for a wild cheering section for the players.

With painted t-shirts, faces, chests and hair, students find many ways to show their Penn State pride. Someone from another college, smuggled into the student section is easy to spot. Wearing anything but a Penn State shirt to the game is taboo.

The smell of sweaty fans and face paint is one that is familiar to regular student fans. Students stand crammed in line, shoulder to shoulder on the bleacher seats, arms raised above their heads in celebration. On a hot day, one can really work up a sweat screaming, shouting and jumping around.

When the lion jumps into the stands, the students instinctively lift the lion above their heads and pass him back through the crowd. This tradition is called the "Pass the Lion" and it has been carried through the years in the student section.

As the camera pans or photos of the crowd the huge blue and white square with the letter S can be seen. Another student section tradition is the "S Zone." When a student is given a blue or white

t-shirt, they know they've sat in the "S Zone." Those sitting or standing on blue tape on the bleachers are given a blue shirt and white shirts go to those around them. The 'S' stands for State.

Even before the game begins, students conjugate around the stadium for some pre-game tailgating.

Beginning as early as 7 a.m., elaborate tailgating camps are set up in parking lots and fields around the stadium. The Penn State football experience starts here for most. Tables of snacks, macaroni salad, hamburger buns and condiments stick out from the bumpers of SUV's forming the boundaries of each camp.

Energized fans of all ages, dressed in Penn State sweatshirts and jeans cluster together in folding chairs. The smell of grilled burgers and hot dogs wafts through the camps as young fans toss a football back and forth. Some students take this time to meet up with their infrequently seen parents and family members, also attending the game. Tailgating is as much a part of Penn State football as the game or the lion.

There was a time when a touchdown sent students either throwing anything at hand or ducking for cover. Students are not allowed to throw any objects during the game, as that tradition has caused

Hard hat not required

serious injury in the past. Bottles of water are now distributed sans hard plastic caps to eliminate the danger of flying bottles.

While the student section no longer requires a helmet for survival, the fans are as rowdy as ever. The sound of sneakers making contact with metal bleachers almost overpowers the constant chatter. However, when the team scores a touchdown, the crowd yells in unison and whether you know the student beside you or not you give him a hug because you both know you are sharing that age-old Penn State pride.



J.J. Kowal gives the number one sign to the camera sporting his masterpiece art work on his chest. The great Joe Paterno is a subject of celebration JoePa and PSU football are one in the same



Photots courtesy of Google Images

The Penn State Nittany Lion Cheers on the crowd. The infamous SZone is glowing in the background. Students know if they stand on the blue tape in the student section they will be part of this PSU time honored tradition.



Passing the lion: As the lion raises his hand in the air students sitting in the student section pass him around throughout the stands. This is a students section tradition that will be carried out for years to come.