



CHICAGO CUBS DAILY CLIPS

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<https://www.mlb.com/cubs/news/kendall-graveman-cubs-agree-to-deal/c-302160786>
- Chicago Tribune, **Cubs and White Sox seasons storylines for 2019, from the Cactus League openers to the World Series**
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- The Athletic, **Cubs year in review: 'The reckoning' is coming. What about Bryce Harper?**
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Cubs.com

Cubs face 5 key items prior to start of 2019

By Jordan Bastian

The Cubs piled up the wins last summer only to have the rug pulled out from under them in the fall. The lineup struggled over the final two months, injuries hindered the roster and Chicago not only lost its grip on the National League Central crown but was bounced by the Rockies in the NL Wild Card Game.

With that as the backdrop for this critical offseason on the North Side, the team's decision-makers have stressed the importance of improvement from within for 2019. Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein called the year ahead a "reckoning" for an organization trying to capture another World Series crown. And, with the bitter taste of last season's ending still lingering, the club wants to get started.

"We certainly weren't who we believe we can be," Cubs general manager Jed Hoyer said in early December. "And I know that this group of players has another gear that it can get to that we didn't get last year. We've spent a lot of time talking about how to get there. So, the sooner we can start playing games again, the better. I can't wait to drive to Arizona. It'll be great."

There are still several weeks remaining before Spring Training begins and -- with the exception of signing veteran utility man Daniel Descalso -- the Cubs have been quiet to date this offseason. There are still objectives to tackle and plans to formulate in preparation for the spring ahead and season to follow.

Here are some items left on the Cubs' to-do list for the rest of the offseason:

1. Address the offense

As has been well-documented throughout the winter, the Cubs do not appear to have much financial wiggle room. As things currently stand, the team's payroll projects to be north of \$200 million, putting Chicago in a position where trading contracts in place would probably be required in order to add any contracts of significance. So, as much as Cubs fans may have wanted a blockbuster free-agent addition this winter, that looks unrealistic.

Still, what Chicago's offense went through down the stretch in 2018 should not be ignored or left unaddressed. The team posted a .249/.316/.389 slash line in the second half and posted the Majors' highest ground-ball rate (47.8 percent) over the final two months. Descalso adds a disciple of the air-ball revolution to the equation, but that alone will not right what went wrong.

2. Get Kris Bryant healthy

This will be crucial for the Cubs. A left shoulder injury sapped Bryant's slugging percentage last season, but the good news of late has been that the third baseman has been unrestricted and feeling great in his

winter workouts. If Chicago does not have the financial wherewithal to add a premier hitter to the mix, it absolutely needs Bryant to report to Spring Training healthy and back to his old offensive ways. The Cubs will also be counting on continued development from the likes of Kyle Schwarber and Ian Happ, and strong comeback campaigns from Willson Contreras and Albert Almora Jr.

3. Add bullpen depth

This will be especially important for the first month of the season. Brandon Morrow's status will become clearer as Spring Training progresses, but the righty may need to open the season on the disabled list after undergoing a debridement procedure on his throwing elbow in November. Given their financial situation, the Cubs might not be able to reel in one of this offseason's marquee relief arms. Instead, expect Chicago to see how the market develops and then target some value and depth options as spring approaches.

4. Sort out the middle-infield puzzle

The Cubs and Major League Baseball continue to keep a close eye on Addison Russell's progress behind the scenes as he works through a treatment plan related to his violation of MLB's Joint Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Policy. Russell was tendered a non-guaranteed contract and will be ineligible until May 3 while finishing out a 40-game suspension. The current plan calls for Javier Baez to handle shortstop, leaving a hole at second. Descalso can help at that spot, along with internal options like Ben Zobrist, David Bote and Happ.

5. Determine roles for Mike Montgomery and Tyler Chatwood

When the Cubs picked up Cole Hamels' \$20 million team option, that essentially locked the five-man rotation into place. Hamels will be on the staff, alongside Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks, Jose Quintana and Yu Darvish. If Darvish's comeback from right elbow and triceps issues lingers into April, the Hamels deal offers solid depth. If the entire rotation is healthy and no trades are made between now and the spring, then the Cubs need to map out the best way to utilize Montgomery (eligible for arbitration) and Chatwood (set to earn \$12.5 million in '19).

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Cubs.com

Inbox: How will new managing style affect Cubs?

By Jordan Bastian

Welcome to the Cubs beat. My question is about the "new Joe Maddon" approach this season -- do you think it's necessary?

-- Peter H., Tulsa, Okla.

Obviously, I can't speak to the day-to-day vibe of the Cubs last season, as I wasn't on the beat at the time. What I can speak to is what has been said this offseason by both Maddon and president of baseball operations Theo Epstein. They both seem to think a return to a more hands-on approach will be beneficial not only for Maddon but for the team.

Now, let's be clear. This probably won't be a drastic, sweeping change. Maddon has said he plans to cut down on his interaction time with reporters -- causing a collective gasp from those of us who thrive on fantastic quotes and stories -- in favor of more time on the field during batting practice. Maddon has stressed that teaching and coaching is his passion, and he wants to get more involved again.

One of the driving forces behind this slight change is the turnover with the coaching staff. Maddon will have a new pitching coach (Tommy Hottovy), hitting coach (Anthony Iapoce), assistant hitting coach

(Terrmel Sledge) and bench coach (to be determined), so he wants to help with the transition. Maddon also said during the Winter Meetings that he will get back to working closely with the coaching staff.

"I'm really into coaching the coaches," said Maddon, who added that he plans on having bi-monthly group meetings with the staff. "With the young coaches, that's something also that I think is going to be important to get back into that. The best way I could describe it, I've pretty much put my Minor League hat back on, which I really love to do. The developmental component. The instructional league component. Try to challenge myself on that level. And again, it's kind of fun to think about it."

A lot of the Cubs' focus this offseason has been on finding ways to have the core group take another step forward developmentally in 2019. The team has publicly downplayed its ability to make a blockbuster free-agent addition this offseason, choosing instead to stress the idea of extracting more out of the roster that has already been built.

Along those lines, Epstein also expressed that getting Maddon more involved on the field is an important step.

"He helped transform this franchise, but he's not content," Epstein said during the Winter Meetings. "He's looking to get better. ... The good news is that this is a situation where the players just want more of Joe. They like Joe. They love the impact that he has on them when he speaks to them and when he's doing real hands-on leadership."

Why do the Cubs remain so loyal to Kyle Schwarber after his mediocre and inconsistent offensive production?

-- Michael K., St. Charles, Ill.

Well, I think you're throwing the word "mediocre" around fairly loosely, Michael. If you look at wRC+ -- my favorite among the all-encompassing offensive metrics -- Schwarber had a 115 mark in 2018. That indicates that he was 15 percent above league average. The jury is still out on Baseball Prospectus' new metric, Deserved Runs Created Plus, but it factors in a variety of elements to paint a picture of what should have happened. Schwarber's 118 DRC+ was actually higher than the 115 posted by Javier Baez.

If you're hung up on batting average, OK. Schwarber hit .238 last season. But haven't we moved beyond average as a means to accurately evaluate a hitter? I will give you this: Schwarber's inconsistency via his splits was dramatic. He hit .241/.356/.503 with a 121 wRC+ off righties, but .224/.352/.303 with an 85 wRC+ off lefties. So the key here is maximizing Schwarber's production by limiting the exposure to left-handers when it makes sense.

There are other reasons not to bail on a hitter like Schwarber. For starters, he is 25 years old with three more years of control, and it doesn't look like he's reached his ceiling. And then there's the fact that he improved himself as a defender last season (two Defensive Runs Saved and a 14.0 UZR/150 in 943 2/3 innings in left). I see far more reasons to stick by Schwarber than to move on.

I appreciate the need for depth, but why did the Cubs sign Daniel Descalso (another .230 hitter) to go along with Addison Russell, Ian Happ, David Bote and Schwarber?

-- John L., Colorado Springs, Colo.

Thanks for writing in from the Springs! I have a lot of great memories from Colorado. I finished up high school at Rampart, and I like to give MLB.com Rockies reporter Thomas Harding a hard time about the fact that he once typed my name in a newspaper prep game recap back in the day. Moving on ...

We're citing batting average again? If you look at his 2018 results, it's clear that Descalso has made some pretty significant changes to his swing and approach.

Descalso's launch angle climbed to 19.1 degrees (up from 12.8 in 2017) last season. His average exit velocity increased (89 mph in '18 vs. 87 mph in '17) and his Barrel rate doubled (10.2 percent in '18 vs. 5.1 in '17). Descalso has a career fly-ball rate of 29.7 percent, but that climbed to 43.1 percent last season. That led to a career high in homers (13) and a spike in homer-to-fly-ball rate (11.4 percent in '18 vs. 6.9 percent in '17). Descalso also saw his walk rate rise.

Descalso offers occasional pop and an air-ball oriented approach for a Cubs lineup that had the highest ground-ball rate (47.8 percent) over the final two months last season. Defensively, he can offer depth at multiple infield positions, too. All of that came with an asking price of \$5 million guaranteed over two years. That looks like a solid pickup, in my opinion.

Why did the Cubs get rid of Tommy La Stella? He was a great pinch-hitting option and can play different positions. And they got nothing for him?
-- Bruce, Bolingbrook, Ill.

Descalso's 2019 salary (\$1.5 million) is in the neighborhood of what La Stella (a fan favorite and a solid lefty bat off the bench) was projected to earn through arbitration. Chicago had to decide whether it made more sense to tender La Stella a contract or try to find an upgrade at a similar cost. They did the latter through the Descalso signing. And Chicago acquired Minor League righty Conor Lillis-White from the Angels for La Stella. Last year, the 26-year-old Lillis-White had a 3.50 ERA and 98 strikeouts vs. 32 walks in 72 innings between Double-A Mobile and Triple-A Salt Lake.

What are the chances that MLB will increase the roster size from 25 to 26 by 2019?
-- Steve M., Albuquerque, N.M.

Don't expect that for 2019, as that kind of change would need to be collectively bargained between MLB and the Players' Association, but this is one I can get behind. Another idea I like is the concept of a fixed daily roster in the final month after rosters expand to a maximum of 40 players. So, say a team carries the bulk of its 40-man roster in September. Each day, that team must announce its 25-man active roster with the other players being ineligible. I could also get behind expanded rosters at the start of a season, when many pitchers are still building up their arm strength and pitch count. If those ideas are too drastic, you can at least count me in for a 26-man roster for the entire season. I like it. Where do I cast my vote?

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Cubs.com

Q&A: Hottovy on holiday plans and traditions

By Jordan Bastian

As the Cubs' new pitching coach, Tommy Hottovy is busy mapping out plans and strategies in preparation for the 2019 season. He is also prepping for a busy holiday season with his wife, two kids and the host of family making its way to Chicago for Christmas. Hottovy took some time recently to chat about the holiday season with MLB.com.

MLB.com: What are your plans for the holidays this year?

Hottovy: Usually, we go to Kansas City for the holidays. Most of my family is in the Kansas City or Wichita area. This year, though, we lucked out. We convinced my whole family to come up to Chicago for the holidays. They're going to ride the train up and kind of enjoy that whole process of coming from K.C. to Chicago on the train, and have a good time in Chicago. Chicago's such a fun city, especially in the summer. But even in the winter, there's a lot of really cool things to see. So yeah, we're going to have everybody up and do some fun things.

MLB.com: Do you have family traditions that you do every year?

Hottovy: Yeah. Part of when you have grandkids and a lot of cousins, you get together and you always do the gifts and stuff. Well, a couple years ago, we decided it was really important to move away from just gifts and focus more on the time together. So the last couple years, we've done like a destination-type place where you can get everybody together, rent hotel rooms, spend three or four days with solid family time instead of everybody coming over, seeing them for a couple hours, you do gifts and then they're gone. We wanted something more fun and to spend more time together. So we'll do that in Chicago this year. That's our big family tradition that we're trying to carry on.

MLB.com: Do you decorate your house for your kids?

Hottovy: We do. And every year, I go buy lights to hang them on my house. I consider myself fairly handy, but every year I buy lights and then every year I return them and say, "Nah, I'm not going to do it this year." We always get the stuff outside that's on the ground that's easier to handle. My wife, she's got Pinterest locked down, so we've got every Pinterest Christmas decoration I think that's out there. It looks nice. She did a great job.

MLB.com: What about when you were a kid?

Hottovy: Yeah, our big thing was we always did it all together. We'd have the one night -- either coming back from Thanksgiving or the first weekend after -- we'd get all the decorations out. The one thing I'll always remember is we had this cool archway on our front porch above the front door. And my dad had this huge wreath. I mean, it was probably 6 feet across. It's a big, big wreath. Every year, he'd get the ladder out and he'd climb up and hang this huge wreath from this entryway.

In Kansas City, not unlike Chicago or the Midwest, there'd be those windy, cold days, and that thing was swinging in the wind. But every year, he'd get that up, and that was such a cool tradition. That's one thing I'll never forget. And it always looked awesome when he got it up. When my dad moved to Florida, we had this wreath and I didn't have anywhere to put it. But my brother, at their house, it has a nice similar entryway. So he's taking over the tradition of hanging that wreath. I always ask him, "When's that thing going up?" It's an undertaking. That thing's a beast.

MLB.com: Do you go fake tree or real tree?

Hottovy: Right now, we're with the fake tree. I think we're getting to the point where the kids might be old enough that the real tree can play. We did a real tree a lot once we got older. That was kind of a tradition -- going and cutting the tree. There are really funny stories from when we went and got those trees. That's why I think, as our kids get older, that's probably going to be a tradition we carry on.

MLB.com: Is there a favorite present that stands out from when you were a kid?

Hottovy: Yeah, I mean, man, we were fortunate. I got so many cool things growing up. Probably one of the coolest things was a new bike. I always had kind of the smaller bikes, and then in like fifth or sixth

grade, I was really wanting more of a mountain bike that I could actually go do some stuff on. It was jet black. Really cool. I had that thing in our garage until I went to college. And then it got handed down to my brother. I'll never forget the day we did a garage sale and got rid of it. I can't believe we had that thing for that long. That was probably one of my favorite things I got growing up.

MLB.com: As the oldest of four kids, you probably had plenty of gifts that wound up getting passed down the line.

Hottovy: Yeah, absolutely. Parents are strategic. And Santa is strategic, too. Santa knows that eventually the younger kids are going to want to play with it, too. (laughs)

MLB.com: Speaking of Santa, can you name all his reindeer?

Hottovy: I think I can do them all. Let's see: Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, Blitzen and Rudolph.

MLB.com: Even with having two young kids, that's impressive.

Hottovy: And in order of the song, too. (laughs)

MLB.com: Do you have a favorite holiday song?

Hottovy: I always liked the traditional Christmas songs growing up. But as I got older, I really loved like the Mannheim Steamroller and the really cool ones that have more of the orchestra like "Deck the Halls" and some others. Now, my son loves the same thing: Trans-Siberian Orchestra and Mannheim Steamroller. He's kind of taken to that same genre. It's not so much the songs with vocals but with just awesome music. My family loves music. I have a guitar. We'll get together and play and make up songs and try to have music as part of our family.

MLB.com: How good are you at wrapping presents?

Hottovy: Not as good as I should be. Not as good as my wife -- that's for sure. Let's just say everybody knows when I wrapped the present. I try to stay away as much as I can, but I love being part of it. I love letting the kids help wrap presents and wrap things for their sibling and wrap something for mom. But I do think my wife would not be able to tell the difference if my kids wrapped a present or if I did. That's where I'm at.

MLB.com: Besides a World Series ring, what's on your Christmas list this year?

Hottovy: Really, just giving the fans of Chicago and the people in that city something to cheer for and for them to continue to support us and come out and have fun watching games. Obviously, a World Series ring would be at the top of that list. But I want all of our guys to improve and get better. That's why we're here. We want to see guys getting better and have great years. When I see guys doing that, and doing well for themselves, for the team, for the city, for their families, that's what drives us. That's what makes me excited about going into 2019.

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Cubs.com

Graveman, Cubs finalize 1-year deal

By Jordan Bastian

The Cubs are offering Kendall Graveman a chance to spend the upcoming year rehabbing his right elbow under the care of their medical team. In return, Chicago will have a cost-effective layer of depth for the next two seasons.

On Sunday, the Cubs announced that they signed Graveman to a one-year Major League contract that includes a team option for the 2020 campaign. The right-hander will not be an option for the Opening Day roster in '19, but this signing is based upon taking a long-term approach with a once-effective pitcher who is currently on the comeback trail.

The 28-year-old Graveman was non-tendered by the A's in November following a forgettable season that ended with Tommy John surgery on his right elbow on July 24. A typical recovery timetable for that type of procedure is 12-18 months, meaning Graveman is not likely to be an option until deep into the 2019 season, if at all.

Graveman's contract with the Cubs will pay him \$575,000 for 2019, though his base salary would jump to \$2 million (pro-rated) if he were to spend at least one day on the active Major League roster at any point during the season. Then, the Cubs would have a \$3 million team option for '20 (with no buyout cost), and Graveman (currently at 3.078 years of MLB service time) could technically be under team control through '21 via the arbitration process.

Looking ahead to the '20 season, the bulk of the Cubs' rotation still projects to be in place, with only lefty Cole Hamels facing free agency next winter. Veterans Jon Lester and Yu Darvish are locked in on guaranteed deals, while the Cubs will have a team option on Jose Quintana and arbitration cases to work out with Kyle Hendricks and Mike Montgomery. Tyler Chatwood will be in the final season of his three-year contract.

Over parts of five seasons in the Majors, Graveman has gone 23-29 with a 4.38 ERA in 83 games (78 starts), amassing 286 strikeouts against 130 walks in 446 innings. The right-hander leans heavily on a sinker, mixing in a changeup, cutter, slider and an occasional four-seam fastball.

While Graveman does not rely on strikeouts, the righty has at points ranked among baseball's best starters at generating ground balls. Across the 2015-17 seasons combined, Graveman ranked tied for 10th among all MLB starters with at least 400 innings in ground-ball rate (51.3 percent), per Fangraphs.

Graveman's best season was in 2016, when he posted a 4.11 ERA and 4.39 FIP in 186 innings (31 starts) for Oakland. Last season, the righty went 1-5 with a 7.60 ERA in seven starts -- the last of which came on May 11 -- before having surgery on his throwing arm.

The Cubs' approach with Graveman is reminiscent of last offseason, when the team inked lefty Drew Smyly to a two-year contract under similar circumstances.

Smyly was also recovering from Tommy John surgery at the time of the deal, but never made it back into an MLB game with the Cubs in 2018. Earlier this winter, Chicago traded Smyly to the Rangers, helping clear \$7 million off the books so that the Cubs could better afford to pick up the \$20 million team option to retain Hamels for the upcoming season.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs and White Sox seasons storylines for 2019, from the Cactus League openers to the World Series
By Paul Sullivan

The 2019 season is approaching, and though plenty of free agents remain unsigned, it's time to start thinking ahead.

Here's a monthly planner for the Cubs, White Sox and Major League Baseball:

January

Cubs Convention: Jan. 18-20 at Sheraton Grand Chicago

Joe Maddon explains what he has learned about millennials this offseason. Business operations president Crane Kenney explains the Cubs Network plans. Anthony Rizzo wedding stories will be told.

Hall of Fame announcement: Jan. 22

Mariano Rivera, Roy Halladay, Edgar Martinez and Mike Mussina are expected to join Lee Smith and Harold Baines in the Class of 2019. Will Barry Bonds or Roger Clemens finally get in? Stay tuned.

SoxFest: Jan. 25-27 at Hilton Chicago

Are they still in the hunt for Manny Machado or Bryce Harper? General manager Rick Hahn again gets to assure everyone Eloy Jimenez can make the team out of spring training. No, really.

February

Pitchers and catchers report

No dates are official yet for the Cubs and Sox, but most teams are expected to report Feb. 12 or 13 with the first workout the next day.

Cactus League openers

Cubs, Feb. 23 vs. Brewers at Sloan Park in Mesa, Ariz. Rematch against the NL Central champs. Game 164?

Sox, Feb. 23 (split squad) vs. Dodgers at Camelback Ranch in Glendale, Ariz.; at A's at HoHoKam Stadium in Mesa.

March

MLB season opener: March 20

A's vs. Mariners in Tokyo. AL West rivals play a two-game series in Japan one week before everyone else begins. Look for the M's to start newly signed Japanese lefty Yusei Kikuchi in one of the games.

Cubs and Sox season openers: March 28

Cubs at Rangers. "The Reckoning" begins as the Cubs start the season with a nine-game trip.

White Sox at Royals. Rematch of last year's opener in which Matt Davidson hit three home runs in a Sox romp. Davidson wound up with 20 homers and was non-tendered by the Sox come November.

Sox home opener: April 4

Mariners at Sox. Time for the Sox to turn the corner in the rebuild.

Cubs home opener: April 8

Pirates at Cubs. Natives are getting restless after a two-year championship drought.

Traditional late April call-ups

Elite prospects whom teams want to retain through 2025 (instead of 2024) figure to be up by the end of the month. Jimenez, Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Fernando Tatis Jr. are three to keep an eye on.

Traditional postponements

Foul spring weather brings dozens of postponements and cries of “Why do the schedule makers make (fill-in-team) play so many home games in April?”

May

Traditional “It’s a grind” reminder

Teams off to poor starts remind everyone it’s a long season (i.e. “a marathon”) and it’s not how you start, it’s how you finish. Cubs have a 24-day stretch in May that consists of 17 home games and six road games.

June

City Series, Part I: June 18-19 at Wrigley Field

Cubs and Sox begin their annual four-game series for the “coveted” Crosstown Cup. The midweek games (Tuesday and Wednesday) are at night.

July

City Series, Part II: July 6-7 at Guaranteed Rate Field

Cubs and Sox conclude their annual series for the “coveted” Crosstown Cup. The Saturday game is at night, while the Sunday game time is TBD. In a scheduling quirk that makes no sense, both teams have a rare Friday off July 5 to prepare.

Home Run Derby: July 8 in Cleveland

MLB’s premier event. Bryce Harper is defending champion after his controversial win over Kyle Schwarber at Nationals Park. Assuming he’s signed by then, look for Harper to sit this one out.

All-Star Game: July 9 in Cleveland

The 90th midsummer classic returns to Cleveland for the first time since 1997. That’s seven years after the Cubs last hosted an All-Star Game at Wrigley Field.

Start of second half: July 12

Cubs open at Wrigley vs. the Pirates. Sox open in Oakland.

Hall of Fame inductions: July 21 in Cooperstown, N.Y.

Rivera is expected to head up the Class of 2019, while Baines and Smith will represent the Sox and Cubs, respectively.

Trade deadline: July 31

Paul Goldschmidt, Nolan Arenado, Xander Bogaerts, Anthony Rendon, Jose Abreu and Ben Zobrist are among the potential free agents after 2019 who might become available at the deadline.

August

MLB Little League Classic: Aug. 18 in Williamsport, Pa.

Cubs vs. Pirates. Third annual game pitting MLB teams at the site of the Little League World Series. Noah Syndergaard and other Mets starting pitchers sat in the stands with Little Leaguers last year. Look for the Cubs to keep that tradition alive.

September

Labor Day: Sept. 2

Traditional mile marker for baseball's stretch run. This is where the Brewers began their comeback against the Cubs in 2018, in case anyone forgot.

End of regular season: Sept. 29

Cubs at Cardinals. Age-old rivals finish the season at Busch Stadium after ending things at Wrigley in '18.

Tigers at Sox. Which team's rebuild will be closer to fruition by the end of '19?

October

Wild-card games: Oct. 1 and 2

This is the game the Cubs hope to avoid after the 13-inning loss to the Rockies ended their brief playoff run in '18. But the NL Central should be a dogfight again with the Cardinals adding on this winter.

World Series begins: Oct. 22

Is it Series or bust for Joe Maddon? Will the Cubs' core be dismantled next winter if they don't get here? And can the Sox pull off the Inconceivable Dream of going from 100 losses to the Series in one year?

November

Free agency begins

Players are eligible to sign with new teams five days after the World Series ends. (Spoiler alert: No one does.)

December

Winter meetings: TBD in San Diego

Lots of rumors of blockbuster trades and signings, plus the traditional Scott Boras filibuster. If the last two years are any indication, many teams will wait until the start of 2020, when free-agent prices figure to drop.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs lose minor-league field coordinator Tim Cossins to Orioles, promote Chris Valaika to hitting coordinator

By Phil Thompson and Mark Gonzales

Tim Cossins, the Cubs' minor-league field and catching coordinator since December 2012, left the organization Thursday to join new Orioles manager Brandon Hyde's staff.

The Cubs, meanwhile, promoted Triple-A Iowa co-hitting coach Chris Valaika to minor-league hitting coordinator. Valaika, 33, who played in 99 major-league games over four seasons for three teams — including the Cubs in 2014 — takes over for Jacob Cruz, whom the Pirates hired last month as assistant hitting coach.

Hyde, 45, a Cubs coach for the last five seasons — including Joe Maddon's bench coach in 2018 — took the Orioles job Dec. 14. He was the fourth coach under Maddon to leave this offseason: Hitting coach Chili Davis was fired, pitching coach Jim Hickey resigned for personal reasons after only one year and assistant hitting coach Andy Haines left to become the Brewers' hitting coach.

The Cubs have filled some of those vacancies and others, hiring Anthony Iapoce as hitting coach, Tommy Hottovy as pitching coach, Termel Sledge as assistant hitting coach and Chris Denorfia as quality assurance coach.

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Chicago Tribune

It's been one of the quietest offseasons of the Theo Epstein era — but not for the Cubs' Central rivals
By Paul Sullivan

The Cubs' official 2018 postseason T-shirts were marked down from \$40 to \$10 at a local sporting-goods store Saturday morning.

But even procrastinating shoppers were bypassing them for the Bears goodies, and for good reason.

The "October Ready" postseason slogan, printed in large letters across the front of the shirt, turned into a cruel joke to a fan base that has grown accustomed to counting down to October from the start of spring training.

We're more than halfway through one of the quietest offseasons of the Theo Epstein era, watching National League Central rivals such as the Cardinals and Reds make significant additions and wondering whether the Dodgers are clearing the path to a Bryce Harper signing.

It's no surprise the Cubs have put their phones on mute. Epstein said last month the 2019 season "is really a reckoning in a lot of ways," suggesting the current bunch that melded in 2015 and '16 has one more chance to live up to the expectations created by its magical start.

“Whether we have a big offseason or a more nuanced offseason, you should judge us on how we play next year,” Epstein said.

So far it has been all nuance. The addition of utilityman Daniel Descalso and the departure of pinch-hitter Tommy La Stella have been their most notable decisions, along with tendering a contract to Addison Russell.

The Cubs on Saturday signed free-agent starter Kendall Graveman, who was nontendered by the A’s, to a one-year, \$575,000 deal with a \$3 million option for 2020. Graveman is expected to miss most of 2019 after undergoing Tommy John surgery on his right elbow in July but could return in September. He was 1-5 with a 7.60 ERA last season before being demoted and is 23-29 with a 4.38 ERA in five seasons.

Meanwhile, the Cardinals acquired slugger Paul Goldschmidt and signed left-handed reliever Andrew Miller while the rebuilding Reds added a pair of veteran hitters in Yasiel Puig and Matt Kemp, not to mention starter Alex Wood, in Friday’s seven-player deal with the Dodgers.

Whether the Dodgers will use the savings to invest in Harper, who already fits the Hollywood image, could change the offseason maneuverings of several teams, including the Phillies and White Sox.

While the Cubs aren’t keeping up with the Joneses, the Brewers haven’t made any big moves either. After winning the division by defeating the Cubs in Game 163 at Wrigley Field, they’re theoretically the team to beat.

“Now you want to stay there,” Brewers general manager David Stearns told me in November. “It’s hard to get there and even harder to do back-to-back years and stay there. The Cubs were a really good team in 2018, and they’re probably going to be better in 2019.

“They’re certainly not going to be satisfied with their season. We know that, so we have a tremendous amount of work ahead of us if we want to stay at the top of the division.”

Asked if they’d be able to spend more after their 2018 success, Stearns replied: “Certainly (owner Mark Attanasio) and our ownership group have proven that where there’s an investment that makes sense from a baseball perspective, they’re going to be supportive.”

Maybe, but we’re still waiting. Other than signing second baseman Cory Spangenberg and dealing outfielder Domingo Santana to the Mariners for young outfielder Ben Gamel, the Brewers have been conspicuously quiet.

Cardinals President John Mozeliak has been the busiest NL Central executive so far. He said in July at Wrigley that the organization doesn’t believe in rebuilding, and has proved it with the bold move of acquiring Goldschmidt and the riskier one of signing Miller.

A dominant reliever in recent years, Miller had three stints on the disabled list last season and has a lot of mileage on his arm. Still, he could be the Cardinals’ new closer or remain in the same chameleon-like role he had with the Indians, entering in the middle innings to put out fires.

“As far as me having a sticking point on what role? That’s nonexistent. I truly mean that,” Miller told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. “I’d like to perform well and you talk about numbers and this and that, (but) the goal is to win the World Series.

“I certainly told that to the Cardinals. My goal is to be one of the 25 guys jumping on top of each other at the end of the year. And I wouldn’t play anywhere that I didn’t think that wasn’t realistic.”

The Pirates, who made a significant move in July by acquiring Rays starter Chris Archer in exchange for prospects, haven’t been as active as one might expect. Their biggest moves have been shedding Ivan Nova’s salary on the White Sox and signing Lonnie Chisenhall to fill in while Gregory Polanco recovers from shoulder surgery. Shortstop Jordy Mercer went to the Tigers, so the Bucs could take a flier on injury-prone Troy Tulowitzki, who played under manager Clint Hurdle with the Rockies.

The Reds’ big splash Friday, after recently acquiring starter Tanner Roark from the Nationals, seemingly transitions them from a rebuilding team to one intending to compete under new manager David Bell.

Whether that’s realistic, they certainly have a strong enough lineup to make noise.

Teams have plenty of time to spend this winter, and an assortment of free agents will be available in January when the prices generally come down for all but the superstars — such as Harper and Manny Machado.

Epstein said before the winter meetings that the Cubs have spent “more than enough to win” and probably will have the highest payroll in club history in 2019.

“If there are limitations or there is a need to get creative, it just underscores the fact that we have to do a better job and we have to find value and efficiency on the roster,” he said.

The reckoning is coming for everyone.

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Chicago Tribune

ESPN adds 2 Cubs games at Wrigley Field in May to 'Sunday Night Baseball' schedule
By Phil Rosenthal

ESPN announced it’s picking up two more Cubs games for “Sunday Night Baseball” — back to back weekends against National League Central rivals at Wrigley Field in May — in 2019.

The Cubs’ game against the Cardinals on May 5 and their May 12 date with the Brewers will be broadcast nationally.

Those are in addition to the previously announced June 18 “Sunday Night Baseball” date with the Dodgers in Los Angeles and the 2019 MLB Little League Classic against the Pirates on Aug. 18 in Williamstown, Pa.

Next year will be the 30th season of “Sunday Night Baseball” on ESPN. Most games will begin at 6 p.m., an hour earlier than in previous seasons.

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Chicago Sun-Times

£delined by budget, Cubs watch Reds, Cards add as Dodgers position for big move
By Gordon Wittenmyer

With every day the Cubs stand pat or deal from the bargain-basement bin of the free-agent market, their 2019 team gets worse on paper.

The Cardinals add slugger Paul Goldschmidt and reliever Andrew Miller to a team that won 88 games last season.

The Cubs add infielder Daniel Descalso.

The low-budget Reds add playoff-veteran starting pitchers Tanner Roark and Alex Wood — along with former All-Star hitters Matt Kemp and Yasiel Puig — to a team that already fielded a competitive lineup of hitters. And president Dick Williams said: “We’re not done yet.”

The Cubs add left-hander Conor Lillis-White and rehabbing right-hander Kendall Graveman.

Who? Well, Lillis-White is a minor-leaguer who was the player to be named in the Tommy La Stella trade to the Angels, and Graveman is a former eighth-round draft pick who spent the last four seasons with the Athletics and — never mind.

The point is that the National League Central continues to get better as the Cubs continue to sit out the winter, strapped by a payroll budget cinched tight by unproductive contracts and big arbitration raises coming. They’re assured of having a franchise-record payroll well above \$200 million if they do nothing more than keep their current roster intact.

And with the trade Friday that sent Wood, Kemp and Puig to the Reds, the Dodgers have maneuvered enough room in their outfield and budget to make a run at Bryce Harper, which almost certainly would make them favorites to make a third consecutive trip to the World Series.

So what happened to the checks Cubs ownership promised to write when the front office needed the money for a Harper-like player who would put them over the top?

Revenues certainly have increased enough since the 2016 World Series title to cover a sizable-enough leap in payroll to compete for Harper or any number of other significant free agents the Cubs have passed on so far.

And indications are the restraints are less about luxury-tax penalties, which the Cubs reset by staying under the thresholds the last two seasons, than whatever bean-counting calculus ownership and the business-operations department are using to set budgets.

The front office faced similar restraints coming off the 2015 breakout season before president Theo Epstein got creative with the business side in the month leading up to the winter meetings to wrest enough flexibility to add Ben Zobrist and Jason Heyward. He pointed to increased playoff revenues and promised two winters of player spending in one to help make it happen, then delivered.

Between the general managers meetings and winter meetings this time around?

“Fair question,” GM Jed Hoyer said. “Nothing has changed in that regard.”

That explains the message the Cubs delivered during their lengthy meeting with Scott Boras, Harper’s agent — as long as three hours, by some accounts — as he and Harper made the rounds with interested teams.

Sources say Epstein urged them to wait before accepting an offer from another team until the Cubs had a chance to try to move some payroll off the books and check again with ownership.

Not much has changed in that regard, either, since then — though Boras' track record with top free agents suggests Harper might be on the market well into January, if not longer.

Especially if Manny Machado, the other big-ticket player on the market, chooses to move first on a deal with the White Sox, Phillies or Yankees, as it seems he's poised to do after Jan. 1.

Until then, the Cubs play out the reliever market for two established pitchers who won't break their bank. And talk about all the internal improvement they need to see from their core, their coaching staff, their front office, etc.

And barely seven weeks from the start of spring training, they spend \$575,000 on Graveman, who had Tommy John surgery and isn't expected to pitch until 2020.

And they watch the Reds. And the Cardinals. And the Dodgers.

And they wait.

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Chicago Sun-Times

Cubs' Kyle Schwarber proposes to high school sweetheart: 'I got [an] early gift'

By Madeline Kenney

Christmas came early for Kyle Schwarber as the Cubs left fielder is officially off the market.

Schwarber proposed to his longtime girlfriend Paige Hartman on Sunday.

The couple, who have been dating since high school, announced their engagement Monday on social media.

"Merry Christmas y'all! I got a early gift!" Schwarber tweeted along with a photo of Hartman showing off her new bling.

Kyle Schwarber

✓

@kschwarb12

Merry Christmas y'all! I got a early gift!

Hartman shared the same photo on Instagram with the caption: "Christmas came early last night! Such a perfect night! I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with my best friend!!"

The Cubs were quick to congratulate the newly engaged couple on Twitter, and Cubs fans flocked to Schwarber's mentions to wish him and his fiancée well.

It's safe to say this Christmas will be one the two will remember.

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Daily Herald

Rivera should be a shoo-in, Martinez gets final shot for Cooperstown

By Bruce Miles

The National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum figures to get a new pair of bookends for its massive library this year.

There also figures to be an interesting story or two in between.

Mariano Rivera looks to be a shoo-in in his first year of eligibility, and Edgar Martinez appears to be gaining ground in his final year on ballots cast by the Baseball Writers Association of America.

Both Rivera and Martinez were specialists, with Rivera being the premier closer in baseball history and Martinez being one of the game's greatest designated hitters.

Rivera figures to come close to 100 percent in the balloting and Martinez may finally get over the 75 percent hump thanks to former White Sox DH Harold Baines winning election by the Today's Game Era Committee earlier this month. Former Cubs closer Lee Smith also gained election by the same committee.

The late Roy Halladay, who died in a plane crash in November of 2017, also is a first-time candidate doing well in ballot tracking.

Former starting pitcher Mike Mussina is doing well in early ballot tracking done by Ryan Thibodaux (@NotMrTibbs on Twitter).

Two players linked to the so-called Steroid Era, pitcher Roger Clemens and outfielder Barry Bonds, look to be inching upward but they may not get the necessary 75 percent of the vote this year in each man's seventh year of eligibility. Both will be on the ballot for a maximum of 10 years.

As older voters who no longer write regularly about baseball are purged from the voting rolls and younger voters come aboard, the players whose names have been linked to performance-enhancing drugs seem to be getting a new lifeline.

The Daily Herald has three Hall of Fame voters: columnist Barry Rozner, White Sox writer Scot Gregor and Cubs writer Bruce Miles. Retired Daily Herald columnist Mike Imrem also casts a ballot.

Here is how each voted.

Scot Gregor:

If only they were all as easy as Mariano Rivera.

On the Hall of Fame ballot for the first time this year, the former Yankees' closer is a lock to be enshrined into Cooperstown.

Not only is Rivera baseball's all-time saves leader (652) and a 13-time all-star, he was one of the best postseason performers in the history of the game.

Rivera is definitely on my ballot, as is another newcomer -- the late Roy Halladay.

Who can ever forget Halladay's 2010 season -- a perfect game against the Marlins during the regular season and a no-hitter against the Reds in the playoffs?

As for holdovers from last year, I've got Edgar Martinez, Mike Mussina and Omar Vizquel.

This is the 10th and final year for Martinez on the BBWAA ballot, and he should make the final push to Cooperstown after getting 70.4 percent of the vote last year.

Harold Baines being inducted into the Hall of Fame earlier this month by the Today's Game Era committee only helps Martinez's cause when it comes to a primary designated hitter being worthy.

Mussina inched closer to Cooperstown (63.5 percent of the vote) in 2017, and he is deserving after finishing in the Top 5 among ERA leaders seven times while going 270-153 in 18 seasons with the Yankees and Orioles.

Vizquel probably falls short again after getting 37 percent of the vote on his first time on the ballot, but he has 2,877 career hits and was one of the best fielding shortstops in history.

Bruce Miles:

Since former Commissioner Bud Selig was inducted into the Hall of Fame, I went from "no" to "yes" on Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens. No one benefited more handsomely from the so-called Steroid Era than did Selig.

I've been a staunch supporter of Edgar Martinez. The DH is a recognized part of the game, and Hall of Famers Frank Thomas and Paul Molitor spent much time as DH after playing primarily in the field.

First-time candidates Mariano Rivera, Roy Halladay and Andy Pettitte get my vote.

I've put Curt Schilling back on my ballot, and I also go with Mike Mussina, Scott Rolen and Omar Vizquel.

Barry Rozner:

Holdovers from last year's ballot: Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Jeff Kent, Mike Mussina and Curt Schilling.

New this time around:

Marian Rivera needs no introduction.

The late Roy Halladay has a great chance to get in on the first ballot. He's 42nd all-time in career WAR for pitchers and was one of the top pitchers of his generation.

Fred McGriff is on the ballot for the last time and he has no chance, a shame since his career numbers, including 493 home runs, were swallowed up by the Steroid Era.

Andy Pettitte is 60th all-time career WAR for pitchers. During his era, he was among the best in wins, starts and innings and his ERA-plus compares favorably to many Hall of Famers, as does his FIP. His postseason career, with MLB records for wins (19), starts (44) and innings (276), puts him over the top for this voter.

Mike Imrem:

Am I still voting for the steroids guys? Yes. Does that include Sammy Sosa? Especially. The Saminator needs me now more than ever. He received 7.8 percent of the vote last year and is in danger of falling below the 5 percent required to stay on the ballot.

OK, so the writers aren't going to vote Sosa into Cooperstown. Nor will one of those cockamamie veterans committees if Tom Ricketts ever is on the panel like Jerry Reinsdorf has been. The Cubs' chairman won't let Sosa into a Cubs Convention rest room, much less the Hall of Fame.

My ballot: Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Roy Halladay, Andruw Jones, Edgar Martinez, Mike Mussina, Mariano Rivera, Curt Schilling, Sammy Sosa, Omar Vizquel.

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The Athletic

How one new statistic values the 2018 Cubs differently

By Sahadev Sharma

With the heavy indications that the Cubs are unlikely to land Bryce Harper and Paul Goldschmidt and Andrew Miller landing in St. Louis, the last thing North Side fans want is a fancy new statistic to get them all riled up — especially one that downgrades Javier Báez's offensive performance in 2018. But that's exactly what Baseball Prospectus' DRC+ (Deserved Runs Created Plus) does.

But before we dive into Báez, let's discuss Baseball Prospectus and what DRC+ really does. It was BP that really helped bring catcher framing to the mainstream, but as lauded as it was at first, Deserved Run Average (DRA), BP's answer to FIP, never really caught on. Much of this can be explained by the fact that it's very difficult to navigate BP's statistics page and organize it in an easily digestible fashion. As someone who uses statistics regularly, I have Baseball-Reference and Fangraphs open at all times. Baseball Prospectus statistics are not used simply because the site is so difficult to navigate.

The folks behind the scenes at BP don't disagree with this sentiment, and I've been told that with new ownership in place, this is at the top of their to-do list. As a former BP employee, this isn't the first I've heard of such claims, but this time the people making the claims are the ones actually using the site on a consistent basis. According to those I've spoken to, new ownership is very eager to get a new user interface up and running. BP has already hired people to work on this full-time and the expectation is that at the very least, it will be in open beta by the time the season starts.

Half the battle of popularizing a statistic is getting writers to use it. Marketing is an underrated part of all of this, and it's likely part of why FanGraphs' statistics have taken off while BP's often equally reliable advanced metrics have remained stagnant over the years. Most of my readers should be familiar with wRC+, which has become the standard for an all-encompassing offensive statistic. Simply put, wRC+ is OPS+ taken to another level, incorporating numerous aspects, including park factors, with 100 being the baseline and every digit above or below being the percentage above/below league average.

DRC+ is similarly structured. Jonathan Judge, who was dubbed the next Nate Silver by CBS Sports, leads the Baseball Prospectus stats team and is the mind behind DRC+. Judge took some time to explain some of the details behind the statistic to me, and it's clear he's very confident that he and his team have created something superior to what's currently available.

(Chart in link)

The above chart shows DRC+ compared to other statistics commonly used to show overall offensive performance and claims to be better in reliability, predictability and descriptiveness.

“Reliability refers to the consistency with which a metric rates a player similarly from year to year,” Judge said via email. “A good metric should in theory be able to rate a player similarly from year to year; a bad one jumps all over the place because it is so noisy to begin with.

“Predictiveness brings us full circle and asks how well the next season’s (or month or week or whatever) run-scoring corresponds to how the statistic rated a player the previous year. Games, after all, are scored in real runs, not deserved runs. DRC+, to be clear, is entirely intended to measure past contributions. But, if you are accurately estimating a player’s probable past contribution, that contribution should largely show up the next season too, at least on a rate basis, all other things being equal. Because that’s what DRC+ is honed in on, its results are (far) more reliable from season to season and predictive from season to season than other offensive metrics. Again, those numbers are in (the) article, and we proved it using individuals that switch teams, which is a particularly grueling task for a metric.

“DRC+ is better than all the others and the differences are far, far beyond the margin of error in most cases. In terms of how we designed DRC+, the short answer is that we don’t award full credit for every play to the hitter, and shrink their contributions toward the mean, if warranted. The more PAs they have, the less their performances get shrunk. And the more stable the event “skill” is, the less it is shrunk. The end result is a sort of “super-rating” that awards the amount of credit that is deemed appropriate, rather than just treating the outcome of every play as 100-percent the batter’s responsibility.”

If that’s not a detailed enough explanation of what DRC+ does better than other statistics, Judge broke down the case for the statistic while unveiling it earlier this month.

But back to Báez and the Cubs — why doesn’t DRC+ like Báez? He had a 131 wRC+ in 2018 compared to a 115 DRC+. His drop in ranking from 23rd in wRC+ to 45th in DRC+ was one of the largest in baseball.

“Javy and (Christian) Yelich both got downgraded a fair amount on doubles, so perhaps that will salve the wounds of Cubs fans a bit,” Judge said when I asked what led to Báez’s drop. “The doubles model likes to see hitters who end up with doubles put a lot of balls into the outfield. Javy and Yelich both don’t do that as much as what the model thinks “true” high-doubles hitters do. In other words, an unusually high percentage of their outfield balls in play ended up being doubles. That caused a fair amount of the downgrade.”

Báez is one of the most aggressive base-runners I’ve watched over the years. Some call him reckless, and maybe in the long term, it will prove to be. But it’s also part of his instinctual greatness, and what allows Báez to outpace certain traditional metrics and excel despite peripherals that suggest he’d be prone to extended slumps. I wonder whether that aspect of his game is just too nebulous for an advanced metric to truly consider, thus the downgrade in doubles. Anyone who has watched Báez knows that ambivalence, and has wondered what he’s thinking as he heads to second on an obvious single, only to be left speechless as he somehow slides into second with another aggressive double.

“Speed is only indirectly considered,” Judge said. “And it is possible that super-speedy guys may be under-appreciated by this implementation.”

Báez isn't super-speedy, per se, but many would argue that his base-running abilities belie measurement. And there are plenty of other reasons why Báez is downgraded in this statistic that make perfect sense.

"Baez also strikes out too much and doesn't walk enough, both of which gave back a lot of his very high value on home runs," Judge said. "He's still seen as a solidly above-average player, but having suddenly had everything click like it did after years of, well, not doing that, I think a fair-minded observer would be a bit skeptical of a repeat even without DRC+ weighing in. He may just have an unusual profile, but using the same rules that give DRC+ outstanding accuracy on average, he does not rate as highly."

Baseball Prospectus also doesn't have permission to use Statcast data in these advanced metrics. Judge was quick to point out that DRC+, which doesn't use any data measured by Statcast, far outpaces the quality of the statistics that have been produced by MLBAM and Statcast. That's a perfectly fair point and one I don't find too difficult to believe.

But I do wonder if a player like Báez, who makes consistently hard contact and runs the bases with a panache rarely seen, would benefit by a decent margin if those aspects of the game were more strongly considered. Judge said he's open to feedback on the statistic, especially in regard to the speed element.

Báez wasn't the only Cubs player downgraded by DRC+. Willson Contreras dropped 25 spots in his ranking from wRC+ to DRC+, but a quick look at his numbers tells us that makes a lot of sense.

"He just didn't do a lot of things well at the plate this year, at least in the metric's opinion," Judge said. "As DRC+ scores it, he struck out more often than average, was below average in generating singles, doubles, and home runs, and his only above-average damage was done with (hit-by-pitches) and triples — not exactly the stuff of sustainable, high-performance batting. Perhaps he rebounds next year, but his performance this year was certainly very worrisome, and that's putting aside the glove-work."

And that doesn't even take into account that Contreras' hard contact dipped from 35.5 percent in 2017 to 28.9 percent last season. Despite his unexpectedly rough season, I think this is a case where numbers can't fully measure the issues at hand. Contreras put a lot of pressure on himself after turning down a contract extension last winter. Add in that his home country of Venezuela is in the midst of political and financial strife and that he's still learning the complicated intricacies of catching a major-league rotation, and it's not hard to understand just how difficult it is to measure certain aspects of his game.

If Cubs fans want some good news when it comes to DRC+, they can turn to Anthony Rizzo and Kyle Schwarber. Schwarber ranked 38th in baseball by DRC+ (25 spots higher than wRC+) and Rizzo ranked 19th (16 spots higher than wRC+). Both had walk rates above 10 percent, with Schwarber's above 15.

"Walks are very, very, very important," Judge said. "Remember that DRC+ is not just awarding partial credit, but it is more impressed by achievements in the areas with known sustainable skill — like, say, taking walks and avoiding strikeouts. Schwarber of course takes a ton of the former, and Rizzo both takes walks and avoids strikeouts, consistently putting the ball in play."

No one would doubt that Rizzo can bounce back from what turned out to be a slightly below-average season for him because of a dreadful April. But love for Schwarber can be as polarizing as a downgrade for Báez.

Perhaps this is where DRC+ can really be tested, at least in the Cubs world. Schwarber struggled mightily in "clutch" moments last season. DRC+ won't downgrade him for his lack of RBIs and it's likely a bit of bad luck is accounted for in advanced metrics that like him. Báez won't be credited as much in these

metrics for the preternatural skills he displays on a regular basis. If one were to ask me who I'd bet on, it'd be hard to pass on Báez. Yes, years of data show his 2018 to be an outlier. But what that data doesn't account for is that his development was always expected to be a slow burn. It required patience to buy into Báez. That patience paid off last season.

But that's what makes this all so fascinating. DRC+ could prove to be right in all these cases. Perhaps Báez takes a step back in 2019 and Schwarber a leap forward. Neither would be all that surprising. Frankly, if Báez is merely 15 percent better than league average on offense (like DRC+ suggests he was in 2018) and Schwarber, Rizzo, Contreras and Kris Bryant all improve, the Cubs would take it.

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The Athletic

Cubs year in review: 'The reckoning' is coming. What about Bryce Harper?

By Patrick Mooney

Cubs fans finally got some good news on Thursday when the team and Entercom announced that radio play-by-play man Pat Hughes had signed a multiyear contract extension. Hughes will be back in 670 The Score's booth, working alongside Ron Coomer and smoothly narrating his 24th season with the Cubs. Otherwise ... um ... anyone seen that Bryce Harper Cubs jersey you ordered for Christmas?

For a team that might have been one pitch away from opening the playoffs as the National League's No. 1 seed — only two years removed from winning the World Series — this has certainly been a depressing offseason for Cubs fans. President of baseball operations Theo Epstein, general manager Jed Hoyer and manager Joe Maddon all understand this is a critical time for the organization that will reveal whether the Cubs are more like the '85 Bears than The Foundation of Sustained Success they promised.

The Cubs have only 14 players left from their active 25-man 2016 World Series roster and maybe now the championship hangover is finally over. That group of 14 includes shortstop Addison Russell, who is serving a 40-game suspension under Major League Baseball's joint domestic violence policy with the players' union while ugly details from his personal life continue to surface.

Maddon, the star manager who helped transform the franchise, is working on an expiring contract and spinning his lame-duck status as potential free-agent opportunities. By Opening Day 2019, the Cubs will be on their third hitting coach (Anthony Iapoce), third pitching coach (Tommy Hottovy) and third bench coach (Submit Your Resume Here) in three years. The Cubs have only four coaches left from Maddon's 2016 staff: game-planning chief Mike Borzello, bullpen coach Lester Strode, staff assistant Franklin Font and bullpen catcher Chad Noble.

That kind of turnover and turmoil isn't what anyone around the team anticipated, especially when 2018 started with such great expectations. With a slow offseason playing out all the way into March, the Cubs felt like most of their winter shopping had been done by adding Brandon Morrow, Tyler Chatwood and Steve Cishek before the new year. And then, right before the start of spring training, the Cubs signed Yu Darvish, the freakishly talented/enigmatic pitcher who had dominated them during the 2017 NLCS.

It seemed as though the Cubs had won the winter, but once the season started, that positivity quickly dissipated. All spring there was talk of a quick start. No more World Series hangover. And while they were never really in their early-2017 malaise, the Cubs struggled to pull away from the pack.

There were flashes of the team many hyped as the class of the NL. Look at the impressive 10-2 run in late August/early September that included games in which they faced Noah Syndergaard, Jacob

deGrom, Mike Foltynewicz and Aaron Nola. But that was also part of a longer stretch of 30 scheduled game days. The Cubs would lose their next series, and though it would be only one of two series out of their final eight that they would drop, both those series losses came against the hard-charging Milwaukee Brewers.

Each loss for the Cubs mattered. Pick the worst: From the first, a 2-1, 17-inning walk-off loss at Marlins Park in late March, to a 2-1 loss in late September against the St. Louis Cardinals at Wrigley Field. They all helped contribute to what ended up being a tie atop the division after 162 games. The Brewers forced a Game 163, winning 3-1 at Wrigley Field. The Cubs' season would end the next day in a 2-1, 13-inning loss to the Colorado Rockies that would force Epstein to admit that the "offense broke somewhere along the lines."

Cubs fans got their hopes up after Epstein vented during that end-of-season press conference. But the Cubs are still paying for last winter's mistakes.

Chatwood began the season with a six-walk start, giving a preview of what would be a hard-to-watch summer for the right-hander who signed a three-year, \$38 million deal. By season's end, no one was talking about Chatwood's potential or other-worldly spin rate. Despite tossing just 9 2/3 innings in August and September, Chatwood led all of baseball with 95 walks and posted a 5.30 ERA.

Darvish (4.95 ERA) lasted just eight starts and 40 innings in an injury-plagued season. It's hard to be optimistic when Darvish is only now starting to throw after undergoing a debridement procedure on his right elbow in September. Without a bounce-back in 2019, it will quickly start to look like Darvish's \$126 million contract is as onerous to the team as Jason Heyward's \$184 million deal.

Morrow — the closer who was part of last winter's \$215 million investment in free-agent pitchers — didn't make an appearance after the All-Star break and might not be available until May 2019 while recovering from elbow surgery. That budget crunch — with an anticipated payroll above \$200 million in 2019 — has left the Cubs waiting out the reliever market for January discounts.

Imagine how dysfunctional the 95-loss teams must be.

The bosses at Clark and Addison are aware of the negativity. They hear the line of questioning about why spending isn't a priority in such a critical winter. Some occasionally allow themselves to scan through social media and see how a group that once was the toast of town seemingly can't do anything right anymore. And while Epstein owns the mistakes that have been made, it would be unfair to suggest that a continued downward trajectory is inevitable.

Because the Cubs do have the components for a World Series contender. Anthony Rizzo is still the face of the franchise. Remove his awful April from 2018 and suddenly his numbers look much more in line with what he's done for much of his Cubs career. Kris Bryant is expected to be a bigger, stronger — and most importantly, healthier — version of the player who missed 60 games this year. It can't be overlooked just how good Bryant was prior to his shoulder injury, boasting a 1.022 OPS through 38 games and MVP frontrunner status six weeks into the season. Javier Báez was already one of the most exciting talents in the game and then emerged as a legitimate MVP candidate.

There's more. Jon Lester is arguably the best free-agent signing in Chicago sports history. Cole Hamels and Ben Zobrist are World Series MVPs. Willson Contreras is an All-Star catcher. Pedro Strop is fearless, a glue guy in the bullpen and the clubhouse. Kyle Hendricks is The Professor, continuing to wow with command and movement over velocity.

As frustrating as the inconsistencies can be with the rest of the young position players — Kyle Schwarber, Ian Happ and Albert Almora Jr. — they have also shown flashes of greatness. Imagine if just one of them can put it together for a full season. And one more tip of the cap to David Bote's walk-off grand slam, one of the most compelling moments in all of baseball last summer.

Of course, there is still that tiny sliver of hope that the Cubs haven't fully shut the door on the biggest fish in this — or perhaps any — free-agent market.

The Cubs have held high-level discussions about a Harper pursuit, sketched out trade possibilities in an attempt to clear salary and maintained a dialogue with super-agent Scott Boras. At least one team involved in the Harper talks has believed the Cubs are a factor. Epstein's legendary reputation as a dealmaker persists to the point where we won't totally rule out the Cubs as a possibility until Harper is at the podium at Dodger Stadium or putting on a White Sox hat at the press conference or saying how much he always wanted to play for whatever mystery team.

But it would be disingenuous to suggest the Cubs are heavily involved in the Harper negotiations and about to shock the baseball world again. Their internal communications, interactions with agents, transparency in the media and cost-cutting roster moves all point toward a quiet winter.

The Cubs have given off no optimistic vibe or realistic sense that they can put together a Harper deal. The feeling is that the Cubs were not totally prepared as an organization to make that kind of massive investment now, in part because they've been trying to win the World Series the past four years instead of shedding payroll and long-term commitments and pinning their hopes on this free-agent class.

The White Sox still have to prove they can close that kind of megadeal, graduate enough players from their farm system and build out an entire roster. But Harper would be the superstar for their upcoming TV network with the Bulls, Blackhawks and NBC Sports/Comcast. Harper is the big personality to draw attention away from the North Side and make the White Sox relevant again. Imagine Harper and Eloy Jiménez in the same outfield as the curtain closes on The Bryzso Era in Wrigleyville.

But the social-media noise and negative headlines won't matter if the 2019 team plays up to expectations. It would be foolish to write off the Cubs now. Another electric summer at Wrigley Field and a pulsating October is totally possible. But winning the 2019 World Series might be the only way to salvage an unsatisfying 2018.

"This year is really a reckoning in a lot of ways," Epstein said. "We do have a lot to prove. Which sounds funny coming off 95 wins. I feel like we underperformed. I think you're going to see a really highly motivated group of players out there. Whether we have a big offseason or more nuanced offseason, you should judge us on how we play next year."

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