



CHICAGO CUBS DAILY CLIPS

CubsPressbox.com · CubsMedia@Cubs.com · 773-404-4191

February 8, 2019

- Cubs.com, **Cubs head to camp seeking sense of urgency**
<https://www.mlb.com/cubs/news/cubs-spring-training-preview/c-303662610>
- NBC Sports Chicago, **Cubs pitching prospects to keep an eye on in 2019**
<https://www.nbcsports.com/chicago/cubs/cubs-pitching-prospects-keep-eye-2019-alzolay-mekkes-duncan-robinson-hendricks-tyson-miller-mlb-top-prospects-farm-system>
- NBC Sports Chicago, **One projection system predicts Cubs will be 13 games worse in 2019**
<https://www.nbcsports.com/chicago/cubs/one-projection-predicts-tough-year-cubs-javy-baez-nl-central-2019-playoffs-brewers-cardinals>
- Chicago Tribune, **2019 will be an important year for both Joe Maddon and Rick Renteria, Chicago's yin and yang of managers**
<https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/baseball/ct-spt-cubs-white-sox-joe-maddon-rick-renteria-20190208-story.html#nt=oft13a-2gp1>

--

Cubs.com

Cubs head to camp seeking sense of urgency

By Jordan Bastian

Shortly before the Winter Meetings in December, when it was increasingly clear that the Cubs would not be major players in the free-agent marketplace, president of baseball operations Theo Epstein said what has become the unofficial slogan for 2019 for his team.

"This year is really a reckoning in a lot of ways," Epstein said at the Cubs' headquarters across the street from Wrigley Field.

It was on the field within view of that December press conference where the Cubs lost a Game 163 division-clincher against the Brewers before dropping the National League Wild Card Game to the Rockies. It was an abrupt conclusion to a fatiguing stretch of 42 games in 43 days that left the 95-win Cubs sucking air and searching for answers.

The solutions will need to come from within.

Rather than overhaul a roster already packed with talent, the Cubs' decision-makers spent the offseason spreading a message of urgency for the group in place. Behind the scenes, the front office, along with manager Joe Maddon and his coaching staff, discussed ways to improve communication across the board and went to work on dissecting what went wrong in 2018 and how to fix it.

There have been some small adjustments to the roster in place. After hammering home the notion that last year's team could have used a bit more veteran leadership -- like David Ross and Jon Jay brought in

recent seasons -- Chicago signed utility man Daniel Descalso, who has a strong reputation in that regard. And to help a bullpen rife with question marks, the Cubs agreed to a deal with Brad Brach.

Epstein spent much of the offseason explaining that the Cubs were working with limited monetary resources for this year. Chicago boasts the largest payroll in franchise history (it projects to be over \$210 million and even higher in terms of the luxury-tax estimates), leaving little wiggle room to pursue a blockbuster addition.

So it will be incumbent for the bulk of last year's roster to create in-house corrections.

"We really feel strongly and believe strongly in the guys that we do have," Maddon said last month. "We're just really trying to develop that plan to really extrapolate more out of the group that we do have. And, again, when I say that, if you really look at it, it's primarily from the offensive side of the ball."

Maddon will have his role to play in this year of reckoning, too.

Epstein made it clear early in the offseason that any talks of a contract extension for Maddon -- in the final year of his five-year deal -- will be delayed until later this year. In the meantime, Maddon and Epstein have discussed having the manager adopt a more hands-on approach in '19. That will go not only for the players, but for a coaching staff that has undergone significant changes.

"It's going to be really important to me to set the tone among the coaching staff," Maddon said, "and keeping us on task regarding each player. So we're trying to build in a system, or systems, that kind of overlap a little bit to make sure that we do stay on task with all this. And it's kind of a fun challenge, quite frankly."

That process began with plenty of offseason conversations. Epstein noted during Cubs Convention that he has probably spent more time talking to staff, coaches and players this winter than in any other offseason in his career as an executive. Part of that is self-evaluation, but a lot of it has also been game-planning about ways to get the most out of the Cubs' roster and to stave off complacency.

That process will begin to really take shape during Spring Training.

"Urgency is the opposite of complacency," Epstein said. "And I don't think we've been overly complacent or anything. But if we're being honest with ourself and taking accountability for it, we do need to make a little bit of an adjustment and from Day 1 of the season play with more urgency, because this is a really competitive division. And what an awful feeling that was at the end of last year."

--

NBC Sports Chicago

Cubs pitching prospects to keep an eye on in 2019

By Tony Andracki

"It's something that keeps us up at night."

That's how Cubs senior VP Jason McLeod summed up the state of the organization's pitching development while at the fan convention last month.

Rob Zastryzny still stands as the most impactful drafted-and-developed pitcher to come up from the Cubs minor league system under Theo Epstein's front office and the left-hander has just 34.2 career innings in the big leagues.

That lack of success has been the Cubs' Achilles' heel for years and it's come to something of a breaking point given how much money the team has to invest in pitching in 2019.

So the Cubs are changing tactics a bit in their farm system. It's time to dial up a sense of urgency in every aspect of the organization.

"[In the past], I would say that we definitely wanted to err on the side of being cautious and conservative," McLeod said. "If there was anything going on with the pitcher — arm soreness, felt a little tweak with the elbow, certainly with the high school pitchers — [we backed off.] We were trying to put in such a structure progression through Years 3 and 4 that we probably could've pushed guys in our early days.

"As we sit here five or six years later, not to be egregious about anything, but we'll probably be a little bit more aggressive."

Put simply: The conservative approach hasn't worked for the Cubs and they're going to try to push the limits (within reason) in 2019 and beyond.

"I think there's an overwhelming sense of urgency throughout the organization," McLeod said. "I know Theo brought it up [at Cubs Convention]. When I say that, it's an urgency of doing something to impact the organization. Not being complacent, not being safe, not being conservative.

"It doesn't mean pushing someone who's not ready for it, but I also think there is gonna be more of a 'let them show themselves' if they're ready to help us, so to speak. We know exactly where we are with that. This is probably the first year I can confidently sit here and feel like we have the guys that can help the team in the major leagues this year if needed."

That's crucial now more than ever. The Cubs had the oldest pitching staff in the National League last season and that collective number is only going to increase as guys like Jon Lester and Cole Hamels inch closer to the twilight of their careers while no young pitchers are coming up to help augment the bullpen or rotation.

"We've gotta be better than what we've been," McLeod said. "We know what we are from the major league standpoint with our club and players that are getting into their arbitration years. It's just on us. We can't keep celebrating Kris Bryant and the 2013 draft.

"[The lack of impact pitching is] an obvious — it's so obvious it's not even an elephant in the room. It's something that drives us every day. I think we made a great hire in [minor league pitching coordinator] Brendan Sagara last year. He already is really good. I like the players we have in our system. This is the best I've felt after 8 years and I am bullish on some of those guys."

Will 2019 finally be the year that rewrites the narrative of the Cubs' pitching development?

If so, the impact arms will likely come from the following list:

Adbert Alzolay

Alzolay is no longer the consensus top pitching prospect in the Cubs system, but he still may hold the highest upside and is probably closest to the big leagues. The 23-year-old right-hander was shut down in May last year due to a lat injury, so he'll have a pretty stingy innings limit.

That means the most likely path to Chicago comes via the bullpen. The Cubs still see Alzolay's long-term future as a starter, but they want to protect his arm in 2019 and won't push him too far. Plus, it would take several injuries for a spot to open up in the big-league rotation given the five starters in place plus Mike Montgomery, Tyler Chatwood and Alec Mills as starting depth.

The Cubs have been touting Alzolay for a while and 2019 may finally be the year we see him in Chicago.

Duane Underwood Jr.

Roughly seven months after Epstein's regime came into power at Clark and Addison, the Cubs front office drafted Underwood with their second-round pick. That should give you an idea of how long Underwood has been among the Cubs pitching prospects.

We're still waiting for that breakthrough from the right-hander, but he's still young (he doesn't turn 25 until July) and made his long-awaited MLB debut last year, impressing in a 4-inning spot start in Los Angeles.

The Cubs have been cautious with Underwood since they made him the 67th overall player selected in 2012 out of high school, but the training wheels have slowly come off — he threw 125.1 innings in 2018 after accounting for 138 innings in 2017. Still, the results have been underwhelming — 4.53 ERA, 1.37 WHIP, 7.9 K/9 in 27 outings (20 starts) with Iowa last season.

Underwood is on the cusp of cracking the big-league roster, but it's still unknown what his long-term role will be.

"Duane's in this area right now where we're gonna develop him as a starter still," McLeod said. "I think it's really up to him — is he gonna grab on to it? I absolutely believe in his ability to pitch out of the bullpen if needed, which makes you feel good. If Alzolay's healthy and Underwood, then we can go get those types of guys and break them in in the bullpen — pitching 2 innings at a time maybe."

Dakota Mekkes

The 6-foot-7 right-hander is not a household name yet and hasn't been included on any top prospect lists, but he's on the cusp of becoming a legitimate big-league option. Mekkes — a 10th-round pick out of Michigan State University in 2016 — has shot up through the Cubs system and dominated at every stop, including a 0.81 ERA in Double-A and 1.44 ERA in Triple-A last year.

Mekkes doesn't have elite velocity, but the Cubs love how he pitches to his big frame and a deceptive motion that hides the ball from hitters. That's led to a lot of swings-and-misses in the minors — a career 11.6 K/9 rate, with 71 whiffs in 53.2 innings last season.

"He's kind of a big guy with a lower slot with a high-riding heater that guys can't get on for whatever reason," McLeod said.

Duncan Robinson

The 25-year-old righty has flown under the radar since the Cubs selected him in the 9th round of the 2016 draft, but that may be changing in a hurry. During McLeod's "Down on the Farm" panel at Cubs Convention last month, he mentioned Robinson by name more than any other pitcher in the organization, talking up the 6-foot-6 starter.

Robinson is a product of Dartmouth College just like Kyle Hendricks and McLeod was quick to draw a similar parallel between the two pitchers in how they execute a gameplan, throw strikes and consistently get outs without elite "stuff."

Robinson has a career 2.78 ERA and 1.198 WHIP over 288 minor-league innings and turned in a strong showing (8-4, 3.11 ERA, 1.24 WHIP) in 26 starts last season between Double-A Tennessee and Triple-A Iowa. He'll start the year at the Cubs' top minor-league affiliate — one call away from joining the big-league rotation or bullpen should injuries strike.

It's impossible to predict how the next 7-10 months will play out, but the Cubs would love for a guy like Robinson to force their hand and potentially become a long-term answer in the MLB rotation.

"Who knows what's gonna happen with the club in future years, but I feel good about the depth and I feel like we have guys that can step in and be rotation pieces," McLeod said.

Keegan Thompson

The 23-year-old has been a fast riser in the Cubs system since they made him a 3rd-round selection in 2017. Thompson reached Double-A last year, making 13 starts with a 4.06 ERA and 1.40 WHIP with Tennessee and figures to be a part of the Triple-A rotation at some point early in 2019.

The Cubs love Thompson's competitiveness and the way he pitches off his fastball.

"Whether it's this year or next year, I'd be very surprised if you don't see him in Chicago," McLeod said.

Tyson Miller

Miller is another unknown, but don't expect that to last for long. McLeod couldn't contain his enthusiasm for the 23-year-old righty when speaking about him last month:

"I'm so excited to see what Tyson does when he shows up because of the year he had last year. ... He got stronger as the year went on and he's a guy I'm really excited to see what he does in Double-A. He finished so strong, the velocity was there at the end of the year, he can pitch off his fastball, it's got that natural cut-life to it and he's just a big, physical monster."

The 2016 4th-round pick spent all of 2018 with Advanced Class-A Myrtle Beach, going 9-9 with a 3.54 ERA, 1.09 WHIP and struck out 126 batters against only 35 walks in 127 innings.

He's still probably a couple years away from the big leagues but another good season in 2019 could be enough to throw his name in the ring as a potential long-term option for the MLB rotation.

Thomas Hatch

Hatch has been a poster boy for the cautious, conservative approach the Cubs have had with their minor-league pitchers. He was the organization's top draft pick in 2016 (3rd round) but he missed all of

2015 with a sprained ligament in his elbow and the Cubs opted to let him rest and simply watch during his first foray into pro ball after a high workload at Oklahoma State in spring 2016.

However, when he's been on the field, Hatch has turned heads. He started 26 games for Tennessee last season, going 8-6 with a 3.82 ERA, 1.31 WHIP and 7.3 K/9.

He'll likely begin 2019 in the Iowa rotation in his age-24 season.

Justin Steele

The Cubs added the 23-year-old southpaw to their 40-man roster this winter so they wouldn't lose him in the Rule 5 draft. His 2017 season ended early due to Tommy John surgery, but he made a quick recovery — posting a 2.31 ERA, 0.90 WHIP and 10.2 K/9 in 11 starts last year between Rookie ball, Myrtle Beach and Tennessee.

Steele will have an innings limit in 2019 and McLeod said he'd probably start the year in the Double-A rotation again.

Trevor Clifton

The 23-year-old right-hander was named the Cubs' minor league pitcher of the year in 2016 and made his Triple-A debut last year to solid results (3.89 ERA, 1.36 WHIP).

Clifton found his name at No. 87 on Baseball Prospectus' top prospect list prior to 2017 before a tough season in Double-A removed some shine from his status. He figures to begin the year as a part of the Iowa rotation.

--

NBC Sports Chicago

One projection system predicts Cubs will be 13 games worse in 2019

By Tony Andracki

Count PECOTA among the 2019 Cubs haters.

In fact, we may have a new clubhouse leader in that department.

The Baseball Prospectus projection system unveiled its 2019 picks Thursday morning and they believe the Cubs will finish third in the National League Central...with only 82 wins.

The projection is for the 2019 Cubs to struggle to finish above .500? That's wild. Did the negative portion of Cubs Twitter hijack the system?

A year ago at this time, PECOTA projected the Cubs would win 89 games and claim the division crown with the Cardinals (84 wins) and Brewers (83) not far behind.

What's changed so much with the system in a year? The Cubs return almost the exact same roster from a team that won 95 games (and was projected to win 89 by PECOTA) plus a full season of Cole Hamels and the minor additions of Daniel Descalso, Brad Brach and Tony Barnette.

So why the major step back?

The answer lies in run prevention, namely the aging pitching staff.

The Cubs scored 761 runs last season, which makes their projection of 739 for 2019 seem a little light but otherwise on par.

The "RA" column (runs against), however, is a different story. The Cubs gave up only 645 runs in 2018, but PECOTA projects them to surrender 730 runs this year, a difference of nearly a half-run per game.

How is that possible? A combination of really poor defense and some unkind pitching projections.

The Cubs have had one of the league's better defensive units the last few seasons (with record-setting glove work in 2016), but PECOTA lists only Anthony Rizzo, Kris Bryant and Jason Heyward as positive defenders (plus Addison Russell after he returns from suspension). Meanwhile, Willson Contreras' defensive projection is appalling mainly due to poor pitch-framing metrics. Somehow, Javy Baez and Albert Almora Jr. are also negative defenders by the projection system.

As for the pitching side, only a handful of players are slated for an ERA below 4.00: Jose Quintana (3.96), Kyle Hendricks (3.92), Brandon Morrow (3.92), Yu Darvish (3.78) and Steve Cishek (3.92).

PECOTA projects Pedro Strop for a 4.03 ERA and 1.28 WHIP despite the fact he hasn't hit either number since 2013 and sports a 2.63 ERA and 1.02 WHIP in 6 seasons with the Cubs.

The projection system is also unkind to Jon Lester (4.38 ERA, 1.32 WHIP) and Cole Hamels (4.06 ERA, 1.27 WHIP) as they enter their age-35 seasons.

Offensively, PECOTA essentially projects each player to put up a similar line to their 2018 season with a couple of notable exceptions: The system sees Baez and Ben Zobrist taking major steps backward.

At the end of the day, this is just one projection system that doesn't actually impact real life in any way beyond the fact that it's fun to talk about.

There's no guarantee the Cubs will make the playoffs or finish above third in what is shaping up to be a really tough division, but it's hard to see so much going wrong for this team that they only win 82 games this year. There's simply too much talent and this same roster found a way to 95 wins last year despite a host of misfortune.

--

Chicago Tribune

2019 will be an important year for both Joe Maddon and Rick Renteria, Chicago's yin and yang of managers

By Paul Sullivan

As they dive headfirst into the 2019 season this week in Arizona, Cubs manager Joe Maddon and White Sox counterpart Rick Renteria are entering crossroads of sorts.

Maddon, coming off a 95-win season and four straight postseason appearances, needs to win to keep his job. Renteria, coming off 100 losses with most of the same nucleus returning, needs to stop losing to keep his sanity.

There may be vastly different expectations this year for the Cubs and Sox, but fans on both sides of town want to see one thing: improvement.

It's up to Maddon and Renteria, the yin and yang of Chicago managers, to make sure that happens.

Lame duck soup

Entering the final year of a five-year deal without a contract extension, Maddon may find his seat a bit toasty if the Cubs get off to a poor start.

No one would've imagined he'd still be without a deal in 2019 after winning the 2016 World Series to ending the Cubs' epic drought, but these are strange times in Wrigleyville, where participation trophies no longer are in vogue.

Maddon has an impressive .541 winning percentage in his 15 years in the majors. If you take away his first two seasons with the Rays in 2006 and '07, when they lost 101 and 96 games, that percentage shoots up to .568 — an average of 92 wins a year.

Maddon's winning percentage ranks 49th all-time according to baseball-reference.com, just ahead of Hall of Famers Joe Cronin (.540) and Leo Durocher (.540), who until Maddon was considered the best Cubs manager of the last 70 years.

But Durocher never won anything in Chicago, and his legacy remains the '69 Cubs team that collapsed in September and still became beloved for "almost" winning.

Part of Durocher's appeal was his outsized personality, which often grated on Cubs players. Maddon has a ring and those four postseason appearances in his four years on the North Side, but apparently that's not enough for management to make a judgment about him.

Though he may be a lame-duck manager, but Maddon doesn't seem particularly worried.

"We're all lame-duck, aren't we?" Maddon said during his trip to Chicago for the Cubs Convention. "I've been on one-year contracts for many years, but actually, I'm on the last year of a five-year contract, so I'm pretty fortunate. I don't worry about it. I don't even think about it unless you ask me about it.

"As you know, I'm pretty self-confident, and I feel good about what we've done and where we're going in the future."

The possibility of the contract becoming a distraction obviously is there, and unless the Cubs get off to a hot start it will be mentioned a time or two, no matter how much Maddon or Theo Epstein tries to downplay it.

The players know the deal.

"I don't pay any attention to that stuff," reliever Pedro Strop said. "But Joe is one of the best managers in the league, so I'm pretty sure he's going to have a job. If not with us, it'll be with somebody, so there's nothing to be worried about."

Strop was involved in one of Maddon's most controversial decisions last year. After taking over as closer for the injured Brandon Morrow, Strop was allowed to bat after the Cubs had taken a one-run lead in the tenth inning of a Sept. 13th makeup game against the Nationals.

Strop hit a rocket toward third but pulled a hamstring while trying to beat out a double play, sidelining him for the rest of the stretch run.

Maddon was eviscerated on Twitter and talk radio for letting Strop hit for himself. He had to explain his rationale again last month during a question-and-answer session with fans at the Cubs Convention.

“Had he been thrown out at first base and not pulled a hamstring, nobody would be asking these questions,” Maddon said. “It’s just one of those things that happens. Injuries occur. I learned from Marcel Lachemann many years ago, and I totally believe this: You don’t treat them like China dolls. They’re well-trained athletes. It’s one of those situations that happens. I really do believe it was the right thing to do in that moment. ... And retrospectively, it had no impact on the race whatsoever.

“Our bullpen, the guys we picked up, did really well. When things occur in a game, you only have that one shot in that moment to make that decision, and a lot of times when it doesn’t work out people don’t like that, And that, to me that’s an outcome bias situation.

“If we all knew what was going to happen before, you might have chosen a different route.”

Maddon may indeed be the best manager we’ve ever seen in Chicago. But if there’s one thing we’ve learned from Twitter, it’s that no manager is smarter than the fan watching from his couch.

Waiting and praying

While Maddon is one of the most successful managers of his era, Renteria has been one of the least. He’s compiled a .416 winning percentage in three years of managing, including one on the North Side, and never has come close to finishing .500.

He has enjoyed five months with a winning record out of 18: June and August 2014 with the Cubs, and April and September 2017 and August 2018 with the Sox.

Renteria’s winning percentage is 29th worst all-time, according to baseball-reference.com. But he’s led two rebuilding teams, so it’s unfair to lump him in with that group just yet.

The Sox haven’t judged Renteria on his record, and they quietly gave him an extension last spring. It wasn’t until November that general manager Rick Hahn revealed Renteria’s contract runs through 2020, a year longer than his original deal.

The Sox believe his teaching ability is perfect for the rebuild, and Renteria has a great relationship with his young players.

But at some point the Sox have to start winning, and Year 3 of the rebuild will be an important one for Renteria, with or without the still-unsigned Manny Machado.

The American League Central comprises the Indians and four rebuilding teams, so the Sox should shoot for at least .500. Another 95-100 loss season could bring questions about whether Renteria is the right man for the job, whether he’s signed for another year or not.

Yoan Moncada, Lucas Giolito and some of the other kids have to show signs of becoming the players they’ve been hyped as. Eloy Jimenez has to be the real deal when he arrives this year. Ditto, Dylan Cease.

“The guys we do have are real — I’ll continue to repeat that — they are real talent,” Renteria said. “I think we’re getting closer. I think the guys at the major league level, combined with the guys that are coming through and hopefully will be with us soon, will put us in a real good place.”

For the Sox to drastically improve, first baseman Jose Abreu, entering his walk year, must rebound from injuries and a subpar year to prove he’s still an integral part of the Sox’s future. Otherwise there’s no sense in keeping him around.

Renteria’s biggest task will be convincing Abreu to be the designated hitter more often now that Yonder Alonso, a better defensive player, is on the roster. Renteria admitted Abreu has “always disliked” the idea of playing DH but seems to be coming around.

Renteria’s second-most difficult task could be convincing Sox fans he can deftly handle a bullpen with two talented late-inning options, Kelvin Herrera and Alex Colome, now on board.

Asked by a fan at SoxFest if the Sox could win 80 games, Renteria was his usual optimistic self.

“I do think the back end of our bullpen has been tremendously increased in terms of its ability to close out ballgames,” Renteria replied. “We’ll still manage the situations to give us the best outputs, but we have to play clean baseball, and that’s what we’re striving to do. (Eighty wins) is very possible, absolutely.”

It’s not much to shoot for, but you have to start somewhere. Rest assured we should know a lot more about Renteria’s long-term future by the end of Year 3.

--