



CHICAGO CUBS DAILY CLIPS

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- Cubs.com, **Inbox: Cubs keeping line open with Harper?**
<https://www.mlb.com/cubs/news/inbox-will-cubs-check-back-with-bryce-harper/c-302386198>
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<https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/baseball/ct-spt-baseball-football-fan-interest-sullivan-20190103-story.html>
- The Athletic, **Rosenthal: Why the Cubs are in a bind; the meaning behind the Mets' moves; ex-manager finds interesting new gig**
<https://theathletic.com/753212/2019/01/07/rosenthal-why-the-cubs-are-in-a-bind-the-meaning-behind-the-mets-moves-ex-manager-finds-interesting-new-gig/>

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Cubs.com

Baez, Berrios, Bauer host clinic in Puerto Rico

By Armanda Rivera

BAYAMON, Puerto Rico -- On the eve of Three Kings Day, a major holiday in Latin America marked by festivals and children eagerly awaiting presents, Twins ace Jose Berrios gave kids in his native Puerto Rico the gift of baseball.

With assists from Cubs infielder Javier Baez and Indians starter Trevor Bauer, the gift took the form of a youth clinic in Berrios' and Baez's hometown of Bayamon on Saturday.

Approximately 150 children took part in the La Makina Baseball Clinic, held at a baseball complex in the Flamboyan Gardens sector of the city. Divided into groups of 50, they took turns learning pitching mechanics from Berrios and Bauer, and fielding ground balls with Baez.

"The main thing is reaching out to a child," said Berrios, 24, in Spanish. "That the child can spend time with us and interact with us up close. I grew wishing to be where I am now and with God's help I made it. I want to give kids what I longed for when I was a kid."

After the clinic, the three All-Stars took photos with the participants, each of whom left with a backpack, batting gloves, Twins T-shirts and caps, and, of course, a big smile.

"It's exciting to see the kids' faces when they see you and you can appreciate their excitement," Baez said in Spanish. "I went through that stage."

Bauer, who also visited Puerto Rico in April when the Twins and Indians played a regular-season series in the capital of San Juan, took the opportunity to practice his Spanish and answered questions through an interpreter.

It is Berrios' goal to seize every opportunity to share his love and knowledge of baseball with the next generation.

"Really, every time we get the chance to do it, we want to do it. I know it's a great experience for them. It's a privilege to be able to contribute to the learning and development of these kids," he said.

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Cubs.com

Inbox: Cubs keeping line open with Harper?

By Jordan Bastian

Any truth to the report that Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein asked free agent Bryce Harper and agent Scott Boras to wait and consult with them before signing a contract with another team?

-- Eric W., Florida

Cubs fans have been searching and hoping for any scrap of positive Harper-related news throughout this offseason, and that tidbit was delivered as an early stocking stuffer a few days before Christmas.

According to the Chicago Sun-Times, Epstein had a lengthy meeting with Boras during last month's Winter Meetings in Las Vegas and "urged them to wait" and check in with the Cubs before signing a long-term contract with a rival team. Although I can't confirm the validity of that report, it certainly fits in with the overall messaging that has come out of the Cubs' offices this winter.

Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer have emphasized over and over that Chicago's biggest need is improvement via the players already in the fold, noting that the team would probably need to be creative to add a contract of significance. In baseball jargon, that translates as a requirement to free up payroll through trades to realistically pursue an expensive free agent.

Already this offseason, we have seen teams like the Mariners, Indians, Dodgers, Reds and Mets swing complicated trades that not only moved talent, but swapped contracts. It's a safe bet that the Cubs have been doing what they can to find potential fits along those lines. The most obvious contracts to move would be those of Jason Heyward or Tyler Chatwood. Ben Zobrist could also be a candidate. Jose Quintana would certainly draw interest (not to mention a better return package).

Given the Cubs' history of blockbuster moves in recent years, it's hard to completely count them out, even with the lack of payroll flexibility seemingly hindering the team. Harper is too perfect a fit for a Cubs lineup in need of a jolt to completely rule it out. So even if the Cubs aren't at the forefront of the rumors right now, it makes sense for them to ask Boras to circle back to see if the club is any closer to finding the financial fortitude required.

I would warn against Cubs fans getting their hopes up, however. As things stand, it remains far more likely that Harper will be hoisting another team's jersey at his introductory press conference. Until that happens, fans can keep hoping that Chicago is flying under the radar as a mystery team.

I saw your article on the Cubs' recent coaching hires, including bringing Bob Tewksbury on board as a mental skills coordinator. Does every team have one these days? What does that job entail? What is Tewksbury's approach?

-- Dan P., Montara, Calif.

Most teams have at least one person on staff in this area now. Tewksbury, specifically, has held this type of job with the Red Sox (2004-13, '15-16) and Giants ('17-18).

For more on his background and approach, you could dive into his book, "Ninety Percent Mental: An All-Star Player Turned Mental Skills Coach Reveals the Hidden Game of Baseball," which Tewksbury co-authored with longtime baseball writer Scott Miller. Tewksbury played a role in the development of Jon Lester's pregame preparation, helping the Cubs lefty with focus drills and breathing exercises. I plan on providing more on the addition of Tewksbury during Spring Training.

Anything that falls under the mental side of the game is typically handled by coaches in this position. While I was covering the Indians last year, for example, Mike Clevinger revealed that Cleveland's performance coach, Ceci Clark, helped him with breathing exercises to keep his heart rate down (similar to a sniper in the military). I've also covered multiple pitchers (Roy Halladay, Corey Kluber and Carlos Carrasco, among others) who relied heavily on Harvey Dorfman's book, "The Mental ABCs of Pitching."

I've noticed that a substantial number of the Cubs' hitters almost refused to swing at the first pitch last year. If you could watch all at-bats in fast-forward, you'd see what I mean. And it seemed like opposing pitchers keyed on this, getting ahead in the count constantly. Is this something they've been coached to do, or just an insanely frustrating coincidence?

-- Loren N., Wichita, Kan.

The cool thing about this newfangled internet machine thing is that you don't have to watch every at-bat to get information these days! And sometimes the numbers do not align with gut feeling. This is a great example. Per Statcast™, the Cubs swung at the first pitch 31.9 percent of the time in 2018. That was the third-highest rate in the Majors. In fact, looking at raw data, only the Braves (2,100) had more first-pitch swings than the Cubs (2,019) last year. Chicago hit .344 with a .580 slugging percentage on the first pitch -- a tick above the MLB averages (.338 and .575). The Cubs' percentage of 0-1 counts (12.8 percent overall, per Statcast™) was right on the MLB average (12.81).

Why is David Bote not being considered as an everyday infielder for second base or shortstop?

-- Robert, Lombard, Ill.

It's always a bit of a challenge for a player young in MLB experience to crack the everyday lineup of a team built to contend now. In Bote's case, his offensive splits and defensive versatility would probably make him a role player out of the chute on the MLB roster. It's all about maximizing production until a player forces a team's hand and emerges as an everyday option.

While the sample size is limited, Bote performed much better against lefties (134 wRC+) than against righties (79 wRC+) in '18. So maybe he could be paired with Daniel Descalso at second base in the first month of the season (while Javier Baez handles shortstop until Addison Russell's return). Or if Zobrist and Descalso handle second, Bote could play third against lefties, with Kris Bryant spelling Kyle Schwarber in left.

In a recent article, you mentioned Albert Almora Jr. as a player in need of a comeback season? Are you kidding me? A comeback year from a player who proved he should be the everyday center fielder and was the Cubs' best hitter the first half?

-- Kent W.

Given that Almora is 24 years old, maybe the better characterization would've been "continued development" from him in 2019. What I was looking at was a drop in OPS to .700 in '18 compared to .782 in '17, and a drop in wRC+ to 89 ('18) from 103 ('17). Part of the decline was production against righties (84 wRC+ in 335 plate appearances) and a dismal second half (.546 OPS). But you're right, Almora's first half (.795 OPS) was strong. Chicago needs more of that in '19, and that's why I included his name in that summation.

I noticed that Russell is not on the Cubs' 40-man roster. What is his exact status entering 2019?

-- David S., Chicago

Russell is on MLB's restricted list and will remain there until he has completed his 40-game suspension. So the shortstop will not count against the 40-man roster until being activated (his eligibility date is May 3). In the meantime, Russell has been tendered a non-guaranteed contract through the arbitration process.

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NBC Sports Chicago

Key points from Theo Epstein's radio interview on Cubs' offseason

By Tim Stebbins

It might not be the groundbreaking news Cubs fans are looking for, but Theo Epstein offered up something for fans yearning for Cubs updates.

670 The Score interviewed Epstein on "Inside the Clubhouse" on Saturday morning. The Cubs president did not announce any acquisitions, but here are some key points from the interview:

Updates on Darvish and Morrow

Yu Darvish and Brandon Morrow were the Cubs' two biggest acquisitions last offseason. While Darvish struggled (1-3, 4.95 ERA in eight starts), Morrow (1.47 ERA, 22-of-24 in save attempts) was a force in the Cubs' bullpen, when healthy.

Darvish and Morrow suffered elbow injuries that ended their 2018 seasons prematurely. The two are progressing after undergoing procedures following the conclusion of the regular season, though.

"They're both doing well. Darvish is farther ahead, he's on a traditional buildup with his throwing program and is in really good shape," Epstein said. "He'll be full-go on a normal schedule in spring training."

"Morrow doesn't think he's going to be too far behind at all. If you asked him, he'd probably say he's going to be ready for Opening Day. But, probably, that's unrealistic.

"If we do the right thing and build him up slowly, he'll probably miss it by a few weeks. But we'll see."

Luxury tax not dictating offseason moves

The Cubs' budget woes have been well-documented this offseason (a comprehensive break down can be found here). For the 2019 season, the Cubs are on pace to:

- Have their highest Opening Day payroll in franchise history (surpassing the \$182 million figure from 2018)

- Surpass MLB's \$206 million luxury tax threshold

Essentially, the luxury tax punishes teams with extremely high payrolls, as MLB does not have a salary cap like the NBA, NFL and NHL. Teams are taxed on each dollar when their payroll surpasses the \$206 million figure (more on that here).

As things currently stand, the Cubs' 2019 payroll is projected to be around \$209 million. However, the number certainly will be higher than that, as there are still moves to be made.

The common thought this offseason has been that any Cubs moves would be dictated by their proximity to the luxury tax. However, Epstein said quite the opposite on Saturday.

"The CBT threshold is not dictating any of our actions or inactions this winter at all," he said. "We're not governed by that. There are times when strategically you want to make sure you're under it or where you don't mind going above it."

That may seem ambiguous, and Epstein probably meant it to be. It's far-fetched to think that he would reveal exactly what the Cubs' offseason plans are, to a T. Still, the main takeaway here is that if a move makes sense for the Cubs, they could go over the luxury tax to do it.

"I've said that all offseason, from the first press conference on: This is not an offseason where anyone should be fixated about the tax," he said. "It's like any business — there are budgets. You can't ignore them. You can't spend what you don't have.

"You should spend everything you do have. There will be offseasons when being very, very mindful of the CBT and not going just a touch over it, for example, and then hurting yourself with respect to future tax rates or draft positions and those things. That matters.

"This is not one of those offseasons. So I wouldn't waste a lot of time thinking about the tax as you try to assess what's going on."

However, this doesn't mean that the Cubs will go over the \$206 million figure by an absurd amount. But if go over the tax — perhaps to add a backup catcher and/or bullpen help — they seem open to doing so.

Potential moves aside, Epstein seems confident in the Cubs' roster as it currently stands.

"They're a motivated and determined bunch," he said. "I wouldn't bet against us."

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NBC Sports Chicago

Cubs reportedly wanted to add Troy Tulowitzki as starting shortstop

By Vinnie Duber

Who's going to be the Cubs' starting shortstop at the outset of the 2019 season? Well, it won't be Troy Tulowitzki. But according to a report, that's who the Cubs wanted it to be before he signed with the New York Yankees.

According to SNY's Andy Martino, "the Cubs pursued Tulowitzki to be their starting shortstop, at a minimum for the duration of Addison Russell's domestic violence suspension."

Tulowitzki is viewed as a zero-risk move for the Yankees as they get a former All-Star shortstop with a couple Gold Gloves on his resume for the league-minimum salary. But according to Martino, the interest in Tulowitzki was hardly confined to The Bronx, with 16 teams either making a contract offer or showing interest. The Cubs, along with the division-rival Pittsburgh Pirates, were hoping to add Tulowitzki as their starting shortstop, with the Los Angeles Angels also named as an interested party.

The Cubs have some question marks at shortstop as Russell is slated to miss roughly the first month of the season while suspended by the league. While the Cubs insist that they're keeping Russell around and playing a part in his rehabilitation, that hasn't stopped people from wondering if Russell has played his final game in a Cubs uniform.

If that ends up being the case, the Cubs would likely lean on Javy Baez at shortstop and utilize a combination of Ben Zobrist, Ian Happ, recently acquired infielder Daniel Descalso at second base, with David Bote backing up Baez at short.

Theo Epstein's front office has made a habit of trying to find diamonds in the rough or turn cast-off veterans into contributors on winning rosters, and Tulowitzki would have been no different. But Tulowitzki picked the Yankees on a league-minimum salary.

It's tough to project what Tulowitzki's role will be with the Yankees. He's coming off several injury-plagued seasons and missed the entirety of 2018 after having surgery on both heels. The Toronto Blue Jays made the surprising decision to just pay the remaining \$38 million remaining on his contract and send him to free agency rather than keep him on their roster. The Yankees do have a hole at shortstop, at least temporarily, while Didi Gregorius spends the first half of the 2019 season recovering from Tommy John surgery. The Yankees are also involved in a free-agent pursuit of Manny Machado, who has two Gold Gloves at third base but played shortstop last season and wants to keep playing shortstop.

But Tulowitzki supposedly impressed during his free-agent workout, and perhaps he's well enough to once more be an everyday shortstop. Combine the opportunity to do that with the fact that the Yankees are as good as any team out there, coming off a 100-win season, and even without Machado they could be the preseason World Series favorites. Playing any role on a team like that could be an attractive thing for a veteran who just deposited almost \$40 million into his bank account. And then there's a small personal connection, with Tulowitzki growing up idolizing Derek Jeter and supposedly wanting to play for the Bronx Bombers.

The biggest unknown in all this, though, is Tulowitzki's health, and it could very well turn out that he's unable to make the kinds of contributions required of a season-long starter. But the Yankees have enough infield depth — and could potentially still add an All Star in Machado — that he might not need to be able to be a starter all season long.

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Chicago Tribune

Operating in Bears' shadow no problem for quiet Cubs: 'I'm pulling for them,' Theo Epstein says
By Paul Sullivan

Chicago's intense focus on the Bears has managed to render the Cubs invisible this offseason, something you might have thought impossible only a couple of years ago.

Of course, the Cubs haven't done anything of note other than signing free-agent infielder Daniel Descalso, so it's probably best to stay out of the spotlight during Bears Mania.

"I'm just happy for them," Cubs President Theo Epstein said Friday from his Wrigley Field office. "It's great to see a plan come together like that. They're a really likable, fun team and you can tell they care about each other and play really hard, so I'm pulling for them."

The longer the Bears' postseason run, the longer the Cubs can remain in the shadows, from which Epstein generally prefers to operate. He said at the start of the offseason the Cubs would be relying on the same nucleus to get them back to where they want to be in 2019 and repeatedly harped about sticking to the budget.

Nothing much has changed since then, other than Anthony Rizzo getting married. A pre-Christmas rumor suggesting Bryce Harper magically might sign with the Cubs at the end of the winter appears to be little more than a pipe dream of overimaginative tweeters, though Epstein declined to address Harper or any other free agents.

It seems against Epstein's nature to remain inactive through an entire offseason. Early in the Cubs' rebuild he couldn't help himself and gave Edwin Jackson a four-year, \$52 million deal in 2013 that proved to be a disaster.

But Epstein insisted it's not that difficult for him to wait for the right moment to make a move.

"There are times to be aggressive and times to be patient, and there are times when you can be aggressive and times where you have to be patient," he said. "Every offseason is unique. We're working hard, and there are a lot of things we're trying to do behind the scenes to make sure we have a successful season next year.

"I know thus far we haven't added the big names that get the fans excited. I understand that's part of the expectations in the offseason.

"But ultimately we'll be judged by how we play, and we're doing everything we can to have a really successful season and live up to our expectations and our standards."

With about five weeks left until spring training, Epstein said he has had more trade discussions than free-agent talk of late. He reiterated the Cubs are focused on adding to the bullpen.

“But we’re monitoring free agency,” he said, “and if there is something that’s practical for us we’ll be aggressive in the right bucket.”

Epstein and the front office spent the last few weeks interviewing candidates for the bench-coach vacancy created when Brandon Hyde left to become the Orioles manager. The Cubs hired Mark Loretta for the role, and having someone compatible with Joe Maddon could be more important than ever because Maddon was so familiar with Hyde and longtime sidekick Dave Martinez before him.

Maddon also interviewed the candidates by phone from his Florida home, and Epstein said Loretta impressed everyone.

“Mark’s a highly intelligent person who was a student of the game as a player and has stayed involved in the game the last nine years,” Epstein said. “He’s someone who sees the game extremely well, understands players, understands strategy and is a connector and a really good communicator.”

“He and Joe hit it off really well.”

The Cubs still have plenty of time to make changes, but no one would be surprised if they do some tweaking instead major rehabbing.

When the new year arrives, it’s natural to put the past behind and look ahead. It’ll be easy for Epstein and Cubs fans alike to do.

A bad final week ruined the 2018 season, culminating in the wild-card loss to the Rockies. Still, you can’t win 95 games without a room full of talent, so it’s not like they’re starting 2019 at the bottom.

Even if they do nothing major this offseason, the Cubs figure to compete for the playoffs again if most of the players play up to their capabilities.

Either way, Epstein admits he’s getting antsy for spring training to begin.

“I am,” he said. “We still have a lot of work to do and have a number of things going on, including arbitration (cases).

“But getting play underway will be good for everybody’s mental health.”

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Chicago Tribune

Sorry, MLB, but baseball takes a back seat to the NFL when it comes to fan interest

By Paul Sullivan

In an attempt to be snarky on the final weekend of the NFL regular season, Major League Baseball sent out a wordless tweet that contained two emojis of a baseball and football.

Though I’m not fluent in emoji-speak, I believe the message was “baseball is greater than football.”

The tweet has garnered more than 35,000 likes and 1,800 replies since it was posted Dec. 29, and sparking debate in an otherwise dull offseason obviously was MLB’s objective.

For many, there's no debate at all. Baseball is the so-called national pastime and a beloved sport handed down from generation to generation. But whether it's a better sport than football is in the eye of the beholder. Most fans I know love both sports, and because they overlap only in September and October, there's no reason to choose one over the other outside of a few Sundays every fall.

But the seemingly innocuous tweet might be a sign MLB is getting worried about its sinking status in the modern sports world. Overall MLB attendance was down 4 percent in 2018 at 69.6 million, the first time it has dropped under 70 million since 2003.

And according to Sports Media Watch, 40 of the 50 most-watched sporting events in the U.S. in 2018 were NFL games, including the top seven.

The World Series is baseball's showcase, and 2018 featured an intriguing matchup between two iconic franchises with national followings. But according to the Nielsen Company, the decisive Game 5 between the Red Sox and Dodgers ranked only 38th on the list of prime-time TV telecasts in 2018 with 17.64 million viewers.

The Red Sox's Series-clinching win finished behind three NBA Finals games between the Warriors and Cavaliers, 14 "Sunday Night Football" games, one "Thursday Night Football" game, the NFL season opener and two College Football Playoff games, not to mention four NFL postseason games, including Super Bowl LII, which naturally was tops with 103.39 million viewers.

As the NFL playoffs begin this weekend, it's apparent the MLB emojis are backward.

MLB knows it has issues, which is why the league and players union made a concerted effort last season to speed up the game with shorter breaks between innings and limited mound visits. At the general managers meetings in November, MLB Deputy Commissioner Dan Halem noted average game time was down around 4½ minutes to about three hours, saying it was "going in the right direction."

Still, the attendance drop is glaring, thanks in part to early weather-related issues (a record 28 postponements in April), the proliferation of rebuilding (some say tanking) teams and increasingly high ticket prices. Halem said owners are "heavily focused on making sure if people, particularly families, want to attend baseball games, that there are options to do so that are affordable."

So what happened?

"Generally, there's a lot of competition for people's time," Halem said. "Our local (regional sports network) ratings were good. People may be consuming baseball in different ways. But it's an area that the commissioner is focused on."

An absence of action might be the biggest problem. There were more strikeouts (41,207) than hits (41,109) for the first time in MLB history, and the lack of balls in play leads to more dead time even when batters aren't loitering outside the box adjusting their batting gloves. That isn't expected to change anytime soon, though Halem said opinions are mixed on whether the game must change to create more action.

"A lot of people like the way the game is being played right now," he said. "Other people like to see more balls in play. On any of these issues, I don't think there is a right answer, and some of these trends may be cyclical, too, and may reverse themselves because teams are very competitive. And as soon as one club starts doing something that's successful, reducing their strikeout rate as a team for example, then other clubs follow."

“Look, it’s an area we’re focused on, but there is really no right answer when we talk about these issues. There are a lot of opinions, and the commissioner and our owners will make whatever changes they believe are appropriate.”

Meanwhile, the NFL just completed its highest-scoring season in history and saw a 5 percent ratings increase from 2017. Some games last 3½ to four hours, and no one raises a stink. This postseason includes venerable franchises such as the Bears and Cowboys, new stars such as Patrick Mahomes and Jared Goff and old standbys such as Tom Brady and J.J. Watt.

Baseball will always be a great sport and the preferred choice of millions. There’s no place I’d rather be on a summer day than in a ballpark. But when it comes to star power and watchability, football is king.

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The Athletic

Rosenthal: Why the Cubs are in a bind; the meaning behind the Mets’ moves; ex-manager finds interesting new gig

By Ken Rosenthal

Bryce Harper to the Cubs? Hah.

In late November, the Cubs’ budgetary restrictions caused them to lose free-agent reliever Jesse Chavez to the Rangers on a two-year, \$8 million contract. Little has changed since then, and the Cubs would need to clear money to sign even a modestly priced reliever such as free-agent righty Adam Warren, according to major-league sources.

The Cubs like Warren, whom they acquired from the Yankees in the Starlin Castro trade on Dec. 8, 2015, then sent back to New York in the Aroldis Chapman deal on July 25, 2016. Club officials are concerned about the bullpen, and continue to talk to other free agents of interest, sources say. But with a projected luxury-tax payroll of \$228.4 million, according to RosterResource.com, the team remains in a financial box.

At least one trade seems necessary, but which player would the Cubs move? Infielder/outfielder Ben Zobrist, set to earn \$12 million in the final year of his contract, would seem a logical candidate. But Zobrist turns 38 on May 26, and the market is flooded at second base, his primary infield position. In addition, Zobrist’s contract allows him to block trades to eight teams.

The Cubs explored deals for a number of their young players early in the offseason but found nothing to their liking. Among the players they discussed: Shortstop Addison Russell, who will serve the final 29 games of his 40-game suspension for violating baseball’s domestic-violence policy at the start of the 2019 season.

Russell, who is projected to earn \$4.3 million in his second year of arbitration, according to MLBTradeRumors.com, will forfeit a prorated portion of his salary while suspended. The Cubs spoke with clubs about him before their much-criticized decision to offer him a contract on Nov. 30. Most teams had no interest in a player serving a domestic-violence suspension.

A couple of unidentified clubs, however, at least contemplated adding Russell, and one even discussed the matter with ownership, sources said. That team backed off after Russell’s ex-wife, Melisa Reidy, and

previous girlfriend and mother of his first child, Mallory Engstrom, went public in mid-December with new details of his alleged abuse against them.

If the Cubs are going to move Russell, who turns 25 on Jan. 23, it will not be until he demonstrates better performance on the field (his OPS declined from .738 to .722 to .657 the past three seasons) and better conduct off it.

On both fronts, he faces an uphill fight.

Per club policy, Russell will not attend the annual Cubs' Convention in Chicago from Jan. 18-20. The team does not invite players on the restricted list to the event, a source said. Pitching prospect Oscar De La Cruz, serving an 80-game suspension for violating baseball's joint drug program, also will not be present. Russell is expected to report to spring training early and address the media before the team's first full workout.

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