



WHITE SOX HEADLINES OF OCTOBER 25, 2018

“Which is the real Carlos Rodon? Who will close in 2019? 5 offseason pitching questions for the White Sox” ... Paul Sullivan, Chicago Tribune

“If less Chris Sale is the answer, then baseball has lost its way” ... Rick Morrissey, Sun-Times

“Why moving Moncada to third base makes sense for Chicago White Sox” ... Scot Gregor, Daily Herald

“White Sox prospects Luis Curbelo, Steele Walker are still optimistic, still toolsy after a down year in Kannapolis” ... James Fegan, The Athletic

Which is the real Carlos Rodon? Who will close in 2019? 5 offseason pitching questions for the White Sox

By Paul Sullivan / Chicago Tribune / October 24, 2018

This is the second in a series of position-by-position analyses of the White Sox entering the offseason.

1. Which is the real Carlos Rodon?

The stunning ending to Michael Kopech’s season after two seasons of hype and hope leaves the Sox rotation with a big hole.

Kopech was penciled in with Carlos Rodon and Reynaldo Lopez, giving the Sox a top three most teams would envy. Sox fans could flash back to 1983, the first year Britt Burns, LaMarr Hoyt and Richard Dotson teamed up after Hoyt spent the '82 season as closer. There’s nothing better than watching a young rotation grow up together, and the Sox had the makings of a special one.

But elbow reconstruction surgery will sideline Kopech for all of 2019, and Rodon mysteriously slumped during the final month, putting a damper on another otherwise dominant season.

Rodon returned in June after rehabbing from arthroscopic shoulder surgery the previous September and went 6-3 with a 2.70 ERA over his first 14 starts. But he proceeded to go 0-5 with a 9.22 ERA over his last six starts, while opposing hitters batted .339 against him with a 1.024 OPS. Rodon lasted only 3 1/3 innings over his last two starts, allowing 14 runs to increase his ERA to 4.18.

Paging Dr. Cooper. Are you there, Don?

“You know, I had some clarity coming back this year and pitching,” Rodon told reporters after lasting one inning in his final start in Minnesota. “Ate some innings and had some fun even though this last month hasn’t gone the way I would like, but it was good.”

Actually, there is less clarity now than in August, when Rodon looked like an ace. Sox manager Rick Renteria said he was healthy. Rodon still has great stuff. Whether the slump was because of mental fatigue is a question only Rodon can answer.

Either way the Sox have to hope it was a blip. They need Rodon to be their horse in 2019 and beyond. Heading into his fifth season, it’s probably now or never.

2. Will the Sox bring in a dependable veteran starter or hold a spot open for Dylan Cease?

Rodon, Lopez and Lucas Giolito are all assured of rotation spots, while Dylan Covey should begin the season as the No. 5 starter. The Sox figure to add one veteran innings-eater, and here is where I'm obligated to point out they hold a \$16 million option on James Shields, whom they still love, but ...

The Sox certainly have enough money to spend, though perhaps not the incentive to do so in Year 3 of the rebuild. A glut of fair-to-mediocre starters will be entering the market, including non-tenders, and the Sox aren't expected to spend for someone like Nathan Eovaldi or Patrick Corbin. Triple-A starter Jordan Stephens, a fifth-round pick out of Rice in 2015, could be given a chance to win a spot in spring training.

Remember Cease was rewarded with Cactus League starts last year, despite the fact they were starting him out at Class A Winston-Salem no matter what. It showed what the Sox think of Cease's potential, and he made the most of the experience.

The Sox made the right move in shutting Cease down on an innings limit in late August, and figure to give him time at Triple-A Charlotte before a call-up. As MLB Pipeline's Minor League Pitcher of the Year, Cease's arrival should rival Kopech's grand entrance and at least gives Sox fans something to look forward to next year..

3. Is the 2019 closer on the current roster?

Unless it's Jace Fry, probably not.

The Sox can experiment with the bullpen in another non-contending season, with no standouts and plenty of young arms with options. Unless they plan to contend, they can groom Fry or Ian Hamilton as the closer, perhaps in open competition next spring at Camelback Ranch.

The Sox tried this route with Bob Howry in their last big rebuild two decades ago. Then, early in 2000, they turned to another youngster, Keith Foulke, who helped take them to a division title. Maybe Fry or Hamilton can be the next Foulke, who went on to become the Red Sox closer when they ended their drought in 2004.

If the White Sox choose to sign a free-agent closer, there will be plenty of options, including Kelvin Herrera, Jeury Familia and even former Sox reliever David Robertson. Free-agent signee Joakim Soria did a respectable job this year before he was dealt to the Brewers for a couple of prospects, so a similar four-month rental wouldn't be surprising.

But with the escalating price of closers, it's probably best to develop your own.

4. Will Danny Farquhar return?

Farquhar, who missed most of 2019 after suffering a ruptured brain aneurysm in the Sox dugout on April 20, has been planning a comeback almost since he left the hospital.

"Every doctor I've spoken to believes in me and says I can come back," Farquhar told the Tribune's David Haugh during a workout at his California home last July.

A comeback from a brain hemorrhage would be an inspiring story next spring, but whether Farquhar will be healthy enough to attempt a return that quickly is unknown. Obviously Farquhar's health is the primary concern, and there is no need to rush him back.

5. Will Matt Davidson be available soon out of the bullpen?

It's a great hot stove topic — struggling slugger attempts to become a pitcher in the offseason. But Davidson's success in three scoreless appearances on the mound during blowout games doesn't mean he's ready to step into the bullpen, even the White Sox bullpen. If he's really serious about this, Davidson

should agree to spend a year or more in the minors to develop into a reliable middle reliever. OK, never mind. After hitting .378 with eight home runs in 12 games against the Royals but only .211 with 12 home runs in 111 games against the rest of baseball, Davidson may need to focus on his offense.

If less Chris Sale is the answer, then baseball has lost its way

By Rick Morrissey / Sun-Times / October 24, 2018

I want no part of a sport in which Chris Sale is pulled after four-plus innings of a World Series game.

I don't care if the analytics say it was the right move, and I don't care that, after the left-hander gave up three runs Tuesday, the Red Sox went on to beat the Dodgers 8-4 in Game 1.

The Red Sox won. Baseball lost.

The former White Sox pitcher is so much fun to watch. You wouldn't expect there to be menace in a 6-6, 180-pound man who looks like he needs to poke extra holes in his belt to keep his pants up. But it's there in the way he uncoils his windup. It's there in the way the ball leaves his hand during his sidearm delivery. His fastball will singe your eyebrows, and his breaking ball seems to come out of right field. God help you if you're a left-handed hitter.

He's the show. When the plug is pulled on that show, as it was after Sale walked the first batter of the fifth inning, with the Red Sox leading 3-2, you're left with a halting, lurching parade of relievers. It's about as enjoyable as reading mortgage documents.

The goal is to win the game. The analytics people make that pronouncement, drop the mic and walk away. But there is no proof the Red Sox wouldn't have won the game if Sale had pitched into, say, the seventh. There is no proof Sale, who had thrown 91 pitches to that point, wouldn't have gotten stingier.

There is proof that Sale, who might go down as one of the best pitchers in history, was being treated like a disposable wipe. It didn't make for good television.

We're being deprived of possible greatness here. In Sale's case, we might be in the process of being deprived of Randy Johnson, vintage 2001. Johnson went 5-1 in the playoffs for the Diamondbacks that season, never pitched fewer than seven innings (except in a Game 7 relief appearance in the World Series), averaged 114 pitches, had a 1.52 ERA and was named the World Series MVP.

Other than Johnson's 4-inch height advantage, he and Sale are the same guy. Same left-handed nastiness. Same fear-inducer.

Same guy, different world.

Why moving Moncada to third base makes sense for Chicago White Sox

By Scot Gregor / Daily Herald / October 24, 2018

As soon as the World Series wraps up, the Manny Machado rumor mill is going to kick into overdrive.

Machado already has been in the spotlight during the postseason, but not for his obvious skills as a baseball player.

In Game 4 of the NLCS, Machado, as he crossed first base, intentionally kicked the Brewers' Jesus Aguilar. That cost the Dodgers' infielder a \$10,000 fine and unending abuse from Milwaukee fans for the rest of the series.

Throughout his seven-year career, mostly spent with the Baltimore Orioles, Machado has been no stranger to controversy.

That could be a factor when he hits the free-agent market following the World Series, and some think it could be an issue for the Chicago White Sox.

Approaching the two-year mark on their rebuild, the Sox are loaded with outfield and catching prospects, and they are in decent shape on the pitching front despite losing potential ace Michael Kopech (Tommy John surgery) for the 2019 season.

Third base remains a big question mark, and that's why Machado's name has been linked to the White Sox.

In that sense, the Sox pursuing Machado does make sense this winter.

They likely would be OK with some of Machado's antics, even if National League MVP in waiting Christian Yelich called him a "dirty player," among other things, last week.

Here is the bigger problem with the White Sox courting Machado: money.

The Sox have plenty to spend, but not the expected \$300 million Machado is expected to be seeking over the course of a 10-year deal.

The more likely option looks like this: the White Sox move second baseman Yoan Moncada to third next season and beyond.

"It's conceivable," Sox general manager Rick Hahn said in late September.

Hahn indicated the potential position switch is going to be discussed this off-season, and the guess here is that talk leads to action.

When he was drafted with the No. 4 overall pick in June, Nick Madrigal was projected to be a shortstop with the White Sox, even though he played second base with Oregon State.

In 39 games playing defense with the Arizona League Sox, low Class A Kannapolis and high A Winston-Salem, Madrigal played second base 38 times and shortstop one time.

Madrigal is ticketed to spend most or all of 2019 in the minor leagues, but second base looks to be his spot when he does join the White Sox.

That gives Moncada the entire '19 season to get comfortable at third base, the same position he briefly played with the Boston Red Sox in 2016.

This season Moncada ranked last among qualified AL second basemen with 20 errors and a .965 fielding percentage.

"I do think he has made a great deal of progress at second base," Hahn said. "I also think he has the athleticism to be an above-average defender at other positions. It's a subject for further conversation."

White Sox prospects Luis Curbelo, Steele Walker are still optimistic, still toolsy after a down year in Kannapolis

By James Fegan / The Athletic / October 24, 2018

When the Kannapolis Intimidators were quickly drummed out of the South Atlantic League playoffs last month, the center of their lineup featured the best two prospects the White Sox had at their Low-A affiliate.

The only problem with this extremely typical practice is that Luis Curbelo and Steele Walker were arguably the two weakest hitters in the Intimidators lineup down the stretch. Curbelo hit .237/.282/.338 in 83 games in his first stretch at a full-season affiliate after being freed from extended spring training in May, and Walker

struggled to .186/.246/.310 there in 31 games after being drafted 46th overall in June and spending some time on the shelf nursing a pulled right oblique.

The White Sox once earned the reputation for rushing their prospects back when their attempts to contend demanded reinforcements as soon as they were available. That hasn't been the case under player development director Chris Getz and during the rebuild, but Walker and Curbelo were two of the youngest players on their team and it showed, but they had reasons beyond that.

"Coming off the oblique injury, you get thrown straight into games," Walker said at instructs in Glendale. "There's no time for adjustments. Hard to get comfortable off of that, so that's what I experienced. Instructs was something I was really looking forward to, to be able to take a step back, play less games, more time in the cage, more time taking batting practice. It's something that I really enjoy."

Walker turned 22 in July, so while he won't be out of place if he returns to Kannapolis next year to get a foothold — and maybe to allow the outfield glut to shake out — his inability to find anything resembling a rhythm with his left-handed stroke at the plate needed a bit of an explanation. When he lays it all out in the organization's sunniest east Texas drawl — the chaos of getting drafted, rehabbing an injury and shuffling through short-season levels — he certainly has one.

"I fly up to Chicago," Walker begins. "There for a day in a half, get all the physicals done, man. Then fly down to Arizona and start rehabbing the oblique. I was here for I think two weeks, two and a half weeks? As soon as I got healthy I played two games (in Glendale), then I flew to Utah. Salt Lake City, Utah. Then an Uber to Orem. I met the team late. It was like an hour-long Uber. It was a weird experience, an hour-long Uber. Then the team plays that night, then we bus in the middle of the night to Grand Junction, Colorado. So then I'm in Grand Junction, Colorado. Play four games there, then bus all the way back to Great Falls, Montana, a 14-hour trip. So I'm in Great Falls, Montana for a week and a half.

"Less than two weeks and then you get a call late after one game and then you're flying all the way to North Carolina, you know. It was just bam, bam, bam, bam. I kinda enjoyed that, you know? Because you get to meet so many people and be in all these different places. It's kind of good being uncomfortable sometimes. For me to start off my professional career being so uncomfortable and coming off an injury and playing games and you've got a wood bat and new teammates and new places you've never been. It was a whirlwind man but I mean, why not start in the fire? Why not start where you don't know what's going on? Next year we'll feel way more comfortable because you've been there, been traveling and you've been through all the newness."

Walker raved about how outfield coordinator Aaron Rowand was preparing him to live up to the White Sox's hope he can mix in at center field, but even external scouts who liked his athleticism coming out of the draft projected him as more likely to play in an outfield corner. While he's sure to play it well, to carry his profile, some of the pop of the guy who slugged .352/.441/.606 in his junior season in Oklahoma will need to show up in some capacity to show that 2018 was a blip.

Curbelo is in a similar boat despite spending all of instructs taking reps at shortstop, and even getting starts there instead of fourth overall pick Nick Madrigal. There's not much sign of it yet, but scouts expect his strong 6-foot-3, 185-pound frame to fill out and push him to third base, where his plus arm will serve him well and his bat speed and power potential will have to play up.

"I see myself playing all over," Curbelo said. "I feel like I've got a pretty good glove, obviously my arm and my range to my left side is one of the strongest things I have as an infielder."

If you're a hardcore White Sox prospect hound, it can seem like Curbelo has been around forever, edging out Amado Nuñez as the most talked about farmhand who pretty much no one in the fanbase had actually seen play. Missing all but three games at Great Falls due to a meniscus tear in 2017 has kept all his progress hidden away on backfields during instructs and in games where the statistics don't count, and seemingly stalled his progress. Yet Curbelo won't turn 21 until next month and just making it to Kannapolis — even for an ugly season — still marks him as relatively precocious.

“Watched a lot of videos,” Curbelo said of staying productive in his rehab, which kept him away from his hometown in Puerto Rico for all but two weeks of the offseason. “Watched a lot of guys while I was sitting on the sidelines out there in the field, just learning while I was out on rehab. Just learning how to take care of my body throughout the season. Just being able to show up every day.”

If Curbelo’s quiet introduction to the Sox system has kept him off your radar entirely, he’s actually the earliest and most high profile high school gamble in Nick Hostetler’s tenure as scouting director. The Sox gave essentially third-round money (\$700,000) to get an 18-year-old Curbelo to sign out of the sixth round from Cocoa High School in Florida. After an injury and family commitments kept his father and grandfather from leaving Puerto Rico and pursuing their own baseball dreams stateside (his father got to see him play as a professional for the first time this year) Curbelo “just felt I was ready” to get his pro career started as soon as possible.

That may have kept him from working his way toward being a first-day pick coming out of college next year, but the White Sox still see him as the type of prospect worthy of pushing Nick Madrigal to second base. They held that view even through a 2018 season that was more about flashes and moments that verify to scouts that the tools are still present, than consistency and production.

“He stays on the ball well,” Kannapolis hitting coach Jamie Dismuke said. “He just gets in trouble when he wants to pull. But he’s a young hitter and he’s learning. He’s controlling the strike zone. He’s a pleasant surprise. He’s swinging the bat well. His average might not show it but he’s hitting the ball hard. All young hitters do it. They want to yank everything, but when his direction is left-center field, he’s reacting, then he’s solid. Like I said, his average doesn’t show how many balls he’s hit hard. He’s hit some balls hard and had nothing to show for it.”

After 2018, that last line could apply to both Walker and Curbelo, who despite their athleticism and prospect pedigree, are eventually going to need to produce like the corner bats they’re projected to be. If not to put themselves in future White Sox lineups, than at least to be more helpful to Kannapolis.
