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- Daily Herald, **With goal of 95 wins reached, Chicago Cubs sticking with Maddon**
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- The Athletic, **Friction? Tension? On Theo, Maddon and the shakeup needed in the Cubs clubhouse**
<https://theathletic.com/569560/2018/10/04/friction-tension-on-theo-maddon-and-the-shakeup-needed-in-the-cubs-clubhouse/>
- Cubs.com, **5 questions facing Cubs heading into 2019**
<https://www.mlb.com/cubs/news/5-questions-for-cubs-in-2018-19-offseason/c-297116468>
- NBC Sports Chicago, **Cubs expect Kris Bryant to rebound with a 'monster' season in 2019**
<https://www.nbcsports.com/chicago/cubs/cubs-expect-kris-bryant-rebound-monster-season-2019-theo-epstein-cubs-offense>
- NBC Sports Chicago, **Theo Epstein admits there's a bit of frustration in Cubs' clubhouse over constant lineup shuffling**
<https://www.nbcsports.com/chicago/cubs/theo-epstein-admits-theres-bit-frustration-cubs-clubhouse-over-constant-lineup-shuffling>
- Chicago Tribune, **Cubs' 2018 time capsule: From Tommy La Stella's bounce house to Anthony Rizzo's toothbrush**
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/baseball/cubs/ct-spt-cubs-time-capsule-anthony-rizzo-20181005-story.html>
- Chicago Tribune, **5 losses that contributed to the Cubs blowing the NL Central title**
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/baseball/cubs/ct-spt-cubs-five-key-losses-20181004-story.html>

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Daily Herald

Epstein: Cubs schedule 'was a lot, but every team has things to deal with'

By Bruce Miles

If you thought the Chicago Cubs were a bit "off" this season or that something didn't seem right, you weren't alone.

And forget about the numbers for a minute. Cubs President Theo Epstein did so for about 6½ extraordinary minutes during his end-of-season news conference Wednesday.

About 27 minutes into Epstein's meeting with the Chicago media, I asked him about how big a factor the schedule and fatigue were in the team finishing the season with a thud, losing in Game 163 of the regular season to the Milwaukee Brewers and in the wild-card game to the Colorado Rockies.

The question was prefaced that the schedule was what it was -- 42 scheduled game days in 43 days down the stretch -- and that nobody likes to hear excuses.

I wasn't sure what Epstein would say, but his answer was more than 1,000 words long, and he cut off another question by telling a reporter he wasn't finished yet.

Apparently he had some things on his mind other than the numbers. And he wanted to get things out and in doing so, he provided some possible guidance for the future.

"It was a lot, but every team has things to deal with," he began, citing the schedule. "We weren't hitting. We weren't producing offensively before that stretch started. Look, there was kind of an interesting reaction to the loss (Tuesday) night in the clubhouse.

"You had a number of guys who were really proud of the season and everything that our guys overcame, including missing a number of key players due to injury. But also that grind of the schedule is really relentless to have to go through that. It was a gauntlet, 42 in 43, which is unheard of. It's a quarter of the season. And they did stick together and really ground through that in positive way. We played winning baseball through that stretch.

"I understand where they're coming from, and I share a lot of those sentiments. That is something to be proud of, but not an excuse at all."

Epstein then referenced something said by MVP candidate shortstop Javier Baez. After the loss in the wild-card game, Baez stood at his locker at around 1 a.m. to try to put things into words.

"We struggled all April," Baez said. "We just kept going about, 'We're going to get it back. We're going to be together.' But it never came to us. We were never in a rhythm of winning games. I think it was because we were paying attention to other teams because we were going down because we lost so many people from our lineup. We were paying attention to what other teams were doing, and that's not how it works.

"Next year, we're going to come back and fight again. We're going to make the adjustment about that because I'm going to make sure, I don't want to hear anything about it. We know what we've got."

Epstein took notice, and he got to the heart of the matter.

"There were players who were looking at it a little differently, like Javy, for example, talking about in some ways we struggled and in some ways something was 'off' a little bit all year; we never got on that roll," Epstein said. "We have to own that. And I agree with that.

"And (pitcher) Jon Lester, in his own way, dragging body parts through the dirt to an acknowledgment to where we are or where we aren't and that maybe that's a good thing in the long run and that it'll lead to the universal recognition that nothing will be given to us. I very much understand those types of sentiments, too."

Epstein was just getting warmed up.

"If we're being totally honest -- and this is a theme that has come up a little bit with some of the players as we talked to them and that we felt through the course of the year -- there was a lot to grind through and there is a lot to be proud of, but we could have done more from Day 1 through 162 as far as complete sense of urgency every day, being completely on mission every day, showing up with that assertiveness and that edge every single day to win. Again, 95 wins is tremendous."

The Cubs got off to a lackluster start this season, flirting with the .500 mark until early May.

"Sometimes, divisions aren't lost on that last day of the season when you only score one run. Or they're not lost the last week and a half when the other team (Brewers) goes 8-0 and you went 4-3 and needed to go 5-2. ... Sometimes a loss early in the season, when you have an opportunity to push for that sweep but you've already got two out of three and you're just not quite there with that killer instinct as a team.

"Do you know what that makes us? Human. But that's something in 2016 that we had. The guys who have been here the whole time acknowledged that, that from Game 1 through Game 162 we had that sense of urgency. There was no complacency. We were completely on mission, and we showed up to assert ourselves and to win every single game.

"And that might win you that one extra game or in the case of 2016, it puts you in a position where you can really rest and prepare down the stretch for the playoffs. We have to own this. We have to be honest about that: It's been a little bit different since 2016. We have to get back to that."

Epstein seemed to indicate that getting "back to that" will be doable. With that, he looked forward to 2019.

"I don't think there's some kind of fatal flaw in the clubhouse," he said. "If we're being honest about it, as Jon Lester said, maybe this will be good for us because if you just show up playing it cool, knowing you're talented, knowing it's a long season and trusting that the talent will manifest over the course of 162, sometimes you end up one game short.

"And that's not who we are. It's not who we want to be. It's not what we're all about. I think we have to own that, and we have to recognize it, and I think our players do, talking to them today. Maybe that feeling in the clubhouse (Tuesday) night, which was a whole lot of (ticked) off and disappointed and frustrated, will be our rallying cry next year."

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Daily Herald

With goal of 95 wins reached, Chicago Cubs sticking with Maddon

By Bruce Miles

It wasn't until about 15 minutes into Theo Epstein's end-of-season news conference -- one that focused much on what went wrong -- for something to dawn on him.

"I can't believe we've gotten this far into the press conference without the balancing caveat of we won 95 games," Epstein said, one day after the Chicago Cubs were bounced out of the postseason with a 2-1, 13-inning loss to the Colorado Rockies at Wrigley Field.

"That's our goal every year. By that measure, it was a largely successful regular season. We do set out to win 95 each year, or more.

"Nine times out of 10 that gives you your division title, and you're moving on."

The statement came in response to a question about the status of the Cubs' coaching staff, which featured several new members this season.

"This isn't on the coaching staff," he said. "Even if we end up making a change or two, which I'm not sure there's going to be, I think continuity is important as well. You don't want to be changing coaches just for the sake of changing coaches."

It was a wide-ranging, hour-and-10-minute back-and-forth with the Chicago media.

Along the lines of the coaching staff, one of the biggest topics was the fate of manager Joe Maddon, who has one more year left on his contract.

There were reports earlier in the season that Maddon might not be back if the Cubs didn't make a deep playoff run. On Wednesday, there were reports the Cubs would allow Maddon to manage in 2019 without offer of an extension this off-season.

"Joe's status remains unchanged," Epstein said. "He's the manager of this team. I'm very happy about that. I know there was a sort of high-profile report this morning that was not accurate. I didn't read the whole thing, but I saw there were some claims that he and I had some personal friction. Not true at all. We have a terrific working relationship."

"We don't agree all the time about baseball issues, and that's the way it should be. I don't want a yes man as the manager, and I don't want a yes-man relationship the other way. I think there should be discord and debate and healthy, trusting relationships where you can work together to make the organization better. And that's the way it is."

Epstein added it was too early to talk with Maddon about an extension.

One of the biggest problems the Cubs faced this season was an inconsistent offense. In addition to scoring 1 run in the wild-card game, the Cubs got beat 3-1 by the Brewers in Game 163 of the regular season to determine the winner of the National League Central. The St. Louis Cardinals beat the Cubs 2-1 last Saturday.

"I mean this with no disrespect to any of our players; I respect them all greatly in every way," Epstein said. "Part of getting better is facing the problem. Our offense broke somewhere along the lines. Of course there's going to be a thorough examination, and of course we're going to spend all our energy trying to fix it and fixing it."

"If you look back at the first half of the season, we led the league in runs scored. We led the league in OPS. We led the league in virtually every significant offensive category. And we were cruising."

"We felt really good offensively. We had cut down on our strikeouts. We had sacrificed some power, but not all. We were getting on base at a huge clip and scoring a ton of runs."

Things went downhill from there.

"In the second half, things were dramatically different," Epstein said. "Overall, we had 40 games in which we scored zero or 1 run, which is hard to fathom. In the second half, we only had 50 games in which we scored 2 or more runs. Our record in those games, when we got to 2 or more, was 37-13.

"We hit more groundballs in the second half than any other team by a huge margin. Our goal is to hit line drives and flyballs out of the ballpark."

The Cubs wound up fourth in runs scored, 11th in home runs and fifth in OPS.

In other areas, Epstein said:

- He does not believe Kris Bryant will need surgery on his left shoulder, which ailed the third baseman-outfielder much of the second half.
- The Cubs would "absolutely" like to have pitcher Cole Hamels back for next season. They have a \$20 million option on Hamels for next year, or they can exercise a \$6 million buyout and try to negotiate. Hamels came to the Cubs from Texas in a July trade and helped stabilize the rotation down the stretch.

In the end, Epstein said that because 95 wins weren't good enough, the Cubs have to look within.

"There's obviously things that we need to do better, that I need to do better," he said. "We should all look at this season that way, that we won 95 games. Great, but we didn't accomplish our ultimate goal. How can we get better? How can we be accountable? A full winter, this extra month that we unfortunately happen to have, is a luxury in baseball.

"But we now have that luxury, unfortunately, of the full off-season. It's a challenge. We're thinking about the front office with our own decisions and our own processes. How do we take full advantage of this so we're never in this position again?"

"We don't want to be part of an offensive collapse in the second half again. We don't want to be part of losing a division lead late again. We don't want to be part of looking back, maybe recognizing that, 'Gosh, maybe a greater sense of urgency from Game 1 through 162 would have led to one more game, and we're still playing.

"We don't want to be part of that ever gain, so we need to make good use of this time."

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The Athletic

Friction? Tension? On Theo, Maddon and the shakeup needed in the Cubs clubhouse

By Patrick Mooney

Cubs president Theo Epstein denied there's any "personal friction" with Joe Maddon, insisting they have a "terrific working relationship" and dismissing the idea that he wants a "yes man" as Cubs manager. The boss of baseball operations also admitted "there should be discord and debate" and sounded completely comfortable with Maddon entering next season as a "lame duck."

There was so much to unpack from Epstein's 71-minute one-man show on Wednesday at Wrigley Field that if you showed up halfway through you might have thought you walked into a fire-the-manager press conference after the team lost 95 games. You could listen to some of Epstein's candid, nuanced,

thoughtful answers and almost wonder if he was laying the groundwork for a change if the Cubs get off to a slow start next year.

Reread sections of the transcript from Epstein's autopsy of a 95-win season that ended this week with a Game 163 loss that handed the Milwaukee Brewers the division title and a 13-inning loss to the Colorado Rockies in the National League wild-card game:

- "In 2017, we didn't show up in the first half of the season. And that put us in a five-and-a-half game hole at the All-Star break. And we had to expend so much energy in the second half to get back on top of the division that we were fried by October."
- "This year it manifested that we had chance after chance to put away the division – and we didn't do it – and we have to own that. I don't think there's some sort of fatal flaw at all in the clubhouse. I just think, if we're being honest about it, as Jon Lester said, maybe this will be good for us. Because if you just show up, playing it cool, knowing you're talented, knowing it's a long season and trusting that the talent will manifest over the course of 162, sometimes you'll end up one game short."
- "We could've done more from Day 1 to 162 as far as complete sense of urgency every day, being completely on mission every day, showing up with that assertiveness and that edge every day."

Wow, it's almost like there's tension between the guy picking the players and the guy who manages them. Of course, it would be naïve to think otherwise, because these are complex jobs and big personalities with Hall of Fame credentials.

At the same time, there's no better manager out there to help the Cubs win the World Series in 2019. Epstein would've risked disrupting all the positive elements of the culture Maddon helped create – a never-panic attitude, an inclusive atmosphere, big-picture sensibilities – while also exposing his front office to even more scrutiny.

Maddon didn't invest \$185 million in Yu Darvish, Tyler Chatwood and Brandon Morrow. Maddon couldn't hire a magician to heal Kris Bryant's left shoulder. Maddon hasn't lost the clubhouse. (Just maybe don't let Pedro Strop hit for himself next time.)

"He's managed his ass off this year with what we've been dealt," Anthony Rizzo said, "as far as losing Yu, as far as losing Morrow, as far as Strop going down late. We just lost so many guys – KB not being healthy all year – and we still figured out a way to win. That's all a credit to him, because without his leadership here, guys aren't playing the way they play. David Bote's not coming up here and playing the way he plays without Joe's leadership and the leadership in this clubhouse.

"I feel for the whole organization just not coming through, but I think Joe's best year was this year as far as managing all the moving parts."

Epstein acknowledged this long winter will include some self-evaluation and self-awareness for the entire operation. What worked in 2016 won't necessarily work in 2019 and beyond.

After more than a century of dread and disappointment, it's amazing how comfortable the Cubs are now when their backs are against the wall, expecting to win every crazy, one-run, extra-inning elimination game. But there's a fine line between not playing uptight and being too casual.

Collecting as much young talent as possible is great in theory. Playing matchups is part of the modern game. The overall depth of the 40-man roster saved this season. The Cubs would still be hearing about

1908 without that long-range planning and fluency in analytics. But maybe those offensive spirals last longer when all these first-round picks are stacked together and learning part-time on the job at the same career stage.

The Cubs are known as a player-first organization with all kinds of amenities and concierge services and state-of-the-art resources that appeal to free agents. (Hello, Bryce Harper and Manny Machado.) But maybe the players are a little too comfortable in their underground clubhouse, in the middle of a city that treats professional athletes like kings.

Epstein is also a progressive thinker who sounded sincere about creating more family support systems and reaching out to Melisa Reidy after Major League Baseball announced Addison Russell's 40-game suspension under the joint domestic violence policy.

Epstein didn't wake up on Wednesday morning and suddenly come to these realizations during a series of exit interviews. All this is bigger than any one bullpen decision or flippant comment at a sensitive press conference. Maddon still commands enough respect – from All-Stars like Rizzo and Javier Báez to clubhouse glue guys like Strop, Jason Heyward and Kyle Hendricks – to think he can be part of the solution.

"We love our manager, the way he talks to us and the way he lets us do whatever we want," Báez said. "It has a lot to do with what we do out there, because we got to be ourselves. When we do something right, he will tell you. And when you do something wrong, he will tell you the same way. He's honest and he wants you to get better."

Rizzo and Báez emerged as the yin and yang of the 2018 team and the Cubs have to find the right balance in the future. Rizzo is a great player and ambassador for the franchise who gravitates toward Maddon's laid-back style. The Cubs felt that self-confidence and sense of calm in 2015 and 2016 and it eased the pressure of trying to make history. Báez played out of control at times during those years but Maddon recognized his gifts and helped him channel those emotions in the right direction. The Cubs need more of that fire now.

Maddon is a present-tense guy who climbed all the way to the top of his profession from the bottom rung of the ladder. At a time when the industry is moving away from older, established, expensive managers, it's difficult to see Maddon forcing the issue about a contract extension, knowing how good he has it here, from the \$6 million salary next year to the playoff-tested roster to the big-city platform for his charitable foundation and off-the-field interests.

"You just got to shake your head," Hendricks said after the stunning wild-card loss when asked about all the heat Maddon takes. "I guess that's the easy place to look. But the product's on the field. You win or lose with the players and (Joe) did everything he absolutely could. All the guys that went down, big pieces, too, and he had to navigate through that, put new lineups out and navigate the bullpen a little differently.

"To still come out with 95 wins is so impressive. At the end of the day, it's the players and we just came up short. We were right there. If we get through this game, who knows where we could have gone?"

That question looms over the entire offseason. It may haunt the Cubs or motivate their next World Series team. Whatever shape these changes ultimately take, remember this isn't a "Wait 'til next year" franchise anymore.

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Cubs.com

5 questions facing Cubs heading into 2019

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- The Cubs won 95 wins and reached the postseason for the fourth consecutive year, a first in franchise history. But their season ended abruptly when they lost the National League Central tiebreaker game to the Brewers and the NL Wild Card Game to the Rockies on consecutive days.

Instead of preparing for the NL Division Series on Wednesday, Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein conducted exit interviews with players as they headed to the offseason wondering what happened.

Here's a look at five questions heading into 2019.

1. What happened to the offense?

In the first half of the season, the Cubs led the NL in runs (476) and on-base percentage (.345). That changed in the second half, when they dropped to eighth in runs scored (285) and ninth in OBP (.316). In 39 games this year, the Cubs scored zero or one run, including when they scored only one in Monday's Game 163. They also scored one run in Tuesday's Wild Card Game.

In the second half, the Cubs scored two or more runs in 50 games and went 37-13 in those contests. In the first half, they hit 100 home runs; they hit 67 in the second half. Epstein said "not being able to get to two runs that many times in the second half is really unacceptable."

There were players like NL Most Valuable Player Award candidate Javier Baez, who took a big step forward regarding his offense. But Epstein said there were others who are trending in the opposite direction.

"It's probably time to stop evaluating this in terms of talent and start evaluating in terms of production and do everything we can do to produce," Epstein said.

2. Will Brandon Morrow be the closer next year?

Morrow led the Cubs with 22 saves, but he did not pitch after July 15 because of a bone bruise on his right forearm. He is signed through next season, with an option for 2020. When asked about Morrow, Epstein said they would recommit to the right-hander in a "very structured role" to keep him healthy. Manager Joe Maddon mixed and matched in save situations when Morrow was sidelined, but one substitute closer, Pedro Strop, will be a free agent.

"That's on me," Epstein said of the Morrow signing. "We took an educated gamble on him there and on the 'pen overall, thinking that even if he did get hurt, we had enough talent to cover for it."

3. Will Cole Hamels be back?

Hamels has a \$20 million option for 2019, and after the Wild Card Game, he sounded like he wants to stay with the Cubs. Epstein said they were impressed at how quickly the left-hander fit in and that they want him back. The Cubs' returning starters include Jon Lester, Jose Quintana, Kyle Hendricks, Mike Montgomery, Yu Darvish and Tyler Chatwood. Darvish will be coming back from tendinitis in his right

triceps and a debridement procedure in his right elbow. Chatwood needs to reboot after finishing as the Major League leader in walks.

"We're set up to have some depth in the starting staff next year," Epstein said. "We're not looking to get rid of starting pitchers. We're looking to have as much depth as possible so we can withstand multiple injuries."

4. Does Kris Bryant need shoulder surgery?

As of Wednesday, Epstein said Bryant did not need surgery on his left shoulder and was hoping that an offseason of rest and work would get the third baseman back to "100 percent and better than ever." After the Wild Card Game, Bryant said he felt fine. He missed all of August because of a shoulder strain and played a career-low 102 games, finishing with 13 home runs and 52 RBIs.

"I know Kris is disappointed in the way this year went," Epstein said. "He's taking a real positive approach to it. ... This is the first time he's dealt with injury and adversity. He's challenging himself to make something positive about it."

5. Will the Cubs find a bonafide leadoff man?

It's on Epstein's list of priorities, but it's not No. 1. Epstein has said he feels having a leadoff batter was a luxury, but it certainly helped in 2016, when Dexter Fowler handled that assignment. The Cubs used 10 different leadoff batters this season, and they combined to lead the NL with a .366 on-base percentage.

"As far as the leadoff guy thing goes, you'd love to have that guy you can point to, everyone knows going in who's in the one-hole, who sets the tone, who's getting on base," Epstein said. "If you don't have it, I think it's better to find a way to be productive in that spot, and we did."

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NBC Sports Chicago

Cubs expect Kris Bryant to rebound with a 'monster' season in 2019

By Tony Andracki

Get ready for a new and improved Kris Bryant in 2019.

After a trying 2018 campaign, the Cubs are hoping the former NL MVP can turn in a "monster" rebound season next year.

Sure, talk is cheap with these types of things, but Bryant been a different mold. Bet against him at your own risk.

"I personally believe after sitting down with Kris after the way that he handled this year that he never really got back fully to what he can be," Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein said at his end-of-season press conference at Wrigley Field, "that this is someone that will put in the work necessary — physically, fundamentally, mentally, all phases — to have a monster year next year with what he learned this year."

As of right now, Bryant won't need offseason surgery on that ailing left shoulder that hampered him for the final 4.5 months of the season.

He injured it on a head-first slide into first base in mid-May and wound up missing nearly 60 games between two separate stints on the disabled list.

By the time he came back Sept. 1, Bryant had reworked the finish of his swing so that he kept both hands on the bat instead of letting go with his right hand and putting a ton of stress on that left shoulder.

Bryant rarely used that two-handed finish in game action over the final month, but he is utilizing it during his practice swings to help reduce the wear and tear on the joint.

Following the Cubs' heart-wrenching 13-inning loss in the National League Wild-Card Game, Bryant refused to make any excuses about his shoulder, brushing off any notion that he was physically unable to perform at the level we've all come to expect from him.

As he stood at his locker, Bryant's eyes welled up while he talked about the emotions and disappointment of the way the team's year ended.

"I'm taking this really hard," he said. "It's really tough."

He also felt like he deserved a lot of the blame for the Cubs scoring only 1 run in 13 innings against the Rockies.

"I missed a couple pitches that I could've done plenty of damage with and I missed 'em," he said. "You're always gonna look back on the things that you thought you could do better and that's where I'm at right now."

"There's plenty of things that I thought I could've done better and that's why I'm so hard on myself. I care so much. That's why this stings a little extra. It's not fun."

Bryant talked broadly about his entire season, saying it "definitely was not up to my standards" and explained how motivated he is to make sure this doesn't happen again.

From May 15 through the end of the season, Bryant played in just 68 games (65 starts) and hit only 5 homers with a .751 OPS.

His .398 slugging percentage ranked 203rd in baseball over that stretch, behind such players as Detroit's Jose Iglesias and Tampa Bay's Malle Smith. (For perspective, those two guys have hit just 28 homers combined in 950 career MLB games.)

Epstein believes we'll all look back at 2018 as the worst year of Bryant's career.

"With the offseason of rest and getting a full winter's worth of work in, he's gonna be 100 percent and better than ever," Epstein said. "...He is taking a really positive approach to it where he's learned a lot from the time that he missed."

"This is a guy who played every single game in high school, I think every single inning in college and just about every single game the first three years of his career and this is the first time he's really dealt with injury and adversity. He's challenging himself and we're challenging him to make something positive out of it."

Bryant shared the same sentiment as Epstein, feeling that he's learned a lot that he can carry over to the rest of his career.

It wasn't just the awkward slide that affected his shoulder. When the issue first popped up publicly, Bryant admitted he aggravated his shoulder because he took extra swings while trying to break out of his hitting slump.

The Cubs medical staff has given him a bunch of exercises already to continue to help build up strength in that left shoulder over the offseason...though Bryant didn't think the offseason would come so soon.

He wasn't ready for the Cubs to be done by Oct. 3 so he doesn't have a set plan yet for the winter, but wants to take just a few days off before getting back into the cage to work on his swing again.

Bryant didn't have any answers for why the Cubs lineup struggled with inconsistency throughout the season, but he's taking personal ownership at rectifying the issue before spring training.

"We'd love to go out there and hit better with runners in scoring position, square the ball up more," Bryant said. "But we just didn't do that. It's frustrating. I don't have an answer to it. It's making me more motivated to figure out a way to figure it out.

"That's how I've always been my whole life, whether it be baseball or school work or playing Monopoly or whatever. I'm always gonna find a way to get better at it. This year didn't go the way I wanted it to personally, but I think it's when you're in your low points and the lowest of the low where you build character and you learn the most.

"I've learned a lot about myself this year and the exciting part for me is to be able to apply that for the rest of my career."

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NBC Sports Chicago

Theo Epstein admits there's a bit of frustration in Cubs' clubhouse over constant lineup shuffling
By Vinnie Duber

Joe Maddon will be back as the Cubs' manager in 2019. Theo Epstein confirmed as much during his approximately 70-minute end-of-season press conference Wednesday.

There was speculation that Maddon and the Cubs might have parted ways after the earliest end to a season during his tenure, speculation that perhaps there was some unseen behind-the-scenes head-butting going on between the skipper and the front office. Epstein made sure to say that wasn't true, that conflict over baseball ideas is welcomed and that he in no way prefers a yes-man running his team.

But while Epstein did his best to put that issue to bed, he was refreshingly honest to the point that he revealed not everyone in a Cubs uniform is always happy with Maddon's methods. The team president fessed up that certain players are a little frustrated with Maddon's constant lineup shuffling, something that's been a Maddon trademark since he arrived on the North Side ahead of the 2015 season — and the Cubs' rise to the top of the baseball heap.

"Maybe a little bit, honestly," Epstein said when asked if there's frustration among the players over the lack of a set, everyday lineup. "But I also think they understand. They look around and they see the talent here. And that's how players talk about it. 'We have so many talented players who deserve to

play, and that's what makes us great, that's what makes us really good. But here's how sometimes it makes me feel, and here's how if we could communicate about it it could make things a little bit easier.' I just think it's important to hear that and to listen and to communicate as much as possible about it and to be transparent.

"In a situation that's more uncertain — more uncertain than a set lineup every single day, which we don't have with this group — helping players anticipate as much as possible when they're going to play, their role so they can think along is really important. And I think that's something that Joe tries to do and does effectively. But we can all get better at it. I learned some things from talking to the players today, and I'm going to share those with Joe. I'm sure Joe learned some things from his discussions with the players, too. We're going to continue to try to get better at it.

"I would say the players very much understand but that they're human and of course at times they get frustrated, more often when they're not playing or not hitting than when they're in there a lot and hitting."

The lack of a set 1 through 8 in the batting order during the majority of a 162-game season has worked rather well for the Cubs since Maddon took over as manager. They've averaged more than 96 wins during his four seasons, all of which ended in playoff berths, three of which saw the Cubs reach the NLCS and one which ended in a World Series championship.

It's been a luxury for a team that's had plenty of depth during this stretch. Maddon's juggling of certain positions on the field and his desire to get certain, more traditional everyday guys rest has allowed the Cubs to stock their bench with players whose talent makes them capable of being everyday guys on many, if not most, other teams.

Being able to bring guys like Albert Almora Jr. and Kyle Schwarber and Ian Happ — and, before his rise to superstardom, Javy Baez — off the bench has helped the Cubs late in games. And as Epstein put it, it's saved the Cubs in injury situations over the years.

"The fact that we have more than eight everyday-caliber players to throw out there and we have depth, it's a huge part of what's helped us win 95 games this year, what's helped us average 97 (wins) the last four years, more than anyone in baseball," Epstein said. "When you lose Addison Russell, Javy Baez slides over, Ben Zobrist slides to second base, and when you lose Kris Bryant, David Bote's there to fill in. Player after player. The alternative to that overexposing a reserve or forcing a Triple-A or Four-A type player into that role, and that hurts the team and that hurts your ultimate goal.

"That said, there is a price to pay, sometimes with players not knowing they're in the lineup every day and not having that confidence that they can go out and play and develop at their own pace. If they're sometimes wondering if they have to get that hit today to be in the lineup tomorrow, that's something that you wrestle with.

"Honestly, I think the right thing for the organization overall is to have too many good players instead of not enough, or to have eight guys for eight spots and then the second you suffer one or two or three injuries your whole season's down the tubes.

"It's the depth of really quality players we've had that's kept us afloat at many times."

The existence of frustration isn't exactly surprising for players who consider themselves — and in many cases have proved themselves — capable of everyday roles. But this is not a new topic for the Cubs, one that predates even these comments from Zobrist in spring training.

“We’ve got a lot of great players, and there are going to be good players that have to sit on the bench on our team at times. But no one ever rusts because you know how Joe uses everybody,” Zobrist said in February. “You’re still going to play. Even if you don’t start, you’re probably going to play later in the game. It’s just part of the National League and the way Joe Maddon manages.”

So while Maddon’s methods might be a tad frustrating at times, they also allow for plenty of opportunities. And more than 96 wins a season.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs' 2018 time capsule: From Tommy La Stella's bounce house to Anthony Rizzo's toothbrush
By Paul Sullivan

The Cubs’ epic fall this week ended the season in a heartbeat and provided a lasting impression.

Instead of going down as one of the wildest, most unpredictable rides in years, 2018 will be remembered as just another year a talented Cubs team blew it, like 1969 and 2004.

But along the way it was fun to watch and provided some special moments that shouldn’t be forgotten.

We can’t save them all for posterity, but thanks to modern technology we can provide a virtual time capsule to store some of the things that made you smile in 2018.

Here are some of the keepers:

Tommy La Stella’s bounce house

After La Stella pranked President Theo Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer by swiping their parking spots in spring training, the Cubs executives issued a polo shirt and pair of Hoyer’s khakis for La Stella to wear during a workout. After a ceasefire, La Stella had a bounce house placed on their parking spots. La Stella said the bounce house was for kids, but the executives were invited too. “Of course, anybody,” he said. “All sizes as well.”

Stoneman Douglas patch

The Cubs wore Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School patches on their uniforms for the season opener in Miami to honor victims of the February school shooting in nearby Parkland. Anthony Rizzo, who attended the school, tapped the patch on his chest after homering, calling it a tribute to “those kids up there and adults that lost their lives” in the shooting. “I’ve hit a lot of home runs,” Rizzo said. “That was probably the most out-of-body experience I’ve had hitting a home run in my life. Just felt really good obviously.”

Javier Baez’s flipped bat

After Javier Baez flipped his bat after a popup in an April game at Wrigley Field, Pirates manager Clint Hurdle hit the roof. “Where’s the respect for the game?” Hurdle barked. “The guy hits four homers in two days, so that means you can take your bat and throw it 15, 20 feet in the air when you pop up like you should have hit your fifth home run?” Baez apologized for “the way I looked in front of the kids and anyone who follows me.” But the Cubs had his back. “Four homers in two days and he doesn’t respect

the game; you should have hit five, Javy,” Rizzo yelled. Baez went on to have an MVP-caliber season, while Hurdle’s Pirates turned out to be also-rans.

Joe Namath’s Cubs “guarantee”

Jason Heyward’s walk-off grand slam on June 6 against the Phillies was the first by a Cub since July 27, 2009, when Alfonso Soriano hit one to beat the Astros. Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Namath, a boyhood hero of manager Joe Maddon, was at the game that night and had visited the Cubs clubhouse beforehand. “Joe guaranteed the win before the game,” Maddon joked, referring to Namath’s “guarantee” the Jets would upset the Colts in Super Bowl III. “The ball was on our own 45, no timeouts left, trips right, Hail Mary and we got the touchdown. It’s all appropriate Joe Willie was here to witness that game.”

David Bote’s shredded jersey

Trailing 3-0 in the bottom of the ninth inning of a “Sunday Night Baseball” game against the Nationals on Aug. 12, rookie David Bote hit a walk-off grand slam to give the Cubs a 4-3 victory and turn Wrigley upside down. Bote smoked Ryan Madson’s pitch into the batter’s eye in center field, flipped his bat and tossed his helmet sky high while rounding third base. During the postgame celebration, Bote’s teammates tore his jersey off his back. “My jersey got shredded,” he said with a grin.

Brandon Morrow’s pants

Cubs closer Brandon Morrow suffered one of the year’s weirdest injuries when he was sidelined after incurring back spasms taking off his pants after a road trip. “People pin me up on Twitter, kind of making fun of me,” Morrow said. “And also people are like, ‘Hey, I sneezed last week and haven’t been able to move since. I feel your pain.’ ” It was just another Cubbie Occurrence, but no one was laughing in July when Morrow suffered a bone bruise in his right forearm, causing him to miss the rest of the season.

Cubs fan’s buckethead

Sitting in the bleachers during a game in July, Cubs fan Kyle McAleer put a plastic bubble gum container on his head in hopes of starting a rally, a tribute to the 2015 Cubs, who did likewise. During the inning, a 6-8-inch metal pin that holds scoreboard tiles in place fell on his head, causing a cut that sent him to the hospital. McAleer survived and was able to laugh about it, saying the bucket head may have saved his life. “If the Cubs weren’t losing, I would not have been wearing that bucket,” he said. “It might have fractured my skull. It definitely could have been fatal. I am extremely lucky.”

Ian Happ’s waffle iron

After Baez homered in Philadelphia on Aug. 31, he returned to the dugout and was presented with a waffle iron from Ian Happ. Baez held it up and yelled “Waffles!” while playing with the lid. “When a guy hits a ball hard, it’s considered waffling a baseball,” Happ explained. “So Tommy (La Stella) and I talked about it in April, and we should put a waffle maker in the dugout.” The Cubs lost the waffle iron in Milwaukee, and Happ soon received three new waffle makers from fans. The next day Happ hit a three-run homer against the Reds. “Waffles!”

“Breathe Deep” T-shirt

After the July 8 death of Ken Ravizza, the team’s sports psychologist, Maddon had T-shirts made with the slogan “Breathe Deep,” one of Ravizza’s favorite sayings. “I had these T-shirts designed for that

moment,” Maddon said. “Also on the back is ‘Attitude is a decision,’ which also leads into what you’re doing. Come out here with a bad attitude, you get your butt kicked. Come out here with the right attitude, you have a chance to win. I wanted the players to see this every day. It’s good advice for anybody, not just baseball players. I wear this every day since Kenny has passed.”

Art of Baseball paintings

Instead of his usual T-shirt slogans, Maddon went in another direction and commissioned an artist to deliver works for his “Art of Baseball” collection. One painting was a rendering of Michelangelo’s David standing in front of the center-field scoreboard at Wrigley Field while wearing a jockstrap. “David is the dude who went after Goliath,” Maddon said in his Cliffs Notes version of the biblical tale. “And the actual statue of David is supposed to be prior to the affair, and he’s standing there kind of tense, like he’s on a pitching mound.” Maddon hoped his players would be inspired by the works, which had some of his favorite Maddonisms scribbled on them. He called it the “silver hammer approach” to teaching, leaving everyone with his own interpretation of what the artwork means.

“Dress Like Pedro Strop Day” accessories

The Cubs held the first annual “Dress Like Pedro Strop Day” in August, a theme trip based on the flashy clothes the popular reliever wears. What does it take to dress like Pedro Strop? “Some gold chains, obviously,” Kris Bryant said. “Tight jeans. Sunglasses. He has his hats he’s passing out, and everyone’s (wearing) bright shoes. I think overall just looking good.”

Jesse Chavez’s sunglasses

When the Cubs acquired reliever Jesse Chavez from the Rangers, it went virtually unnoticed. The 34-year-old Chavez, the 1,252nd pick of the 2002 draft, had pitched for six major-league teams and never was a star. But he turned into a valuable piece of the bullpen, and wore sunglasses while pitching, even at night. Chavez said he simply was tired of changing his contacts.

Anthony Rizzo’s toothbrush

When the Cubs were forced to extend their stretch of consecutive games without an off day and play a makeup game in Washington on Sept. 13, Rizzo decided to make the trip wearing his full uniform. “I do not have a change of clothes,” he said. The only thing Rizzo brought with him was a T-shirt and a toothbrush. “We can sit here and complain about it or we can joke around about it,” he said. “The joking around part is a lot more fun.” After the Cubs beat the Nationals, Rizzo wore his uniform on the flight home to Chicago.

DVD of JD’s called shot

Kris Bryant was homerless in his return from a prolonged stint on the disabled list when he came to the plate at Chase Field in Phoenix on Sept. 18 and had not homered since July 20. Cubs analyst Jim Deshaies told play-by-play man Len Kasper that Bryant would end the drought. “Calling it,” Deshaies said. “He’s going deep. Right here. This at-bat.” Bryant hit the next pitch over the right-center-field wall and into the swimming pool. “Been a pleasure knowing you all,” Deshaies said. “My career is over.”

Celebratory shot glasses

The Cubs didn't celebrate after clinching a postseason berth on Sept. 26 because they had bigger fish to fry. But after winning the next night, Maddon and the team had postgame shots to toast their fourth straight playoff berth. It turned out to be their last celebration.

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Chicago Tribune

5 losses that contributed to the Cubs blowing the NL Central title

By Paul Sullivan

In early May Cubs President Theo Epstein stood in front of the dugout before a game at Wrigley Field and addressed his club's second straight mediocre start to the season.

The Cubs had turned it on in the second half of 2017 to easily win the National League Central Division title, and I asked Epstein if that was part of the problem.

Maybe the players know they can turn it on when they need to and lack a sense of urgency?

"Maybe," he replied. "There's that theory that last year reinforced those habits. I don't know. You can sit here and say 'yes' and then we'll go run off 10 in a row and then it was just psychobabble, trying to create a narrative.

"If you want to write that story, I'll give you the quote. But I'm not sure it's true."

Five months later, during Wednesday's postmortem after the Cubs blew the division title to the Brewers in the final week and lost to the Rockies in Tuesday's wild-card game, Epstein conceded the theory was not just psychobabble after all.

"Again, 95 wins is tremendous, but sometimes divisions aren't lost on that last day of the season when you only score one run and you don't get in," he said. "They're not lost in that last week and a half when the other team goes 8-0 and you go 4-3 and you needed to go 5-2.

"Sometimes they're lost early in the season when you have an opportunity to push for that sweep, but you already have two out of three and you're just not quite there with that killer instinct. You know what that makes us? Human."

In light of that candid admission, here are five Cubs losses before the final-week collapse that ultimately contributed to the Cubs blowing the division title:

May 6: Cardinals 4, Cubs 3, 14 innings at Busch Stadium

After Javier Baez's home run in the top of the 14th gave the Cubs a 3-2 lead in an ESPN "Sunday Night Baseball" game, manager Joe Maddon turned to reliever Luke Farrell, his eighth pitcher of the night. Farrell struck out the first two hitters, including pitcher Miles Mikolas, who had to pinch-hit for the Cardinals. But Harrison Bader reached on an infield hit to shortstop, and former Cub Dexter Fowler hit a two-run, line-drive homer to right for a stunning walk-off victory. The Cubs were 0-for-9 with runners in scoring position, a recurring theme in 2018 as they ranked 20th in the category with a .247 average. Farrell posted a 5.17 ERA in 20 appearances and the Cubs waived him in early September.

May 13: White Sox 5, Cubs 3 at Wrigley Field

The Cubs scored 19 runs in winning the first two games of the City Series. The White Sox had the worst record in baseball and struggling Lucas Giolito on the mound. In the first inning, Giolito walked three, gave up a hit, threw two wild pitches and allowed four stolen bases. But the Cubs managed only two runs, failing to capitalize on his wildness. Giolito wound up with seven walks over 5 2/3 innings, but the Cubs managed only three hits on the afternoon. "Some days (we) come out banging," Anthony Rizzo said afterward. "And some days we come out cold." It was a series the Cubs should have swept, but Maddon wasn't overly concerned. "Any time you win a series, we'll take it," he said, adding: "I know they're going through some issues, but I really like their team on the field." The Sox wound up with 100 losses, the third-worst record in baseball.

June 24: Reds 8, Cubs 6 at Great American Ball Park

Before the start of a four-game series in Cincinnati, Maddon said Cubs fans were "angst-filled" by nature. "Our fans need to be entertained, so if you want to keep riding that emotional roller coaster, go ahead," he said. "And if you choose not to, that's probably (OK). It's like investing in the long term as opposed to watching the (stock) quotes every day. That will drive you nuts." After the Cubs lost the first three games, Maddon doubled down on the angst: "We just beat the Dodgers two out of three, and we're the best team since the '27 Yankees. Cincinnati beats you up for three days, and all of a sudden it's doom and gloom. I cannot live my life that way." That preceded a shocking finale in which the Cubs led 6-1 in the bottom of the seventh before starter Mike Montgomery and Pedro Strop combined to give up seven runs. Maddon left Strop in for nine batters, seven of whom reached, on four hits and three walks. After Joey Votto's RBI double gave the Reds the lead, Strop walked Jose Peraza with the bases loaded to make it 8-6. Afterward, Maddon and his coaches dressed in colorful bib overalls for a theme trip to Los Angeles. "This was pre-planned," he said. "You don't change. You still eat. You still sleep. You still pet your puppy and you move on."

Sept. 3: Brewers 4, Cubs 3 at Miller Park

The Cubs traveled to Milwaukee with 10 victories in 12 games and a seemingly comfy five-game lead in the Central. A series triumph would put the Brewers behind the eight ball. When Rizzo cranked a two-run homer off dominating left-hander Josh Hader to give the Cubs a 3-2 lead in the eighth, the ballpark erupted with celebrating Cubs fans who came up for the Labor Day matinee. But Carl Edwards Jr. issued a bases-loaded walk in the eighth to make it 3-3 before he angrily stalked off the mound, shouting at the home plate umpire. Edwards and Maddon were ejected. Steve Cishek loaded the bases in the ninth on a walk and two hit batters before Jesse Chavez came in to relieve. The Cubs employed a five-man infield with one out, and Chavez got Christian Yelich to hit a hard shot to Kris Bryant, who was playing 10 feet off the line at third. Instead of going home for the force, Bryant opted to sprint to third and then threw to first for an attempted double play. But Yelich beat the throw, and the Brewers celebrated madly with a walk-off victory. Bryant and Maddon defended the decision to attempt a double play. "You just have to make a snap decision, and that's the one that I think most third basemen would make going to the bag," Bryant said. The Brewers took two of three in the series and two of three at Wrigley on Sept. 10-12 to stay in the race.

Sept. 21: White Sox 10, Cubs 4 at Guaranteed Rate Field

Did Addison Russell cost the Cubs a game without even being there? Daniel Murphy homered to lead off the South Side edition of the City Series, but former White Sox ace Jose Quintana gave up five runs on nine hits over five innings in his return to 35th and Shields. The Cubs were never really in this game, but it was significant because of what happened beforehand. The day began with the news that MLB had placed Russell on administrative leave after his former wife, Melisa Reidy-Russell, accused him of physical and emotional abuse. Epstein and Cubs Chairman Tom Ricketts addressed the team in the

clubhouse before the game and held a joint news conference. The next day, Maddon said the Russell situation had been a distraction that affected the clubhouse. "It's hard to say that it didn't," he said. "You walk into the locker room, there's a much different buzz going on outside of the game itself. We did have to meet as a group to talk about things, and again, we did get in (from Phoenix) at 6 o'clock in the morning the day before. So (it) was just one of those days. What it really comes down to is you either have trust and faith in your guys or you don't. It was a tough day." But Jon Lester denied the news of Russell's leave had affected the players. "This clubhouse has been through enough adversity in the four years I've been here to move on from anything that goes on outside this clubhouse," he said.

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