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## NBC Sports Chicago

MLB teams pulling out all the stops for Bryce Harper and Cubs reportedly still in the mix

By Tony Andracki

Bryce Harper is still dominating headlines this Hot Stove season and now we're getting a glimpse into the big pitches from each MLB team.

Yahoo Sports' Jeff Passan detailed how teams around the league are courting the superstar free agent, including the Los Angeles Dodgers sending Magic Johnson to Las Vegas (Harper's hometown) and the White Sox sending Jim Thome.

Passan also discussed the Cubs, but only to say they're expected to "check in" on Harper.

The Cubs have been touting their financial constraints for more than a month, citing the rise in payroll that is projected to eclipse the luxury tax threshold (\$206 million) even before any other signings or moves take place this winter. The moves they've made already support that claim, dealing away Drew

Smyly and his \$7 million deal (\$5 million against the luxury tax) to clear room for Cole Hamels' \$20 million option and sending Tommy La Stella to the Los Angeles Angels last week ahead of an increase in salary that is supposed to take the pinch-hitting specialist up to about \$1.2 million.

Still, Theo Epstein's front office kicks the tires on any move that could possibly make their team better and acquiring a player with Harper's absurd talent would certainly improve the lineup, regardless of cost. It would be irresponsible to not at least "check in" on Harper's market and get a sense of who he is as a player/person with a face-to-face meeting.

The Philadelphia Phillies still look like the favorite in the Harper Sweepstakes and the moves they've made this week further back that claim, as Passan pointed out, by opening up a spot in the outfield and gaining a bit of financial flexibility in the Carlos Santana deal with the Seattle Mariners, allowing Rhys Hoskins to move back to first base.

The Cubs are on track for roughly \$219 million in payroll against the luxury tax in 2019 and the Dodgers aren't far behind at \$197 million while the Phillies sit at just \$132 million and the White Sox are at a stunning \$81 million.

The next couple weeks will be fascinating for Harper's market as MLB's Winter Meetings take place in Vegas, where the superstar will be just a short car ride away from the game's top decision-makers.

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### **NBC Sports Chicago**

State of the Cubs: First base

By Tony Andracki

As the Cubs maneuver through a pivotal offseason, we will break down the current state of the team each week by sectioning it off into position groups. Here is the fourth installment on the first basemen.

What is the current state of the Cubs at first base? Simple — Anthony Rizzo.

No other explanation needed.

End of article.

-30- (for your old school journalists out there)

But seriously: Theo Epstein said at the GM meetings last month the only position group the Cubs feel comfortable with at the moment was starting pitching. He was addressing the offense as one big group, but looking more minutely, first base obviously is not an area of need for this franchise.

In fact, it's probably the most secure position for the Cubs through at least 2021 — the last team option on Rizzo's current deal. However, it's not quite as stable as it once was (more on that in a bit).

Depth chart

1. Anthony Rizzo
2. Let's be honest, this isn't needed

Even if Rizzo goes down to injury — like last April with his back issue — the Cubs have plenty of players to slide over and fill in the gap. Kris Bryant could obviously do it, opening up third base for Javy Baez or David Bote. Ben Zobrist could also shift over to first base.

Then there's Baez (who has some experience over there), Victor Caratini (if he's still on the big-league roster), Ian Happ (who started two games at first in 2018) and even Taylor Davis (who figures to spend the year in the minors, but is on the 40-man roster). Willson Contreras could slide over if the Cubs had a reliable option to put at catcher and in a pinch, I'm sure Kyle Schwarber or Bote could cover for Rizzo.

Of course, none of these options are Gold Glove-caliber defenders like Rizzo, but if the Cubs lose their emotional leader and face of the franchise for any extended period of time, they'll be a lot more worried about missing his bat than his glove.

After homering in the first game of 2018, Rizzo got off to a horrible start — hitting .143 with a .250 on-base percentage and zero extra-base hits from March 30 through April 30. But once he put that back injury and slump in the rearview mirror, Rizzo emerged as the best hitter in the Cubs lineup (yes, even better than Baez) — slashing .303/.393/.512 (.905 OPS) from May 1 on, walking more than he struck out (66 vs. 65) and smashing 24 homers with 92 RBI.

That helped his overall numbers look pretty close to his career line, but it was the first time since 2013 that he failed to hit at least 31 homers.

Like many of the other hitters in the Cubs lineup, Rizzo will look to hit for more power in 2018, but he still has the best approach and consistency among any of the position players on the roster.

What's next?

The only "next" moves the Cubs need to make at first base would be if they want to find a legitimate backup with plenty of experience at the position defensively. Rizzo led baseball in hit-by-pitches in both 2015 and 2017 and has been plunked at least 15 times for five straight seasons, 105 in all. Any one of those in a bad spot on his hand or elbow or foot and he could hit the DL for a potentially lengthy period of time.

Then there's the back issue, as Rizzo has experienced back pain that has kept him out of the lineup for at least a couple games a year. He said the April 2018 injury was a bit different than normal, but still, he's 29 years old and the back issues figure to increase over time as he ages.

Beyond that, the only "next" moves the Cubs need to make to address first base is simply picking up the \$16.5 million options for 2020 and 2021, though those should be the easiest calls Epstein's front office makes in each respective offseason.

The bottom line

Rizzo is the most reliable hitter in the Cubs lineup and if he can pick his power back up and avoid another month-long slump, he has a very good chance to improve upon his 2019 numbers.

At a time when the Cubs really want all their talented young hitters to take that next step and put it all together offensively, Rizzo serves as the perfect example with one of the best two-strike approaches in the league.

Depending on what else the Cubs are able to do this winter and how they augment the lineup, Joe Maddon and Co. may consider moving Rizzo up to the leadoff spot on a more regular basis. He's obviously comfortable hitting there (.317/.409/.587 career slash line in 45 starts leading off), it would

give the best hitter in the lineup the most at-bats and it would set the table for Bryant and Baez with the team's top OBP guy hitting in front of them.

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### **NBC Sports Chicago**

Even if they don't get Bryce Harper back, the Nationals just ensured they'll be a threat to Cubs, NL in 2019

By Tony Andracki

The Washington Nationals may not re-sign Bryce Harper, but they certainly won't be on the outside looking in at the National League pennant race.

The Nats shook up the baseball world Tuesday afternoon when they inked Patrick Corbin to a six-year, \$140 million deal, according to Chelsea Janes of the Washington Post.

The exact details of the contract are unknown, but Corbin gets a deal the same length as Yu Darvish's with the Cubs, only with an extra \$14 million added on. That gives Corbin the 18th-highest AAV (average annual value) contract in baseball and the Nationals already boast Max Scherzer (6th) and Stephen Strasburg (10th) on that same list.

It pushes the Nationals' estimated payroll to about \$196 million for 2019, which is only \$10 million under the luxury tax.

That may make it impossible for them to go out and sign Harper to a megadeal unless the Nats front office can unload some major salary somewhere along the line, but Corbin certainly legitimizes Washington's playoff chances. On the other hand, bolstering the rest of the roster is a nice recruiting pitch to Harper as the Nats front office can prove they're all about trying to bring a championship to D.C.

A three-headed monster of Scherzer-Corbin-Strasburg in the rotation is absolutely incredible assuming they can all stay healthy (something Strasburg has not been able to accomplish yet in his career). The Nationals then roll out Tanner Roark and Joe Ross — who most certainly are no slouches — as their Nos. 4 and 5 options on the starting staff.

Even without Harper, the Top 4 in the Nats lineup still has to rank among the best in the NL with some combination of:

1. Adam Eaton
2. Trea Turner
3. Anthony Rendon
4. Juan Soto

The Nationals have been very aggressive this offseason, supplementing their lineup with a pair of veteran catchers acquired via trade (Yan Gomes) and free agency (Kurt Suzuki). They also picked up two low-risk/high-reward bullpen arms in Trevor Rosenthal and Kyle Barraclough to work in front of incumbent closer Sean Doolittle.

The Corbin deal gives the Nats 25/1 odds to win the World Series:

That's bad news for any Cubs fans under the illusion the Nats would fade into obscurity without Harper.

The good news for the Cubs is the NL East may waste all their energy beating up on each other in the 2019 regular season as the Braves and Phillies are going all-in and the Mets just pulled off a big trade for Robinson Cano and Edwin Diaz.

That's a lot of talent headed to one division this winter:

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### **Chicago Tribune**

Column: The Cubs have needs to address with winter meetings approaching — and the time is ripe to make roster moves

By Mark Gonzales

Baseball lifer Jack McKeon thought Cubs bench coach Brandon Hyde was qualified to become a major-league manager five seasons ago.

Hyde still awaits that chance as his latest candidacy links him to the Orioles.

That lengthy period may pale in comparison to how long antsy Cubs fans have anticipated a series of moves to retool a team that was abruptly knocked out in the National League wild-card game.

But the reality is the offseason won't reach the halfway point until next week — when the annual winter meetings start and activity traditionally reaches a zenith.

The Cubs agreed to terms with prized left-hander Jon Lester four years ago. The following year, they traded infielder Starlin Castro to make room for free agent Ben Zobrist, and three days later agreed to terms with outfielder Jason Heyward.

They acquired closer Wade Davis from the Royals one month after winning the 2016 World Series title, and shored up their bullpen by signing Brandon Morrow and Steve Cishek — their best free-agent signing — at the start and finish of last year's meetings.

This history doesn't guarantee moves will be made by next week — especially with luxury tax concerns — but the extra month of internal evaluations and discussions with other teams can only enhance their pursuit.

One scout familiar with the Cubs pointed to the need for stability at the leadoff spot since Dexter Fowler's departure two years ago, although he wondered how they would address it.

"They're born, or you acquire them," he said, echoing a sentiment held by former White Sox hitting coach Greg Walker.

Marlins catcher J.T. Realmuto had the type of season many forecasted for Willson Contreras — .277 batting average with 21 home runs and 74 RBIs. But Realmuto can become a free agent in 2021, raising the question of whether the Cubs would accelerate their push toward another World Series title at the expense of Contreras, who is one season away from arbitration.

Furthermore, a source familiar with Realmuto and Contreras said the perceived defensive gap isn't as wide as the sabermetrics indicate, with Contreras working more seamlessly with Lester.

Offensive production remains a priority in the wake of the second-half struggles, and marquee free agent Bryce Harper remains available — albeit at a hefty cost accompanied by plenty of competition from teams without luxury tax consequences (Phillies, White Sox) and those apparently willing to go the extra yard (Nationals, Yankees).

Many Cubs fans turned despondent last week when free agent Jesse Chavez signed a two-year contract with the Rangers.

Impact left-handers Zach Britton, whom the Cubs courted near the 2017 trade deadline, and Andrew Miller would strengthen the bullpen immensely, but they could get a longer contract elsewhere.

The Cubs have other needs, such as a backup middle infielder and perhaps a veteran position player that can serve as a mentor a la David Ross (2015-16) and Jon Jay (2017).

To this point, the Cubs' moves have been dictated by deadlines and have resulted in retaining left-hander Cole Hamels, trading pinch-hitting specialist Tommy La Stella and tendering a contract to Addison Russell.

The coaching staff may be announced shortly after Hyde — currently the Cubs' bench coach — learns his fate with the Orioles.

But two months since their season-ending loss represents enough time for the Cubs to crystalize their annual winter shopping list with plenty of inventory still available.

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### **Chicago Tribune**

Alderman says Chicago Cubs ownership looking to take him out of the (political) ballgame

By John Byrne

Baseball and cold beer were distant dreams on a recent icy afternoon as Ald. Tom Tunney hustled past Wrigley Field, pointing out the several restaurants and bars in the new hotel and office building the Ricketts family, which owns the Chicago Cubs, put up around the stadium's west side.

Workers on cherry pickers rose up along the facade of the ballpark itself, carrying out the latest renovations in a yearslong modernization.

"When they say I'm standing in their way, all I can say is 'Are you kidding?'" Tunney asked, raising his arms to take in the new construction.

Since the billionaire owners bought the team in 2009, they set out to spend about \$1 billion on the Friendly Confines and developments around the park, Ricketts family spokesman Dennis Culloton says. Through it all, Culloton says, Tunney's stood in the team's way.

Now, Tunney says the Ricketts family is looking to help finance somebody's election campaign to take him out. Culloton acknowledges the family is thinking about backing a challenger.

Welcome to the 44th Ward City Council race, an aldermanic joust for the future of the Lakeview neighborhood, the old ballpark and surrounding tavern district that long have been famous for sun-drenched bacchanalia.

While the Cubs owners haven't officially backed a Tunney opponent, they were "among the funders" of a community organization called Neighbors for a Better Lakeview, which has sent out mailers ripping the alderman for high residential property taxes in the tony lakefront ward, Culloton said.

And Tunney contends they also are contributing to a political action committee that's hammering him.

Culloton won't talk about the PAC, but says, "it has been painful" negotiating with Tunney throughout the development process in and around the park.

"The Ricketts family has been extremely open about their aspirations, from the modernization of Wrigley Field to the development of properties near the park," Culloton said. "Oh, and a World Series championship for the Cubs."

The family has raised its political profile in recent years, particularly in the Republican Party. Team co-owner Pete Ricketts recently won a second term as the GOP governor of Nebraska. And co-owner Todd Ricketts took over early this year as the Republican National Committee's national finance chair.

"When they say I'm standing in their way, all I can say is 'Are you kidding?'"  
— Ald. Tom Tunney

Now, Tunney said they're turning their political focus to the local level, making a power play to consolidate their control over the ward by backing a new City Council representative. He said the Rickettses have been searching for more than a year for a candidate to support against him. But the alderman argued the move would be counterproductive for the billionaire Cubs owners.

"I don't know what more we can do for these guys," Tunney said. "They've gotten the OK for all these huge projects, and I just want to be sure I'm sticking up for the whole ward. I'm a pro-business alderman."

Countered Culloton: "If Ald. Tunney is a pro-business alderman, I'd hate to see him take an anti-business slant."

"All the Ricketts family has done is employ thousands of union men and women on projects they have paid for in and around Wrigley Field," Culloton said.

Among the clashes the alderman has had with the team over the years, he's argued over the size of the left field video screen and right field ad board they wanted as among the first big changes inside Wrigley Field in order to bring in money to pay for other work.

Tunney also said outfield walls shouldn't be pushed back to allow for wider park concourses, saying the narrowing of sidewalks along Waveland and Sheffield avenues would create safety hazards.

He tried to hold down the number of night games the team would get and opposed a pedestrian bridge over Clark Street from the hotel to the park. He worked to limit the hours of the team-owned outdoor plaza to the west of Wrigley Field, saying it could turn into a massive beer garden that would lead to more neighborhood congestion and put longtime bars in Wrigleyville out of business.

Still, when the team got city approval in 2013 for a massive package of alterations in and around the park, Tunney praised the deal as "transformational for the city."

He has said he sometimes took tough stances in negotiations in order to look out for the interests of other businesses and residents in the congested neighborhood. And he said the modernization of much of Clark Street south of the park with a huge new apartment complex and massive retail development to make the neighborhood a year-round attraction started before the Ricketts family bought the team. "We had this vision for Wrigleyville," he said.

"Now they want to push out everything that isn't theirs," Tunney said. "They are extremely jealous about any money going outside their franchises, whether for a T-shirt or a beer."

Culloton acknowledged the Ricketts family is considering supporting at least one Tunney challenger. "I think it's definitely a possibility going forward that the family may back one or more candidates" for alderman, he said.

Adding to the antagonism, Culloton pointed to Tunney promising the Cubs owners on the City Council floor in 2013 that he would "be up your butt every day" if they didn't honor their commitments to Wrigleyville residents.

"(Tunney) has been disrespectful to a family that has been investing huge sums and trying to improve the neighborhood," Culloton said. "If that means they need to support someone to get a different voice in this process, that's a possibility."

Three people submitted petitions to get on the ballot to challenge Tunney in February's municipal election: Austin Baidas, Patrick Shine and Elizabeth Shydrowski.

Baidas said he has known Cubs co-owner and board member Laura Ricketts for years, since he was an official in Gov. Pat Quinn's administration and she was campaigning for marriage equality in Illinois. Among the Cubs-owning family, Laura Ricketts has stood out as a vocal supporter of progressive causes. "I spoke to her about my candidacy, and I think she supports me, but she has not done so financially," Baidas said. "I don't support the right-wing politics of her brothers."

Baidas manages manufactured home communities in Michigan and elsewhere, and said he got in the race because Tunney isn't dealing proactively with problems of increasing crime, rising property taxes and empty storefronts in the ward. "He seems to be looking backward instead of forward," Baidas said. "These problems aren't going to fix themselves if we rely on ideas that may have worked in the past."

Baidas, who also worked at the federal Department of Transportation during the Obama administration, has sunk \$200,000 of his own money into the race. He has gotten contributions from family members and others totaling about \$130,000, plus \$20,000 from Chicagoan Lana Wachowski, one of the creators of "The Matrix" films, according to state campaign finance records.

Shydrowski is a consultant for the Jack Kemp Foundation and former administrator at nonprofits and government offices, including Cook County Chief Judge Tim Evans and former U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk. Shydrowski, who also worked for the state as an administrator in the Department of Healthcare and Family Services during Gov. Bruce Rauner's administration, cited rising taxes and crime in the ward for prompting her to run.

"We Chicagoans have come to expect the bare minimum," Shydrowski said. "I don't get the sense (Tunney) has unified the entire ward, and I think I have the background to bring together businesses, nonprofits and residents to tackle these issues."

Shydrowski said she hasn't received any support from the Ricketts family, though she would welcome it.



Shine could not be reached for comment.

In the 47th Ward just northwest of Wrigleyville, team officials already are putting in money to support Heather Way Kitzes, who works for the Cubs as manager for government and neighborhood relations. Cubs CEO Tom Ricketts, his wife, Cecelia, and Laura Ricketts each contributed \$5,600 to Kitzes in the crowded race for the seat being vacated by Ald. Ameya Pawar.

And Chicago Cubs Baseball Club LLC contributed \$8,437 in food and drinks to a reception Kitzes held, campaign finance records state.

They may not yet be directly backing a candidate in the 44th Ward, but according to Tunney, the Ricketts family has targeted him in other ways. In addition to the contribution to Neighbors for a Better Lakeview, Tunney pointed to the creation of the “terribletonney.com” website, which focuses on escalating taxes and crime in the ward.

The site is funded by The Jobs PAC, the political action committee of the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association. Tunney said the Cubs owners contributed to the PAC, which then launched the site. “It’s a pass-through,” he said.

Culloton declined to discuss whether the family gave money to the PAC. He referred questions to Gregory Baise, the outgoing president and CEO of the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association who also serves as the PAC’s treasurer.

Baise did not respond to messages asking whether the Ricketts family helped pay for the anti-Tunney website. Instead, he released a statement saying the manufacturers association has long supported “pro-business, pro-growth” candidates. “This is nothing new,” Baise said.

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## **The Athletic**

Are the Cubs lurking in the Bryce Harper sweepstakes?

By Patrick Mooney

For Cubs fans, the Bryce Harper dream won’t die until he’s putting on a different jersey at some other team’s press conference. And that would only begin their countdown until Harper can opt out of what might be the biggest contract in the history of professional sports.

Cubs fans, the Chicago media and national baseball writers have all been conditioned to never underestimate team president Theo Epstein, always anticipating the next bold move and another big name on the Wrigley Field marquee.

As Harper’s camp has staged a series of meetings in Las Vegas and Los Angeles, there are mixed signals on whether or not the Cubs are a factor in the talks and if the franchise’s financial limitations really are restrictive enough to keep him out of reach.

Cubs officials throughout the organization have privately downplayed or dismissed the idea of signing Harper this winter and it’s not a coordinated leak campaign to lower the expectations. Agents and rival teams also get the sense the Cubs are feeling a budget crunch. It’s not exactly a well-kept secret. They unloaded Drew Smyly’s contract in a salary-dump trade with the Texas Rangers so they could pick up Cole Hamels’ \$20 million option in early November. A source also confirmed the Cubs couldn’t close a

deal with super-utility pitcher Jesse Chavez, who loved the entire Wrigley Field experience but recently accepted a two-year, \$8 million offer from the Rangers. If the Cubs couldn't sign Chavez, that doesn't augur well for signing Harper, who is expected to command roughly 40 or 50 times that amount.

In a story published late Monday night, Yahoo! Sports detailed some of the sit-downs with Harper, identifying Hall of Famer Jim Thome as part of the White Sox contingent in Las Vegas and describing the Cubs as "expected to check in." By Tuesday afternoon, Yahoo! Sports retracted a particularly juicy detail: NBA legend Magic Johnson, an investor in the Los Angeles Dodgers, went on the record and denied being part of a recruiting meeting with Harper.

Knowing the personalities involved and how they operate, it wouldn't make sense for Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer to decline the opportunity to get some face time with a superstar player, or for super-agent Scott Boras to exclude a big-market team like the Cubs from the negotiations. Especially when the entire industry will be gathered in Harper's hometown next week for the winter meetings at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino.

Shortly after Epstein took over baseball operations at Wrigley Field in October 2011, the Cubs inquired about another Boras client, Prince Fielder, even though they understood it would be years before the organization would make those kinds of massive investments in free agents. The Cubs and Boras Corp. have a long history of doing business together, from drafting future National League MVP Kris Bryant to helping Jake Arrieta transform into a Cy Young Award winner to organizing Addison Russell's treatment plan and suspension under Major League Baseball's domestic violence policy with the players' union.

The baseball fit and personal connection is obvious given the Cubs' "broken offense" and Harper's friendship with Bryant, who grew up playing with and against Harper in Las Vegas. Over the weekend, Bryant posted an Instagram Story that featured him and Harper and their wives posing with Nelly, the St. Louis rapper who pitched the Cardinals as a destination. Harper has also dazzled some of Epstein's evaluators, going all the way back to their time with the Boston Red Sox and an unforgettable performance at the Area Code Games in Southern California.

"Bryce at 15 years old was the best player on the field," a major-league executive once observed. "By far, the best player on the field. You just saw it right away."

"The biggest thing I walked away with was that guy has zero fear of the moment," another scout said of Harper the prodigy. "He was by far the youngest player at that event and he had zero fear. He was so confident."

Harper is still only 26 years old, a six-time All-Star during his first seven seasons with the Washington Nationals, the organization that drafted and developed him and reportedly made a 10-year, \$300 million offer to retain him in late September.

But there is a simple do-the-math element here for the Cubs, who have already committed roughly \$160 million to 13 players next year, plus almost \$40 million in projected arbitration raises on the MLB Trade Rumors model, a \$13 million earmark for player benefits and the trade-deadline fund this front office usually holds in reserve (in the range of \$5 million or \$10 million).

That puts the Cubs around \$220 million before accounting for 40-man roster churn, pre-arbitration players like Willson Contreras and Albert Almora Jr. or the additions of an experienced hitter, a veteran backup catcher and a late-inning reliever who can finish games.

Epstein's aggressive style and competitive nature also won't let him bring back essentially the same group of players and hope for different results after the Milwaukee Brewers won the Game 163 tiebreaker and the Cubs lost the NL wild-card game against the Colorado Rockies.

This is the same executive who didn't hesitate to fire Rick Renteria and hire Joe Maddon ... and then shut down any extension talks after the star manager won a World Series title and went 4-for-4 in playoff appearances during his first four seasons on the job.

Epstein already negotiated the two biggest contracts in franchise history, guaranteeing \$339 million to Jon Lester and Jason Heyward combined. Epstein acquired All-Star closers Aroldis Chapman and Wade Davis for the 2016 World Series run and the 2017 title defense. Epstein shocked the baseball world with the José Quintana trade with the White Sox, trying to shake the defending champs out of a World Series hangover.

There's no doubt the Cubs are up to something. It's also worth revisiting the scene at the start of the 2015 GM meetings in South Florida, where Epstein essentially ruled out the idea of signing two pitchers to nine-figure contracts in one offseason, telling reporters: "You can pretty much apply that one going forward, at least until we get a TV deal, and probably beyond. That'd be a big winter."

By the time the winter meetings began in Nashville, Tennessee, that December, Epstein had already collaborated with the organization's business-side leaders to execute a two-offseasons-in-one strategy that capitalized on a surprising surge into the 2015 NLCS and the talent available on the open market. The Cubs wound up spending almost \$290 million on free agents, strengthening the core that would end a 108-year championship drought.

But that's an inexact comparison now that the Cubs are in a different payroll stratosphere — the 2015 payroll had been set around \$120 million (including the \$20 million rolled over from a losing bid for Masahiro Tanaka) — and still waiting for that game-changing TV deal.

It's also harder to see Harper playing the role of Ben Zobrist, who stayed in contact with the Cubs that offseason because he wanted to play for Maddon, return to his Illinois roots and make history in Chicago. Zobrist ultimately turned down \$60 million guaranteed from the New York Mets and San Francisco Giants, signed a four-year, \$56 million contract and delivered a World Series MVP performance. That perfect storm also required the Cubs flipping Starlin Castro to the New York Yankees, the only team willing to absorb his salary obligations at the time (\$38 million) and give up a useful pitcher (Adam Warren).

It's even harder to imagine Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts planting his flag in the media heading into a financial showdown with Boras Corp.

"We're going into this expecting to spend money," Philadelphia Phillies owner John Middleton recently told USA Today. "And maybe even be a little stupid about it."

If the Cubs are planning on being a little stupid about their own budget this winter, a rival executive mused, Ricketts and Epstein might be the only ones who know about it.

The Athletic's Ken Rosenthal contributed to this report.

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