



CHICAGO CUBS DAILY CLIPS

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October 4, 2018

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Chicago Sun-Times

How to fix Cubs' hitting in four words or less: Bryce Harper, Manny Machado

By Gordon Wittenmyer

Cubs president Theo Epstein spent thousands of words talking to the media Wednesday about what went wrong with the hitting and theories for addressing it.

He could have used just two words: Bryce Harper.

Or maybe these two words: Manny Machado.

The Cubs got in the limbo line behind other big-market teams last winter to scrunch their payroll under the \$197 million luxury-tax threshold and "reset" the penalty schedule to be in position to spend big again this year.

Does Epstein have the appetite to go big this winter for the kind of hitter that would immediately lengthen and quickly repair a lineup that scored one or no runs 40 times this year — with only two runs in its last 24 innings on its way to a quick exit from the postseason.

"I don't know yet," Epstein said of how much the Cubs might be willing to spend this winter after busting in 2018 on \$185 million worth of pitchers in Yu Darvish, Tyler Chatwood and Brandon Morrow.

"We've spent a lot of money on players, and that's not always the answer, to rush back out and spend more. There are a lot of attractive players out there and some impact players out there, and we'll get together and figure out what's possible, what's not possible and all the best approaches to this offseason."

For now, two things are sure:

First: "The offense broke, somewhere along the line," Epstein said.

Second: With the luxury-tax threshold taking its biggest year-over-year jump (\$9 million) this winter of the remaining years on the collective-bargaining agreement, and the Cubs' reset, this is not the time to shy away from spending if a big-ticket player is the answer.

But while Harper in next year's outfield or Machado in next year's infield would certainly help, the bigger problems with the lineup's recurring anemia might be right in front of everyone's face.

"Of course there's going to be thorough examination, and of course we're going to spend all of our energy trying to fix it," Epstein vowed. "And fixing it."

Then he recounted the Cubs' first-half production: first in the National League in runs and OPS, first in the majors in on-base percentage and third in the NL in slugging.

And the second-half free fall — a run fewer per game and NL rankings of 13th in slugging, ninth in OBP and 10th in OPS.

Twenty times in 70 second-half games, the Cubs scored one or no runs.

"Unacceptable," Epstein said.

But don't blame the new hitting coach, Chili Davis. Or some kind of shift away from the so-called launch-angle/slug philosophy to an all-fields approach that led to the power drop-off.

"This is not on the coaches," said Epstein, who nonetheless said no determination has been made on whether all will be back next year.

Most of it is probably as simple as this: The Cubs had four hitters good enough and established enough to hit good pitching on any given day, and one of them, Daniel Murphy, was only there the last two months of the year.

Ben Zobrist was limited to 139 games because of a schedule built to give him generous rest to keep him healthy all year. Anthony Rizzo opened in a career-worst six-week slump.

And, most of all, Kris Bryant had the most injury-compromised season of his career at any level, missing lengthy stretches because of shoulder problems and playing at less than 100 percent for much of the season when he wasn't on the disabled list.

The closest thing to an established hitter on the roster outside of those four is Jason Heyward, who has struggled in recent years. MVP candidate Javy Baez is still growing.

And nobody else on the roster has come close to proving he's an every-day, professional, productive big-league hitter — despite internal pronouncements to the contrary and a questionable All-Star selection or two mixed in.

Bryant, who has seen Cubs doctors and his own for the shoulder, has been assured that rest will allow him to return to full strength next season. Murphy is probably not coming back.

Beyond that?

"We have to be an offensive force," Epstein said. "We should be with our talent. But it's probably time to stop evaluating this in terms of talent and start evaluating it in terms of production."

Perhaps summed up in as little as two words?

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Chicago Sun-Times

Joe Maddon is still the Cubs' manager; for how long is still unsettled

By Rick Morrissey

I didn't keep track of how many times Cubs president Theo Epstein started a sentence Wednesday with, "If we're being honest here," but it was a lot.

So in the face of rumors, innuendo and vague rumblings about Joe Maddon's status, let's take at face value all the things Epstein said about him at a news conference:

† Maddon remains the team's manager.

† Epstein really likes Maddon.

† The two men have yet to talk about a contract extension for Maddon, whose current deal runs out after next season.

† Epstein doesn't seem to think that allowing a manager to work through the final year of his contract is necessarily a bad thing or that lame-duck status points to a manager not eventually getting a new contract.

Is that enough clarity for you?

I didn't think so.

If you're looking for something a little meatier, well, you — and Maddon — might have to wait awhile. The day after the abrupt end to the Cubs' season, a 13-inning loss to the Rockies in the National League wild-card game, Epstein couldn't or wouldn't address Maddon's long-term future.

"We just finished playing, so I have not turned to that," Epstein said. "I certainly haven't talked to Joe about it yet, but I think we still have to think about that part of it internally first, then talk about it with Joe, and if there's an appropriate time to discuss it with you all, we will. But it certainly will happen in that order."

Does that clear things up for you?

I didn't think so.

It's hard to see how Epstein could rationalize getting rid of a manager who has won a World Series, been to three NL Championship Series and won 90 or more games four seasons in a row in Chicago. But stranger things have happened.

Maddon went into this season under pressure. His team had followed its 2016 World Series title with a slow start in 2017 and spent the rest of the season pulling itself out of it. Maddon responded this year with his best managing performance to date in Chicago, leading a team that struggled with injuries to 95 victories.

Perhaps Epstein isn't averse to having Maddon go through another prove-it season before offering him a new contract.

One factor could be Maddon's salary. He makes \$6 million a year, a huge amount at a time when managers' salaries are going down. If you give him an extension, that likely will mean a raise. Do the Cubs still have an appetite for paying that much money to a manager?

Don't make the mistake of thinking this is solely the Cubs' decision. Maddon would be the frontrunner for just about any managerial opening.

I'd ask if that clears up his employment status for you, but I think I know your answer.

What is clear is that Epstein wanted to make it clear that he likes Maddon.

"I enjoy having Joe around personally, and I like having him as the manager of this club, and I really like having the most wins in baseball the last four years," he said. "I don't like going home the first day of October. That's not on Joe. That's not. I look forward to him coming back next year with some unfinished business, as we all have."

A lot of people had spent the previous days and weeks trying to read the job-status tea leaves. They parsed Epstein's most recent comments, looking at what words he chose to use when talking about Maddon and which ones he avoided. Epstein wasn't pleased with a story by The Athletic's Ken Rosenthal that suggested there was tension between the two.

"I know there was a sort of high-profile report [Wednesday] morning that was not accurate," Epstein said. "I didn't read the whole thing, but I saw in there that there were some claims that he and I had personal friction. Not true at all. We have a terrific working relationship.

"We don't agree all the time about baseball issues, and that's the way it should be. I don't want a yes man as the manager, and I don't want it working as a yes-man relationship the other way, either. I think there should be discourse and debate and healthy, trusting relationships where you work together to make the organization better. And that's the way it is."

Is it possible to make a case for getting rid of Maddon? If you clashed with his look-at-me personality, sure. But you can't answer that question without asking another: What manager out there would be better? That would seem like a juicy fastball: Nobody.

And yet, the next time Epstein strikes anyone as unwilling to make changes would be the first.

One argument I've heard is that you can't jettison Maddon for his failings without jettisoning Epstein for his, including the disastrous signings of Yu Darvish and Tyler Chatwood. It's a tidy argument, but it's also one that would have almost no chance of happening. The guess here is that the Ricketts family, comfortable with the Cubs' cuddly game-day "experience," wouldn't want to get rid of Maddon, a fan favorite. To think that they'd want to go through the effort of looking for a new team president and a new manager is hard to envision.

We're left to wait and see. Run us through how you'll decide on a direction with your manager again, Theo.

"Step 1 is get away from the emotion of the season a little bit, get some perspective on everything, process it and start thinking, with all the personnel — playing and not playing — what the best course of action for the organization is and then communicate," he said.

Got that?

I didn't think so.

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Chicago Sun-Times

What's Cubs' next move after MLB suspends Addison Russell for domestic violence?

By Gordon Wittenmyer

By waiting until the Cubs were done with their brief playoff run to announce Addison Russell's 40-game suspension after its domestic-violence investigation had concluded, Major League Baseball kept the responsibility and potential distraction as far removed from the team for as long as it could.

But as the temperature in Chicago suddenly rose 25 degrees overnight, the heat shifted to team president Theo Epstein and ownership for the next step in addressing the young shortstop's career with the Cubs.

Russell, who had repeatedly denied the accusations, became the ninth player suspended under baseball's domestic-violence policy Wednesday when he waived the appeal process and accepted the penalty.

Russell's suspension includes time already spent on administrative leave this season, which means he must sit out the first 28 games next season. For whatever team he may be playing for at that point.

The chances that it's the Cubs?

"I don't know," Epstein said.

Epstein said the team now has "an obligation to find out as much as we can about what happened," then reach out to Russell and his ex-wife, Melisa Reidy, whose emotional blog post less than three weeks ago relaunched an investigation that had been dormant for more than a year.

"He accepted this discipline, so I want to talk to him about what that means and find out more," Epstein said. "And the victim first and foremost deserves our outreach and support. That will be forthcoming very quickly.

"Addy, in my opinion, also should not just be completely dismissed. He deserves our support and our help going forward, too."

MLB's action includes participation in "a confidential and comprehensive evaluation and treatment program."

Russell, a 2016 All-Star who has struggled at the plate and with injuries since then, is not expected to return to the Cubs, who shopped him in trade talks last season without getting a strong-enough response.

Russell issued a statement Wednesday that read, in part: "After gaining full understanding of the situation, I have concluded it's in the best interest of my family to accept MLB's proposed resolution of this matter."

Commissioner Rob Manfred, who said on the field before Tuesday's game that the timing of an announcement would be sensitive to postseason "roster decisions," said in his statement:

"Having reviewed all of the available evidence, I have concluded that Mr. Russell violated the policy and should be subject to discipline in the form of an unpaid suspension that will cover 40 games."

Under the policy, Manfred has full discretion on the length of the suspension. Four other suspensions have been greater than Russell's, including the 100-game suspension given to Padres pitcher Jose Torres in June in a case that involved criminal charges of assault with a deadly weapon.

Russell's case involved no police incidents on record or legal charges.

The case began in June of last year, when a friend of his ex-wife published a quickly deleted Instagram post accusing him of physically abusing his wife. But neither the friend nor Reidy was willing to cooperate last year with MLB investigators as she pursued a divorce, which recently was finalized.

Epstein seemed to acknowledge the gravity of the Cubs' next step with — or without — Russell.

"We have to understand with all of our words and our actions going forward, whether we know it or not, we're sending messages to our fans who all have their own unique backgrounds and histories and sensitivities and perspectives, and that's important," he said. "But I honestly, personally think the most important thing going forward is to be part of the solution and to focus on making this a better place."

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Chicago Sun-Times

Theo Epstein: 'Complacent' Cubs need to rediscover urgency, edge of 2016 squad

By Steve Greenberg

In the final analysis: Boy, did the Cubs get their you-know-whats handed to them.

Or, as pitcher Jon Lester so eloquently put it after Tuesday's wild-card game loss to the Rockies brought an unsatisfying season to a close, they got their you-know-whats "knocked in the dirt."

Different you-know-whats, same essential meaning.

In a season-ending meeting with the media on Wednesday at Wrigley Field, Cubs team president Theo Epstein agreed with his veteran ace that the team's failure to truly thrive in 2018 could be just what the doctor ordered.

"Maybe that's a good thing in the long run and it'll lead to the universal recognition that nothing will be given to us," he said.

But Epstein took it further than Lester, whose overriding message was that the Cubs ought to better appreciate this window of opportunity they have to win big. Epstein took it further than Javy Baez, too, after the shortstop's fiery declaration that he "doesn't want to hear about other teams" next season — that if the Cubs focus on themselves, no one will be able to block their path to the mountaintop.

In a nutshell, Epstein called the 2018 Cubs his own dirty word. He called them "complacent."

But the longer version is much better.

“There was a lot to grind through, and there was a lot to be proud of,” Epstein said. “But we could have done more from Day 1 through 162 as far as complete sense of urgency every day, being completely on mission every day, showing up with that assertiveness and that edge every single day to win.

“Ninety-five wins is tremendous. But sometimes divisions aren’t lost on the last day of the season when you only score one run, [or] they’re not lost in that last week of the season when the [Brewers] went 8-0 and you went 4-3. . . . Sometimes they’re lost early in the season when you have an opportunity to push for that sweep, but you’ve already got two out of three and you’re just not quite there with that killer instinct as a team.”

History will remember the Cubs’ offense choking on its own futility in the wild-card game, not to mention in the division tiebreaker against the Brewers that preceded it.

But what about the June series in Milwaukee when — after having steamrolled to an 8-1 lead in the season series — the Cubs failed to drop the hammer on the Brewers, instead losing back-to-back games to them by shutout? What about the anemic offensive nights in Pittsburgh, and later at home against the Pirates on the season’s final homestand? Epstein mentioned those damaging moments, among others.

“If you just show up playing it cool, knowing you’re talented, knowing it’s a long season and trusting that the talent will manifest over the course of 162, sometimes you come up one game short,” he said. “And that’s not who we are. It’s not who we want to be. It’s not what we’re all about.”

The feeling that “everything will be OK because we’re the Cubs,” as Epstein described it, never existed during the 2016 run to a World Series championship. Among the many things earned by those Cubs, by the way, was the right to be viewed as the standard by which all Cubs teams to come are measured. Spoiler alert: The last two teams haven’t measured up.

“The guys who’ve been here that whole time acknowledge that from Game 1 through 162 we had that sense of urgency, there was no complacency, we were completely on a mission and we showed up to assert ourselves and to win every single day. . . .

“But we have to own this. We have to be honest [that] it’s been a little different since 2016. We have to get back to that. In 2017 we didn’t show up for the first half of the season, and that put us in a 5½-game hole at the All-Star break, and we had to expend so much energy in the second half to get back on top of the division that we were fried by October and we didn’t accomplish our goal in October. And then this year, I think we all admit, in talking to the players we all know, that we had our chances to put away this division.”

Many Cubs players spoke in the aftermath of the wild-card loss about the rough stretch of the season — 42 games in 43 days — that made 95 victories at the end look plain impressive.

Yeah, well, this boss has made it clear he doesn’t want to hear about it anymore. It didn’t have to be so hard. The end result should have been better. Any other takeaway is just a load of you-know-what.

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Daily Herald

Rozner: This time, blaming the Chicago Cubs' Joe Maddon is unfair

By Barry Rozner

With the possible exception of some of you, no one has been more critical of Joe Maddon's in-game managing the last few years than your friendly neighborhood columnist.

Especially during the 2016 World Series run -- not to mention the 2017 series with Washington -- this space has not been kind to Maddon's use of the bullpen and his frequent early hook of starters.

But it's a reach to blame 2018 on the Chicago Cubs manager.

In fact, the job he did this year was at least on par with the remarkable way he managed his young core in 2015, and in some ways this might have been better.

Of course, some moves he made did not work out, but most of what he tried was a direct result of losing closers Brandon Morrow and Pedro Strop and having to navigate an overused group of guys like Steve Cishek and Jesse Chavez, with the added benefit of an earned lack of trust in so many others and absolutely no offense.

It was not at all surprising given the circumstances -- which include a 95-win season and averaging 97 the last four years -- that Theo Epstein was very much in Maddon's corner when he faced the media Wednesday afternoon for 75 minutes in his State of the Cubs address at Wrigley Field.

"Joe's status remains unchanged. He's the manager of this team and I'm very happy about that," Epstein said, before shooting down just the latest story suggesting Maddon was in trouble. "I know there was a sort of high-profile report this morning that was not accurate. I didn't read the whole thing, but there were some claims that he and I had personal friction.

"Not true at all.

"We have a terrific working relationship. We don't agree all the time about baseball issues. And that's the way it should be. I don't want a yes man as the manager, and I don't want it working that way the other way.

"There should be discord and debate and healthy trusting relationships where you can work together to make the organization better, and that's the way it is."

While Maddon said repeatedly this year that launch angle was not the answer to a better offense, Epstein believes in getting the ball in the air and hitting line drives.

But he also said Wednesday that the two are on the same page in that regard, and that they both want a different approach with runners on base.

According to Epstein, situational hitting is not one of their baseball disagreements and suggested it might be more a case of semantics and presentation than actually philosophical difference.

"I enjoy having Joe around personally and I like having him as the manager of this club, and I really like having the most wins in baseball the last four years," Epstein said. "I don't like going home the first day of October.

"That's not on Joe. It's not.

"I look forward to him coming back next year with some unfinished business, like we all have in this organization."

Maddon will be in the final year of his contract, which on some teams and in some games is completely unacceptable these days. That's another absurdity of sports today. It only becomes a distraction if those involved create one.

It doesn't mean Epstein won't extend Maddon, but he insisted Wednesday that he has not yet spoken to anyone about it.

"We just finished playing, so I haven't turned to that yet," Epstein said, 16 hours after the Cubs lost the Wild Card Game in 13 innings. "Certainly, I haven't talked to Joe about it yet.

"But we have to talk about that internally first and then talk about it with Joe and then if there's an appropriate time to discuss it with you all (in the media), we will, but certainly it will happen in that order."

Having a manager in his final year doesn't seem to frighten the future Hall of Fame executive, though the guess here is he will look for a way to give his manager a little more security and another year on his deal.

Even if he ends up eating it, he might see it as the best way to traverse a long season that has many ups and downs and plenty of stress.

"It's becoming more common in the game," Epstein said of letting Maddon work in 2019 on the final year of a deal. "I think you've seen it in other places and it hasn't always led to a big distraction."

It's not Maddon's fault that Yu Darvish and Tyler Chatwood gave the team nothing, or that his closers were injured, or that so many relievers were ineffective when it mattered most in September.

"We got the absolute most out of the talent that we have here (in the bullpen)," Epstein said. "We weren't at full strength. The way we looked (in the bullpen) at the end of the year is not how we drew it up."

It's also not Maddon's fault that Kris Bryant, Kyle Schwarber and Jason Heyward were injured, and that Javy Baez went ice cold while Anthony Rizzo, Willson Contreras and Addison Russell provided almost no offense down the stretch.

The Cubs won 95 games, they didn't collapse while playing 42 games in 43 days, and they got caught by a better team. They failed at the plate when just a couple of runs on several occasions would have landed them safely in the NLDS.

Put that on Joe Maddon if you want, if somehow that makes you feel better about 2018.

But this time, it's unfair.

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Daily Herald

Chicago Cubs' Russell accepts 40-game suspension imposed by MLB

By Bruce Miles

Chicago Cubs shortstop Addison Russell said he has accepted a 40-game suspension from Major League Baseball under the league's domestic violence policy.

"After gaining a full understanding of the situation I have concluded it's in the best interest of my family to accept MLB's proposed resolution of this matter," Russell said in a statement released by his attorney, Kathleen T. Zellner.

"I wish my ex-wife well and hope we can live in peace for the benefit of our child."

Commissioner Robert D. Manfred Jr. announced the suspension Wednesday afternoon. Manfred said it is without pay for violating Major League Baseball's Joint Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Policy. The unpaid suspension of Russell is retroactive to Sept. 21, he said.

Russell, who had been on administrative leave, has agreed to not appeal the discipline, Manfred said.

Consistent with the terms of the policy, Russell will participate in a confidential and comprehensive evaluation and treatment program supervised by the Joint Policy Board.

"My office has completed its investigation into the allegations that Addison Russell violated Major League Baseball's Joint Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Policy," Manfred said in a statement. "Having reviewed all of the available evidence, I have concluded that Mr. Russell violated the Policy and should be subject to discipline in the form of an unpaid suspension that will cover 40 games."

Cubs team president Theo Epstein addressed the media Wednesday, one day after the Cubs were eliminated from the postseason by losing the wild-card game to the Colorado Rockies. Epstein said he had just received the news about the suspension when he took to the podium.

"I think the most important thing going forward is to be part of the solution and to focus on -- not to sound corny about this, but making this a better place, making sure this doesn't happen going forward on our watch," he said. "Being there for our players, their spouses, for their families, maybe putting some systems in place to help and be very proactive, that's what I'm thinking about."

Epstein would not commit to saying whether the 24-year-old Russell has played his last game as a Cub.

"Addy, in my opinion, also should not just be completely dismissed," Epstein said. "I think he deserves our support and our help going forward, too. I think the fact that MLB includes in their determination here that there's an evaluation of treatment going forward, that's something we should fully support and support participating in."

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Daily Herald

'I just don't know where he's going to get heat from': Chicago Cubs players want Maddon back
By Bruce Miles

Backing for Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon seemed strong in the clubhouse following Tuesday night's 2-1 loss in 13 innings to the Colorado Rockies in the National League wild-card game.

The Cubs bowed out of the postseason for the second year in a row after winning the World Series in 2016.

In four years as manager of the Cubs, Maddon has a record of 387-261 for a .597 winning percentage. His Cubs teams are 19-18 in four years of postseason play.

During the season, USA Today reported that Maddon's job status could be in jeopardy if the Cubs didn't make a deep postseason run.

Maddon's five-year contract runs through the end of next season, making him a "lame-duck" manager heading into 2019.

Cubs president Theo Epstein said the off-season would be the time to discuss a possible contract extension for Maddon.

Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer fired Rick Renteria in the fall of 2014 to bring in Maddon, who was able to leave the Tampa Bay Rays when their general manager, Andrew Friedman, went to the Los Angeles Dodgers.

After Tuesday night's loss, Maddon received support from a couple of key players.

This year the Cubs lost pitcher Yu Darvish and closer Brandon Morrow to injury. Pitcher Tyler Chatwood, a free-agent acquisition last winter, could not find the plate. Third baseman-outfielder Kris Bryant battled a shoulder injury. And Morrow's replacement, Pedro Strop, missed the final 2½ weeks with a hamstring injury.

"I just don't know where he's going to get heat from," first baseman and team leader Anthony Rizzo said. "I think he's managed his (butt) off this year with what we've been dealt with, as far as losing Yu, as far as losing Morrow, as far as Strop going down late. We've just lost so many guys, KB not being healthy all year. And we still figured out a way to win.

"That's all a credit to him (Maddon) because without his leadership here, guys aren't playing the way they've played. (Rookie) David Bote's not coming up here and playing the way he plays without Joe's leadership and without the leadership this club has. I feel for the whole organization just not coming through. I think Joe's best year was this year as far as managing all the moving parts."

Javier Baez, the Cubs' MVP candidate, also voiced support for Maddon.

"You don't control that," he said of speculation. "They don't say that when they make a good move or when he wins the game. They didn't say that in '16 when we won, when he came and everything would change. We love our manager. The way he talks to us and lets us to do whatever we want, lets us be us out here.

"I think he has to do a lot with what we do out there because we got to be ourselves. When you do something right, he will tell you. When you do something wrong, he will tell you the same way. And that's what makes him better because he's honest, and he wants you to get better too."

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The Athletic

Theo Epstein said Joe Maddon is coming back in 2019, but can he get the Cubs back to the World Series?
By Jon Greenberg

The Cubs' decision to keep Joe Maddon for the fifth (and final) year of his franchise-shifting contract is a smart move — if the organization's objective is to mitigate risk as it attempts to build a team capable of returning to the World Series after a (checks notes) two-year drought.

In Joe they trust? Sure.

The stories about Maddon possibly being fired this offseason were not ginned up — every national writer at every ballpark was talking about it, every local reporter with any sense was speculating if it would really happen — but my feeling all along was that the Cubs would err on the side of caution. Maddon has a year left (at \$6 million) on his deal and there's seemingly no one out there who would be a better option. If someone replaces him in the coming years, in 2020 or whenever, will they be able to handle the pressures and challenges of one of the biggest jobs in sports?

Frankly, I'm not sure Joe Girardi's binder has the cure for what ails the Cubs. Is there a "hit the ball" play in there?

Maddon had zero hits the last two games for the Cubs, which is only nine fewer than his entire team did in 22 innings, which is why we're talking about his job status instead of previewing the NLDS, which begins Thursday night in Milwaukee.

The question is: Is that the inherent difficulty of baseball — "I'd always like to think good pitching shuts down good offense," Jon Lester said early Wednesday morning in the Cubs clubhouse — or does Maddon need to find a happy medium between "doing less" and being Buck Showalter?

The Joe question came up quickly in Theo Epstein's season-ending marathon interview, thanks in part to Ken Rosenthal's story Wednesday morning.

"Yeah, Joe's status remains unchanged," Epstein said. "He's the manager of this team. I'm very happy about that. I know there was a high-profile report this morning that was not accurate. I know that, I didn't read the whole thing but I saw in there that there were some claims that he and I had personal friction. Not true at all. We have a terrific working relationship.

"We don't agree all the time about baseball issues, and that's the way it should be. I don't want a yes man as the manager and I don't want a yes-man relationship the other way either. I think there should be discord and debate and healthy, trusting relationships where you can work together to make the organization better, and that's the way it is. I enjoy having Joe around personally and I like having him as the manager of this club and I really like having the most wins in baseball the last four years. I don't like going home the first day of October. That's not on Joe. That's not. And look forward to him coming back next year with some unfinished business, as we all have, in this organization."

I believe that Epstein doesn't want a "yes man." I don't think he wants some figurehead in the dugout. Epstein likes having dissenting voices in the room, but he also likes being listened to. So while there are some ringing endorsements in that carefully worded quote, there is also a lot of vaguely-worded phrasing like:

Joe's status remains unchanged.

He's the manager of this team.

One of the main theories floating around ballparks these days is Epstein doesn't want to extend Maddon, which made a divorce now a sensible idea.

You don't fire Maddon because he made a few blunders with the pitching staff and the Cubs lost in the wild-card game. If and when he and the Cubs eventually part ways it will be because the "debate" isn't healthy anymore and the front office decides to place some blame on Maddon's lap for the young hitters' stagnation in development.

Epstein talked about a need for more urgency out of his team, something echoed by the Cubs' 2018 MVP, Javy Báez, and while the players are veteran enough to police themselves, the younger ones have grown up in Maddon's "frat house" environment, which is perhaps a little relaxed. Will Maddon offer a firmer hand in 2019? How will that work if he's a lame-duck manager?

A good way to spin a lame-duck year is Epstein, Jed Hoyer and Jason McLeod didn't get new deals until the very end of September 2016 as their contracts were expiring. This is now organizational precedent.

"First of all, it's becoming more common in the game," Epstein said of managers going into contract years. "I think you've seen it in other places and hasn't always led to a big distraction. I think examples in our own organization of people going to the last few days of their contract before getting renewed. But I think the big picture is we haven't made any determination on that yet and I haven't talked to Joe about that yet either. That's a topic for the offseason, so like I said earlier, step one is get away from the emotion of the season a little bit, get some perspective on everything and process it and just start thinking about all the different personnel, playing and non-playing, what's the best course of action for the organization and communicate. So think about it, then talk to Joe and then if its appropriate in a point in the future, talk to you about it."

Another ringing endorsement of organizational continuity. Give Epstein credit for being honest, though. As honest as he can be anyway.

The sense I get is that confidence in Maddon's overall managing performance has gone down every season, even if it's still above average. In 2015, Maddon really was the magician (or the guy who hires the magician) we billed him as, a complete culture-changer who set the tone for one of the biggest turnarounds in sports.

Before the 2016 season, this is what Epstein said about Maddon, to me: "Definitely, my quality of life has increased being around him every day. Instead of you know having to prepare for a professional discussion about something, I just feel like I'm checking in on a buddy. He always has something new and invigorating and refreshing to share."

After the Cubs won the World Series, I was pleasantly surprised to see fans spending the next year or so debating Maddon's managerial performance in Games 6 and 7. To me, that meant things were back to normal, even after a parade. I don't like change.

In 2017, the Cubs were memorably flat in the first half, before picking it up in the second. And with that, a massive coaching change occurred in that offseason, with Maddon reuniting with pitching coach Jim Hickey and losing bench coach Dave Martinez, who somehow got the Nationals gig. Did new bench coach Brandon Hyde, an organization guy, provide Maddon a new voice in the dugout this season? Did it make a difference at all? Chili Davis now has a big target on his back after replacing John Mallee as the hitting coach. Only Javy Báez has the results to show for Davis' philosophy shift, and you could say Báez made his biggest strides under Mallee, who helped Báez decrease his strikeout percentage dramatically after his rookie year.

You could also argue that Maddon was the perfect manager for Báez to develop under. Maddon didn't try to make him less flashy. Báez got to be himself, and he's grown into the best version of what scouts thought he could be coming out of high school.

Judging from Epstein's hour-plus press conference full of 600-word answers, there's going to be a lot of introspection this offseason in the front office and Epstein expects that to filter down through the organization. Players like Kris Bryant are certainly open to it. He was very displeased with his season, from his shoulder injury to his performance, and told reporters he aims to rectify things in the winter. Jon Lester, the sage veteran, re-evaluates himself every offseason. It's obvious Kyle Schwarber, Albert Almora Jr. and Ian Happ need to put in the work this winter.

But is Maddon capable of recognizing where he needs to get better as a manager? As a reporter, I love dealing with the Hazleton, Pennsylvania native, who has never met a baseball question he couldn't answer. If you have a question about one of his decisions, he'll explain it. If you want to know about his experience managing in the California League, he has a yarn or 10 to spin.

I was surprised he botched the questions about Melisa Reidy when Addison Russell was placed on administrative leave, both when I asked about it and when the guys from the "Bernstein & McKnight Show" followed up days later. People in the organization weren't pleased with his flippant response and Epstein all but said on the radio that he sat Maddon down and made him read her account of domestic violence.

That's an unusual situation for a manager and his boss, and certainly the timing wasn't good for their relationship. As the voice of the team, let alone just being a good person, Maddon should have known better. Epstein addressed that situation, in regard to domestic violence, Wednesday.

"I think we have to understand that with all of our words and actions going forward, whether we know it or not we're sending messages to our fans, who all have their own unique backgrounds and histories and sensitivities and perspectives and that's important," Epstein said.

The Cubs won 95 games this season — in case someone with the team hasn't reminded you of that in the last 10 minutes — but this season wasn't a success by any metric except that the team survived it.

That's why the players were hugging in the clubhouse after it all ended. The clubhouse is their domain, as it should be. But did Maddon have his finger on the pulse of his players? Was he an observer, and not a leader, as the so-called Cubs culture sputtered on the field?

While Maddon has a lot of things going on, he is approachable. His office is supposedly always open and he likes conversation. In late August, he said players had been coming to see him all season.

"I feel almost like a Catholic priest at times," Maddon said. "There's like this procession coming in there, talking about all kinds of stuff. It's been a really interesting year. A lot of great conversations. When they have issues, they come and talk to me about them. It's a variety of pitchers. It's been about hitting. I really appreciate the fact that they come and talk to me about things."

He's a "player's manager," but who isn't these days? The time of the grizzled, removed skipper is over.

"Joe does a great job at being very lenient with us," Anthony Rizzo said. "We just come in and we play our game. I don't think we get beat up when we stink. And we're not World Series champions when we're really good. We stay even-keeled. I know it's hard to believe, but we do a really good job at just staying focused on one day at a time."

Maddon's regular-season attitude is perfect when the team is good. But when there are obvious deficiencies, it's less so. There was a debate for awhile about whether or not this was Maddon's best managing performance, given the team's injuries and Epstein's whiffs in the offseason. I said no and Maddon agreed. The 2015 one is the best Maddon model, but the Cubs can't get back to when everything was shiny and new.

There has to be an evolution and it needs to start this offseason.

Epstein said in the exit interviews he had completed before he met with the media, the players admitted they need to focus a little more throughout the season. In 2019, the goal is less of a "it's a long season" kind of attitude and more of a "let's play like Javy does every day."

"I think we did a good job of keeping an even keel, we did a good job of grinding through, our players were phenomenal in dealing with 42 games in 43 games," Epstein said. "It was a really connected clubhouse, there were so many positives and so many things to be proud of, but look, having that sense of urgency and not having any just reliance on the talent and the length of the season, and that everything will just be OK because we're the Cubs. We can't have that. We have to all challenge ourselves to get better and be accountable. And it's all of us. It starts with me. I think when you fail and you don't reach your goal, yeah, it's great to talk about making something positive about it, but it starts with self-awareness and self-reflection and accountability."

The good news is the foundation he established in 2015 is still there, but like Epstein said, everyone needs to think about how they can be better in 2019. It looks like Maddon will be managing that team. Will he change? Can he?

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The Athletic

Repairing 'broken' offense tops Cubs' list of offseason priorities: 'We're going to spend all our energy trying to fix it.'

By Sahadev Sharma

The day after the season ends is when Theo Epstein is typically his most comfortable and open on the record with the media. There he was Wednesday afternoon in the bowels of Wrigley Field in a half-constructed, soon-to-be exclusive club of some sort, likely running on little, if any, sleep while as casually dressed as you'll see him in a public setting.

During the season, Epstein is a bit more guarded with his opinions on the team because he doesn't want to seem impatient or critical as they work through issues while also trying to win games. By the GM meetings, he's started the hard work that comes with reshaping or rebuilding his roster, likely looking at specific names and probably already in contact with agents. Once again, his guard is up.

But on days like this, when it comes to addressing his team's play and how he evaluates certain performances, Epstein is insightful and detailed about what worked and what didn't. Wednesday, he was clear that he believed his team's offense would be better.

There are those who will point to the positives: tops in the NL in batting average and OBP and top five in runs scored and walk rate. Those are some of the types of things many would look at as signs of a strong, consistent offense. But Epstein saw it all unfold. He knew the offense he watched in the second

half had changed, and not for the better. As important as the larger sample may be, he knew these were not the same bats he'd watch the first 93 games of the season.

"I think part of getting better is facing the problem," Epstein told a large group of reporters fewer than 16 hours after the Wrigley Field home clubhouse had emptied for the final time this season. "And our offense broke somewhere along the lines. And so of course it's going to be a thorough examination and of course we're going to spend all our energy trying to fix it, and fixing it."

Epstein didn't call it a slump. He didn't suggest there was a quick fix or that bad luck led to a stretch of poor play. This was a "broken" unit. And how the Cubs go about repairing it will be their most complicated task of the winter. But before we try and think of ways to do that, it helps to look back one more time and realize just how bad it all got.

"If you look back, in the first half of the season we led the league in runs scored, we led the league in OPS, we led the league in virtually every significant offensive category," Epstein said. "And we were cruising. We felt really good offensively. We'd cut way down on our strikeouts, we had sacrificed some power, but not all, and we were getting on base at a huge clip and scoring a ton of runs and we felt good about our offensive roster, sort of one through 13 really, every player."

For the most part, this is all accurate, so there's no need to regurgitate all the numbers. The one part that stands out and was a topic all season long is the drop in power. The Cubs had a team ISO of .190 in 2017, fifth in the NL (the average was .176). At the All-Star break this season, the Cubs' ISO had dropped to .168. But the league average was .162 at that point, so relatively, the drop wasn't as egregious as it looked in a year-to-year comparison. Of course, it all fell apart once the break hit and by season's end, the team's ISO had fallen to .159, while the league average climbed a point to .163.

Epstein pointed out that, post-break, the Cubs were a remarkable 37-13 when scoring two runs or more. Which means there were 20 other games during that stretch (28.5 percent of their games) in which they scored one or zero runs. That they won three of those games speaks to how well their pitching performed in the season's final months. In only one of their final seven losses did they score more than one run.

"The indicators in the second half were not where we want to be," Epstein said. "We were among the worst in the league at hitting the ball out of the ballpark, our power was way down, our walk rate was dramatically down, our OPS was down, our runs scored were down, we hit more ground balls in the second half than any other team by a huge margin. And our goal is to hit line drives and fly balls out of the ballpark."

When it came to putting the ball on the ground, the Cubs did it third-most frequently in the big leagues for the entire season. In the second half, their 48.6 percent ground-ball rate was 2.1 percentage points above the second highest team in the big leagues, the same difference between the second highest team and the 10th. The league average OPS for line drives was 1.532. For fly balls, it was .853. For ground balls, it was .509. No wonder this team couldn't buy an extra-base hit in the second half.

"Something happened in our offense in the second half where we stopped walking, we stopped hitting home runs, we stopped hitting the ball in the air, and we stopped being productive," Epstein said. "And not being able to get to two runs that many times in the second half is really unacceptable. And it sort of tells the story a little bit of the end of our season, too. We had those three games, Saturday, Monday or Tuesday, where if we win one of those games, we're still playing, and in each of those games, we scored one run, with a handful of hits. So unfortunately, that was foretold a little bit by just the nature of what happened to our offense in the second half, and that's unacceptable."

What caused this offense to break? What caused all these ground balls and led to this utter lack of power? How did this team lose its approach, stop taking walks and begin chasing balls out of the zone more than all but one team in baseball?

Epstein said their next step is to figure out the answers to those questions. They have some ideas, but over the coming days, they'll wrap up their exit interviews and continue that gathering of information. And part of it will include a hard look at an offensive core that was largely handpicked by this front office. No, Anthony Rizzo and Javier Báez aren't going anywhere. And despite a down season, Kris Bryant, who was dominant before a left shoulder injury sapped his power, is expected to be a big part of a potential offensive turnaround. It's probably safe to put Willson Contreras on that list (but that doesn't mean there won't be major adjustments that need to be made by him going forward). But the rest of the offensive core should be considered not only under the microscope, but possibly available.

"It's an examination of the talent that we have and it has to be more about production than talent going forward," Epstein said. "And that includes our own assessments. Beyond that, it's also trying to understand why we're not where we should be with some individual players. In other words, if you look back, players who do certain things at 22 and 23 should be progressing into a better, more productive phase of their career at 24, 25 and 26.

"I'm the first one to talk about how development and progress, those aren't linear things all the time. There are a lot of ups and downs. But I think there's a trend where Javy took the big step forward, but there are other guys who went the opposite direction or have been trending the opposite direction a little bit. We have to get to the bottom of that. It's our job not just to assemble a talented group, but unearth that talent and have it manifest on the field. Because that's ultimately all that matters.

"It's an assessment on those two fronts. The talent that we have and who's going to be productive, who's not or where can we find that production. And then also understand the environment and are we doing everything that we can in creating just the right situation to get the most out of these guys."

The Cubs need to look at their remaining young talent and identify the Javys — the players you can be patient with because their raw, untapped talent can actually be unearthed. And then cling to those players and move on from the ones who just are who they are.

And they need to review every part of their organization, including those whose job it is to evaluate those players, and those whose job it is to help develop them to reach those lofty heights. And then they must figure out if they're doing their jobs properly. They have to be sure that up and down the organization, a group that built a ball club they believed would be an offensive powerhouse truly kept the right players — while trading away the likes of Eloy Jiménez and Gleyber Torres — and whether they'll be able to continue to do that going forward.

Because there's no doubt everyone involved never again wants to see what happened to this club's bats between the first and second halves of the 2018 season.

"I've never been part of something like this offensively, and I never want to be again," Epstein said. "We have to be an offensive force. We should be, with the talent on our roster. But it's probably time to stop evaluating this in terms of talent, and start evaluating it in terms of production, and we need to do everything we can to produce offensively."

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The Athletic

Why the Cubs want and need Cole Hamels back next year

By Patrick Mooney

The conventional wisdom applies: You can never have too much pitching. There's no such thing as a bad one-year deal. Cole Hamels is happy to be here.

As the Cubs began a long winter with exit interviews on Wednesday at Wrigley Field, their easiest decision might be retaining Hamels by picking up his \$20 million club option for next season. Because Hamels checks so many of the boxes team president Theo Epstein mentioned during a wide-ranging news conference that lasted almost 72 minutes.

The day after a stunning 13-inning loss to the Colorado Rockies in the National League wild-card game, Epstein described a team that didn't play with enough day-to-day urgency, a roster that leaned too hard on fragile pitchers and unproven talent and a farm system that lacks impact prospects.

"Cole was such a breath of fresh air for us," Epstein said. "He made an unbelievable impression. For a guy who's only been here for a couple months, he's as universally respected in that room as anyone I've ever seen. He's a pro's pro and contributed tremendously on the field and off the field with a great engaged, accountable, positive presence in that clubhouse.

"He really cares about his teammates and helped make them better by example and by discussion, too. He's absolutely someone we'd love to have part of the mix going forward."

The Texas Rangers didn't have to consult with Hamels when they traded him in late July because the Cubs were on his list of preferred destinations. The deal was structured in a way that the Rangers would pay the \$6 million buyout for 2019 only if the Cubs declined the \$20 million team option. At the time, Hamels appeared to be showing his age (34) and flagging interest in a last-place team.

Getting out of the American League and a hitter's ballpark in Texas helped rejuvenate Hamels. The big-game lefty who had an 11.12 ERA with the Rangers in July became the NL's pitcher of the month for August. Hamels went 8-for-12 in quality starts and posted a 2.36 ERA for the Cubs.

"Hopefully, I did everything I can to convince them that (option) would be valuable," Hamels said after throwing two scoreless innings out of the bullpen during the longest postseason game in Wrigley Field history. "This organization's an amazing organization. I'm very fortunate that they made the effort to trade for me.

"I did everything I could. This is a tremendous environment to play baseball. This clubhouse — these guys are awesome. I only was able to get about two months with them. It would be a joy to be able to do it from spring training to the ultimate goal of winning the World Series here."

It takes away some of the mystery when the Cubs know Hamels as a pitcher (2,553 career innings), a competitor (2008 World Series MVP for the Philadelphia Phillies) and a person (Roberto Clemente Award nominee).

The Cubs will need that durability, dependability and know-how again next season. Maybe the Milwaukee Brewers wouldn't have pushed the Cubs to a Game 163 and grabbed the division title if Epstein's baseball operations group hadn't gone 0-for-3 with Yu Darvish, Tyler Chatwood and Brandon Morrow, free agents who combined for 1.2 WAR after a \$185 million investment.

Darvish had a Tommy John surgery in his medical file and a World Series meltdown with the Los Angeles Dodgers last year. Chatwood escaped Coors Field but his raw stuff and spin rate didn't translate, leading the majors with 95 walks, even though he pitched just once in September. The Cubs think they can work around Morrow's lengthy injury history with guidelines about his usage, but the closer saved 22 games in the first half and didn't throw a pitch for them after the All-Star break.

"I'll be the first to admit that the offseason moves we made last year did not lead to immediate productivity on those contracts this year," Epstein said. "It put us in a little bit of a hole early with our starting pitching that we all had to overcome. We have to own that. And I have to own that and find a way to be better with those decisions."

Heading into an offseason in which Bryce Harper and Manny Machado will dominate the headlines, Epstein said Cubs executives haven't had in-depth discussions about payroll parameters for 2019, when the luxury-tax threshold will be \$206 million, or the flexibility to add a big-ticket free agent. The entire business/baseball operation had cleared out the October calendar and expected to host multiple playoff rounds at Wrigley Field.

"I don't know yet," Epstein said. "We haven't necessarily gotten to that level of detail in our postseason planning and those things tend to change. This is the time of year when you kind of engage on that and figure out exactly what you have left. But we've spent a lot of money on players and that's not always the answer — to rush back out and spend more.

"That said, there are obviously a lot of attractive players out there and some impact players out there. We'll get together and figure out what's possible — and what's not possible — and figure out all the best different approaches to this offseason."

As great as Jon Lester has been for this franchise, he will also be 35 next year and in the fifth year of a \$155 million megadeal. But the Cubs can't necessarily bank on another All-Star season and Lester being their obvious elimination-game starter.

The Cubs also don't know what to expect from Darvish, who put up a 4.95 ERA in eight starts, ultimately got shut down with a stress reaction and needed an arthroscopic procedure on his right elbow in September.

"We're really, really excited to have a healthy, impactful Yu Darvish," Epstein said. "But we also have to build a lot of depth and backup plans because if we go down the same road that we went down this year and it costs us the season, that's on me.

"We talked about that this year, too. 'Can you expect him to come back?' Well, we hoped he would come back. But in the end, he wasn't able to and that's part of the reason we got Cole Hamels.

"We have to take the same approach this winter. I fully expect (Darvish) to be healthy and go do his thing and punch out a lot of guys and be part of a really great starting staff next year. But if for whatever reason — with any of our guys — it doesn't happen, then we can't let one injury sink our season."

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The Athletic

'Domestic violence is everyone's problem': Theo Epstein responds to MLB's 40-game suspension of Addison Russell

By Lauren Comitor

An investigation that lasted over a year officially came to an end on Wednesday when Major League Baseball announced a 40-game suspension for Addison Russell under the joint domestic violence policy after domestic abuse allegations were made by his ex-wife, Melisa Reidy.

Russell won't appeal the suspension, which is retroactive to Sept. 21. He released the following statement:

"After gaining a full understanding of the situation I have concluded its in the best interest of my family to accept MLB's proposed resolution of this matter," he said. "I wish my ex-wife well and hope we can live in peace for the benefit of our child."

Among the suspensions MLB has doled out under the policy, Russell's 40 games is the fifth-longest. In 2018, the league suspended José Torres for the rest of the season (100 games), effective June 8, and Roberto Osuna 75 games.

The suspension news broke just before Cubs president Theo Epstein's end-of-season press conference on Wednesday afternoon, and while he said he had only had a few minutes to digest the outcome, Epstein spoke more at length about the situation than he had yet.

When asked about Russell's future as a Cub, Epstein said, "I don't know," and spoke about the need to gather information about what happened and come up with solutions so a situation like this doesn't happen again.

"Clearly we support Major League Baseball's finding and Addy's decision to accept the suspension," he said. "It concludes MLB's investigation into this matter as well. My thoughts on it are that, domestic violence is everyone's problem and because of that, we all have an obligation to be part of the solution as well. Discipline, in a case like this, is part of the solution going forward, and so we support Major League Baseball's decision and we think it's appropriate.

"But prevention is also a big part of the solution and maybe a more important part of the solution. And so now that the Major League Baseball investigation is over, I think it's our obligation as a club and my obligation to see what we can do better going forward, to see what we can do to prevent this from ever happening again, to reach out to the victim in this case and try to learn from it and try to give her support. To talk to Addy and give Addy the necessary support so that he can get the help that he needs and make sure nothing like this ever happens again.

"And as a club to see if there's something that we can do positively for our players, for spouses, families, to be part of the solution, and make sure we're not in this situation ever again. So that's how I'm looking at it as we move into this next phase."

Allegations of abuse against Russell first surfaced in June 2017 in an Instagram comment made by a third party, and Melisa Reidy declined to participate in MLB's investigation at the time. But after posting a blog two weeks ago that detailed her experience with emotional, verbal and physical abuse, Reidy cooperated with investigators, who reportedly had "additional credible information" about the allegations.

Reidy spoke with The Athletic's Katie Strang about her personal journey toward feeling comfortable about coming forward with the allegations, why she spoke out and her experience cooperating with MLB's investigation.

On Wednesday, Epstein emphasized the importance of the organization's response to the situation not only for those directly involved, but for Cubs fans who have their own experiences with abuse.

"I think we have to understand that with all of our words and actions going forward, whether we know it or not we're sending messages to our fans, who all have their own unique backgrounds and histories and sensitivities and perspectives and that's important," he said. "But I honestly, personally, think the most important thing going forward is to be part of the solution, and to focus on, not to sound really corny about this, but making this a better place, and making sure this doesn't happen going forward, especially on our watch and trying to control what we can control. So being there for our players, for their spouses, for their families, maybe putting some systems in place to help and be very proactive, and that's what I'm thinking about."

And while Epstein said he was content with the way the organization handled last year's allegations, he acknowledged that they need to bridge the gap between the team and players' families in order to prevent future situations like this one.

"The part I do question myself on is just in general, as a sports team, what is the absolute best structure that you can have for your players, for their spouses, for their families, so that this never happens," he said. "That's a really high standard, but that's what we should all be shooting for, and I know we have a wonderful family program and we have wonderful people working for support. We try to stay as engaged as possible with the families, but clearly because this happened, we should all be asking, can we do more? And I think that should be the goal for everybody whether you work for a sports club or whatever your line of work. Domestic violence is everybody's problem, and so we can all find a way to be part of the solution and that's the way I'm personally going to attack it and I think we should all attack it going forward."

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Cubs.com

Cubs climbed obstacles before sad finish

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- It wasn't until the third inning of Tuesday's National League Wild Card Game when Javier Baez felt the Cubs were in sync.

"In the third inning, I said, 'Now we're here, everybody is together,'" Baez said. "If we do that during the whole year, the regular season, we get used to it."

But that apparently wasn't the case this season, which ended abruptly with a 2-1, 13-inning loss at Wrigley Field to the Rockies. Instead of preparing for the NL Division Series, Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein and manager Joe Maddon were doing exit interviews at Wrigley Field with the players.

Meeting with the media, Epstein said the players' reaction after the Wild Card Game loss varied. Some players talked about how proud they were of the season and everything that the Cubs had overcome, including injuries to players like Yu Darvish, Brandon Morrow and Kris Bryant, and a grueling schedule in which they had a stretch of 42 games in 43 days.

"On the other hand, there were players who were looking at it a little differently, like Javy for example, talking about how in some ways we struggled all year, and in some ways, something was off a little bit and never got on that roll," Epstein said. "We have to own that. I have to agree with that. Jon Lester put

it in his own way -- dragging body parts through the dirt and leading to acknowledgement of where we are and where we aren't. Maybe that's a good thing in the long run. It could lead to the universal recognition that nothing will be given to us."

The offense sputtered in the second half, and Epstein said they have to find a way to correct it. But what also was missing was a sense of urgency.

"Ninety-five wins is tremendous," Epstein said. "Sometimes divisions aren't lost on the last day of the season when you only score one run, or that last week of the season and the other team went 8-0 and you go 4-3. Sometimes they're lost early in the season when you have the opportunity to push for that sweep and you already have two out of three and you're not quite there with the killer instinct as a team. You know what that makes us? Human. But that's something that in 2016, we had."

Cubs fans know what happened in 2016 -- the team won its first World Series championship since 1908.

"This year, we had chance after chance to put away the division and we didn't do it, so we have to own that," Epstein said.

The Cubs finished the 162-game regular-season schedule tied with the Brewers for first in the NL Central, then lost a tiebreaker game at Wrigley Field on Monday.

"As Jon Lester said, maybe this will be good for us," Epstein said. "If you just show up, playing it cool, knowing you're talented, knowing it's a long season and trusting that the talent will manifest over the course of 162, sometimes you end up one game short, and that's not who we are or who we want to be. We have to recognize that, and I think our players do in talking to them today."

One midseason addition the Cubs would like to keep is Cole Hamels. The lefty, acquired from the Rangers via trade, has a \$20 million club option for 2019 (\$6 million buyout).

"Hopefully I did everything I can to convince them that [exercising the option] would be something that would be valuable," Hamels said.

"He's a pro's pro," Epstein said. "He's absolutely someone we'd love to have as part of the mix going forward."

Epstein also said he shared responsibility as well for the Cubs not advancing in the postseason.

"I'll be the first to admit that the offseason moves we made last year did not lead to immediate productivity on those contracts this year, and it put us a little bit in a hole with our starting pitching that we all had to work hard to overcome," Epstein said. "We all have to own that, and I have to own that."

The Cubs had plenty to overcome. Three free-agent acquisitions -- Darvish, Tyler Chatwood and Morrow -- did not contribute as expected. Darvish and Morrow were sidelined with injuries, Chatwood finished the year as the Major League leader in walks (95). Anthony Rizzo was batting .149 at the end of April and Bryant missed August because of a sore left shoulder.

The Cubs overcame a 4 1/2-game deficit on May 30 to open a five-game lead on Sept. 2 in the NL Central. Did Baez feel the Cubs had a championship team in the clubhouse now?

"I don't know what to tell you," Baez said. "We are already champs. We won in '16. Our fans waited 108 years, and this is only the [second year] after we won. We've got a few more times to make it happen before 108 [years] again."

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Cubs.com

Epstein says Maddon will return to Cubs in '19

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein said Wednesday that Joe Maddon's job status hasn't changed and called a report that there was friction between the two "not accurate."

"Joe's status remains unchanged," Epstein said during an end-of-the-season wrapup with the media at Wrigley Field. "He's the manager of this team. I'm very happy about that."

A report Wednesday by The Athletic's Ken Rosenthal said "talk has persisted within the industry" for months now that Maddon and Epstein "are not always on the same page." Rosenthal noted successful clubs have replaced managers -- like the Yankees, who replaced Joe Girardi after making it to Game 7 of last year's ALCS -- in favor of younger candidates.

"I didn't read the whole thing, but I saw in there that there were some claims that [Maddon] and I had some personal friction -- not true at all," Epstein said on Wednesday. "We have a terrific working relationship. We don't agree all the time about baseball issues and that's the way it should be. I don't want a 'yes man' as the manager and I don't want a 'yes man' relationship the other way, either."

"I think there should be discord and debate and healthy, trusting relationships where you can work together to make the organization better, and that's the way it is," Epstein said.

The Cubs have reached 90 wins for four consecutive seasons under Maddon and won the World Series in 2016, ending a 108-year championship drought.

"I enjoy having Joe around personally and I like having him as the manager of this club, and I really like having the most wins in baseball the last four years," Epstein said. "I don't like going home the first day of October. That's not on Joe. That's not. I look forward to him coming back next year with some unfinished business, as we all have in this organization."

Maddon has one year remaining on his contract and Epstein said there's been no discussion regarding an extension.

"We just finished playing, so I have not turned to that yet," Epstein said. "I certainly haven't talked to Joe about it yet. I think we have to think about that part of it internally first and then talk about it with Joe."

The Cubs players backed Maddon after Tuesday's 2-1, 13-inning loss in the National League Wild Card Game to the Rockies. Asked to describe the Cubs' season in one word, Maddon chose "gritty."

"You're not going to hear me make excuses -- and this is not an excuse -- but we have had a lot of things go awry this year and in spite of that, have still tied for the most wins in the National League in a 162-game season," Maddon said. "That speaks to the quality of the player in the room. Even though maybe the numbers offensively didn't match up, these guys put up 95 wins. That speaks to the heart of the player, that speaks to the attitude of the group."

"We lost some tough games in the postseason, in this postseason right now, or getting to the postseason, but I think 'grit' is a wonderful word that describes this group, and I've also talked about the heart," Maddon said. "A couple years ago, when we won the World Series, I said, 'Don't forget the heartbeat.' I think the heartbeat within this group is very prominent and as a manager, that's probably the thing I'm most proud of."

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Cubs.com

Russell suspended for 40 games, won't appeal

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Cubs shortstop Addison Russell has accepted a 40-game suspension without pay for violating Major League Baseball's Joint Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Policy.

The suspension, which is retroactive to Sept. 21, was announced by MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred on Wednesday. Russell missed the Cubs' final 11 regular-season games as well as Tuesday's 2-1, 13-inning loss to the Rockies in the National League Wild Card Game while he was on administrative leave as a result of the investigation.

Russell has agreed not to appeal the discipline. Consistent with the terms of the policy, Russell will participate in a confidential and comprehensive evaluation and treatment program supervised by the Joint Policy Board.

"My office has completed its investigation into the allegations that Addison Russell violated Major League Baseball's Joint Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Policy," Manfred said in a statement. "Having reviewed all of the available evidence, I have concluded that Mr. Russell violated the Policy and should be subject to discipline in the form of an unpaid suspension that will cover 40 games."

On Sept. 21, MLB placed Russell on administrative leave after allegations of domestic violence resurfaced in a blog post by his former wife.

"Clearly, we support Major League Baseball's finding and Addy's decision to accept the suspension," Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein said on Wednesday. "My thoughts on it are, as I said the other day, domestic violence is everyone's problem. Because of that, we all have an obligation to be part of the solution as well. Discipline, in a case like this, is part of the solution going forward, so we support Major League Baseball's decision and think it's appropriate, but prevention is also a part of the solution and maybe a more important part of the solution."

Epstein said he felt the Cubs' obligation now was to "see what we can do to prevent this from ever happening again, to reach out to the victim in this case and try to learn from it and try to give her support, to talk to Addy and give Addy the necessary support so he can get the help he needs and make sure nothing like this ever happens again.

"I personally think the most important thing going forward is to be part of the solution," Epstein said. "Not to sound really corny about this, but make this a better place and make sure this doesn't happen going forward, especially on our watch, and try to control what we can control."

MLB began its investigation into domestic violence allegations against Russell in June 2017, but his ex-wife, Melisa Reidy-Russell, chose not to discuss the allegations at that time.

In September, Reidy-Russell posted on her WordPress blog details of emotional, verbal and physical abuse by her ex-husband.

Last year and this year, Russell issued a statement denying the allegations.

"He accepted this discipline, and I want to talk to him about what that means and find out more -- and the victim, first and foremost, deserves our outreach and our support, and that will be forthcoming very quickly," Epstein said. "Addy, in my opinion, should not just be completely dismissed. He deserves our support and help going forward, too."

Will Russell play for the Cubs again?

"I don't know," Epstein said.

"The part I do question myself on is, in general, as a sports team, what's the absolute best structure you can have for your players, for their spouses, for their families so that this never happens?" Epstein said.

"That's a really high standard, and that's what we should be shooting for. I know we have a wonderful family program, and we try to stay engaged. Clearly because this happened, we should all be asking, 'Can we do more?' That should be the goal for everybody. Domestic violence is everybody's problem, and we can all find a way to be a part of the solution."

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ESPNChicago.com

Joe Maddon to remain manager of Cubs

By Jesse Rogers

CHICAGO -- Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon will return for a fifth season despite his team losing the National League Central tiebreaker and NL wild-card games on back-to-back days this week, team president Theo Epstein said Wednesday.

"Joe's status with the team remains unchanged," Epstein said at a news conference. "He's the manager of this team. I'm very happy about that."

Epstein refuted a report that said he and Maddon had "personal friction."

"Not true at all," Epstein stated. "We have a terrific working relationship. We don't agree all the time about baseball issues. That's the way it should be. I don't want a 'yes man' as the manager and I don't want it as a 'yes man' relationship working the other way either."

Maddon, 64, has one year left on a five-year, \$25 million deal that he signed before the 2015 season. He's set to make \$6 million in 2019. Maddon would love a contract extension but that hasn't been broached yet.

"We just finished playing," Epstein said. "I have not turned to that yet. I haven't talked to Joe about it yet. We have to think about that part of it internally first, then talk to Joe."

Maddon is the only Cubs manager to guide the team to the postseason in four consecutive years, twice making it as a wild card and twice as a division winner.

The Cubs had the best record in the NL for much of the second half of this season but gave way to the Milwaukee Brewers in Game No. 163 of the regular season on Monday. Then they lost the wild-card game Tuesday against the Colorado Rockies, scoring a total of two runs in 22 innings.

Scoring runs was an ongoing issue throughout the second half of the season for the Cubs.

"I enjoy having Joe around personally and I like having him the manager of this club," Epstein stated. "And I really like having the most wins in baseball the last four years. I don't like going home the first day of October. That's not on Joe."

Meanwhile, the team has some decisions to make on key players such as pitchers Cole Hamels and Pedro Strop. Both have team options for \$20 million and \$6.25 million, respectively. Epstein said he would like them both back.

"Cole was such a breath of fresh air for us," Epstein said. "He made an unbelievable impression. For a guy that's only been here a couple months he's as universally respected as anyone I've ever seen."

Epstein wasn't sure of his budget plans for 2019 but acknowledged the team had spent a lot of money in the recent past, including \$126 million on Yu Darvish and \$38 million on Tyler Chatwood last winter. Darvish was injured and Chatwood was unproductive.

"I'll be the first to admit the offseason moves we made last year did not lead to immediate productivity on those contracts this year," he said. "It put us in a little bit of a hole with our starting pitching. ... We have to own that. I have to own that."

Most of the Cubs' offseason focus will be on their offense, which came up woefully short down the stretch. They scored a total of three runs in three of their final four games -- all losses. A win in any of them would have had them playing in the divisional series.

"Part of getting better is facing the problem," Epstein said. "And our offense broke somewhere along the lines. Of course there is going to be a thorough examination and of course we're going to spend all our energy in trying to fix it and fixing it."

Epstein confirmed what former MVP Kris Bryant indicated on Tuesday night: Bryant won't need surgery on his left shoulder, which bothered him for most of the season. The Cubs hope rest will do the trick -- for Bryant and the whole team. They're facing their longest offseason since 2014-2015. In the end, the Cubs considered 2018 a very good season but one that didn't last long enough.

"We should all look at the season that way," Epstein proclaimed. "We won 95 games but we didn't accomplish our goals. How can we get better?"

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NBC Sports Chicago

Theo Epstein backs Javy Baez, feels Cubs lacked 'sense of urgency' in 2018

By Tony Andracki

Theo Epstein treats his press conferences in the same even-keeled way baseball players aim to treat the regular season, without getting too high or low.

The Cubs president of baseball operations is thoughtful and measured in his responses and almost never says anything by accident.

So when his voice started changing in inflection, it made the makeshift interview room in the bowels of Wrigley Field perk up. The passion was palpable.

In his end-of-season presser Wednesday afternoon, Epstein was asked about Javy Baez's comments after the Cubs' Wild-Card loss Tuesday night where the NL MVP candidate said his team was too often focused on the wrong things amid a year that ended abruptly in disappointing fashion for the Cubs.

Epstein agreed with Baez's assessment and explained it in a different way.

The Cubs were forced to endure a stretch where they had just one off-day over the final 43 days of the season and wound up losing the division and the No. 1 seed in the NL on Game 163 Monday before getting ousted from the playoffs Tuesday.

Yet if they had taken care of business earlier in the season before that brutal stretch began, the Cubs would still be playing baseball right now.

"There were players who were looking at it a little differently like Javy, for example, talking about how - in some ways - we struggled all year and - in some ways - something was off a little bit off all year," Epstein said. "We never got on that roll and we have to own that. I agree with that.

"Jon Lester putting it in his own way - dragging body parts through the dirt - leading to an acknowledgement of where we are or where we aren't and maybe that's a good thing in the long run. It will lead to the universal recognition that nothing will be given to us.

"...If we're being totally honest, this is a theme that has come up a little bit with some of the players as we talked to them and we felt through the course of the year, there was a lot to grind through and there was a lot to be proud of, but we could have done more from Day 1 through 162 as far as complete sense of urgency every day, being completely on a mission every day, showing up with that assertiveness and that edge every single day to win.

"Again, 95 wins is tremendous. But sometimes divisions aren't lost on that last day of the season when you only score one run and you don't get in. They're not lost in that last week-and-a-half when the other team goes 8-0 and you go 4-3 and you needed to go 5-2. Sometimes they're lost early in the season when you have an opportunity to push for that sweep, but you've already got two out of three and you're just not quite there with that killer instinct.

"You know what that makes us? Human."

The Cubs often bring up 2016 - both because it resulted in the first world championship for the franchise in 108 years and because the Cubs cruised from start to finish because they had that edge.

Everything Epstein's talking about that the 2018 team lacked at times, the 2016 squad had.

Which is why he and the Cubs players referenced 2016 countless times between the final out of the NL Wild-Card Game and the end of Epstein's 70-minute presser.

"The guys who have been here that whole time acknowledge that," Epstein said. "From Game 1 through 162, we had that sense of urgency. There was no complacency. We were completely on a mission and we showed up to assert ourselves and to win every single day.

"That might win you that one extra game. Or in the case of 2016, it puts you in a position where you can really rest and prepare down the stretch for the playoffs. We have to own this. We have to be honest about that - it's been a little bit different since 2016. We have to get back to that.

"In 2017, we didn't show up for the first half of the season and that put us in a 5.5-game hole at the All-Star Break and we had to expend so much energy in the second half to get back on top of the division that we were fried by October and exhausted and we didn't accomplish our goal in October.

"This year, I think we all admit - and talking to the players - that we all know that we had our chances to put away the division. Whether it was things that happened in the first half or when we started to get some momentum, building a bigger lead. Or you get to a Labor Day series in Milwaukee and all you have to do is win that series and you might symbolically kind of end it right there.

"Then you have another crack at Milwaukee and you can't win that series, either. Or going 5-2 instead of 4-3 down the stretch. Those two Pirate games during the last homestand will haunt us. Or those three games - Saturday, Monday and Tuesday, where all you have to do is score two runs - score more than the one - and you got it."

Epstein went back and referenced a stat he discussed earlier in the press conference - the Cubs scored 2 or more runs in a game just 50 times out of their 70 games after the All-Star Break.

In those 50 contests, the Cubs went a remarkable 37-13.

If the Cubs had managed to turn in one of those performances in either of those three games Epstein mentioned - Saturday, Monday or Tuesday - they'd still have a chance to win their second title in a three-year span instead of trying to come up with answers to what went wrong.

"Look, I don't think there's some sort of fatal flaw - at all - in the clubhouse," Epstein said, his voice dripping with emotion. "If we're being honest about it - as Jon Lester said - maybe this will be good for us because if you just show up, playing it cool, knowing you're talented, knowing it's a long season and trusting that the talent will manifest over the course of 162, sometimes you end up one game short.

"That's not who we are. That's not who we want to be. That's not what we're all about. I think we have to own that and we have to recognize it. I think our players do, from talking to them today. Maybe that feeling in the clubhouse last night - which was a whole lot of pissed off and disappointed and frustrated - will be our rallying cry for next year.

"...Show up every single game as much as you can and get back on a mission the entire length of the season. That's something. There's no fingers pointed, that's all of us collectively in that.

"But if there's one thing we can change besides the sort of fundamentals next year, we will remember that feeling of falling one game short and try to apply it through the course of a 162-game season."

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NBC Sports Chicago

Cubs' Addison Russell suspended 40 games for violating MLB's domestic violence policy

By Cam Ellis

MLB announced Wednesday that Cubs' infielder Addison Russell will be suspended 40 games for violating the league's joint domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse policy:

MLB released this official statement regarding the matter:

Russell has been placed on administrative leave since September 21st after his ex-wife wrote a lengthy blog post detailing allegations of physical and mental abuse.

Through his lawyer, Russell issued this statement:

"After gaining a full understanding of the situation I have concluded it's in the best interest of my family to accept MLB's proposed resolution of this matter. I wish my ex-wife well and hope we can live in peace in benefit of our child."

Theo Epstein was asked a number of questions about Russell's suspension at the start of his season-ending press conference on Wednesday.

"Clearly we support Major League Baseball's finding and Addy's decision to accept the suspension," Epstein said. "It concludes MLB investigation into this matter as well."

Epstein continued by talking about being a part of the solution when it comes to domestic violence.

"I think we have to understand that with all of our words and actions going forward, whether we know it or not, we're sending messages to our fans who all have their own unique backgrounds and histories and sensitivities and perspectives and that's important," he said. "But I honestly, personally think the most important thing going forward is to be part of the solution. To focus on, not to sound really corny about this, but making this a better place and making sure that this doesn't happen going forward, especially on our watch."

Epstein said there was no way to know more about the situation with Russell earlier. MLB took over the investigation and took it out of the Cubs' hands.

"The part I do question myself on is, in general as a sports team, what is the absolute best structure that you can have for your players, for their spouses, for their families so that this never happens," Epstein said. "That's a really high standard, but that is what we should all be shooting for. I know we have a wonderful family program and we have wonderful people working for support. We try to stay as engaged as possible with the families, but clearly because this happened we should all be asking can we do more? I think that should be the goal for everybody, whether you work for a sports club or whatever your line or work. Domestic violence is everybody's problem so we can all find a way to be a part of the solution. That's the way I'm personally going to attack it and I think we should all attack it going forward."

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NBC Sports Chicago

Joe Maddon will be back as Cubs manager in 2019

By Tony Andracki

Joe Maddon is will be the manager of the Chicago Cubs again in 2019, Theo Epstein confirmed Wednesday afternoon.

There was some doubt about Maddon's standing as the skipper of the Cubs, especially after his team was ousted from the postseason after only one game, but he will finish out his contract with the Cubs. He is owed \$6 million in 2019, the final year of his deal. As of right now, the Cubs and Maddon have no plans to discuss a contract extension.

"Joe's status remains unchanged," Epstein said in his end-of-season press conference. "He's the manager of this team and I'm very happy about that. I know there was a high-profile report this morning that was not accurate. I saw in there that were some claims he and I had personal friction — not true at all. We have a terrific working relationship.

"We don't agree all the time about baseball issues and that's the way it should be. I don't want a 'yes man' as the manager and I don't want it working as a 'yes man' relationship the other way, either. I think there should be discord and debate and healthy trusting relationships where you can work together to make the organization better and that's the way it is. I enjoy having Joe around personally and I like having him as the manager of this club and I really like having the most wins in baseball the last four years.

"I don't like going home the first day of October — that's not on Joe. That's not. Look forward to him coming back next year with some unfinished business, which we all have in this organization."

Maddon has done something no other Cubs manager could do before him, taking the team to four consecutive postseasons.

He ended a 108-year championship drought in 2016 and has averaged 97 wins per season in his four years at the helm on Chicago's North Side.

2018 was probably Maddon's best work as Cubs manager given all he and the team had to endure and the players vehemently backed their skipper.

The Cubs committed \$185 million last winter trying to upgrade the pitching staff with Yu Darvish, Brandon Morrow and Tyler Chatwood, yet the three right-handers combined for just 0.3 WAR (FanGraphs), which Epstein accepted responsibility for.

Darvish and Morrow both threw in Game 7 of the World Series for the Dodgers last fall but neither threw a single pitch in the second half for the Cubs in 2018. Chatwood struggled with command, leading the league in walks (95) despite throwing only 19.2 innings after the All-Star Break.

The Cubs were also without Kris Bryant for 61 games as he missed a few games in April after taking a hit-by-pitch to the head and then was out for nearly two months overall with a left shoulder injury this summer. When he was in the lineup, the shoulder issue lingered and affected his swing and offensive output.

Outside of Javy Baez, most of the Cubs' young core of hitters took steps back on offense in 2018 and the team led baseball with 40 games scoring 1 or 0 runs this year (including postseason), tying the 115-loss Baltimore Orioles for that mark.

The Cubs also had only one day off over their final 43 days of the season due to a grueling schedule that wore the team down physically and mentally.

And with all that, it still took until a tiebreaker game Monday for the Brewers to overtake the Cubs in the division. The next night, the Rockies needed 13 innings to topple the Cubs and earn a bid in the NLDS.

The Cubs' early exit clearly was a disappointment for everybody within the organization as well as the fanbase and changes will likely come this winter. But Maddon will still be setting the lineup come spring training 2019.

Beyond Maddon, Epstein did not give a vote of confidence to any of the other Cubs coaches, saying:

"We just finished playing. I have not turned to that. Certainly haven't talked to Joe about it yet. I think we have to think about that part of it internally first and then talk about it with Joe and if there's an appropriate time to discuss it with you all, we will. Certainly it'll happen in that order."

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NBC Sports Chicago

What happened to Cubs offense in 2018? Theo Epstein provides honest assessment

By Tony Andracki

It didn't take long for the Cubs' Jekyll and Hyde offense to become a main topic of discussion at Theo Epstein's end-of-season press conference Wednesday afternoon.

This is largely the same group of hitters that turned in a relentless performance in 2016 en route to 103 regular-season wins and a World Series championship.

The offensive failures were a major talking point surrounding the 2018 Cubs from the first series of the season and really started to pick up steam in September.

With their season on the line, the Cubs managed just 1 run in three of their final four games, including Saturday against St. Louis, Game 163 Monday against Milwaukee and the NL Wild-Card Game Tuesday against Colorado.

The Cubs did not have any actual answers for their offensive woes all year and with the end of the season only a few hours old, they still weren't able to share any conclusions about the state of the lineup.

"Here's where I am about the offense," Epstein said Wednesday afternoon, "I mean this with no disrespect to our players, I respect them all greatly in every way and our coaches and our front office and everybody involved. There's no disrespect, but I think part of getting better is facing the problem.

"Our offense broke somewhere along the lines."

That trio of games over the final week of the season extended the Cubs' mark of games with 1 or 0 runs scored to 40.

That's right - out of 164 games (postseason included), the Cubs failed to score multiple runs in nearly *a quarter* of their games.

A lineup that featured the 2016 NL MVP (Kris Bryant) when he was healthy plus a 2018 NL MVP candidate (Javy Baez), a perennial NL MVP contender (Anthony Rizzo), the likely NL Comeback Player of the Year (Ben Zobrist), a guy that flashed potential last year of a future NL MVP candidate (Willson Contreras) and a guy who once went six months without seeing live pitching only to come back and tear the cover off the ball in the World Series (Kyle Schwarber) somehow failed their pitching staff one out of every four games in 2018.

And that's say nothing of the arrival of Daniel Murphy - who leads baseball in batting average with runners in scoring position over the last three seasons - who was supposed to help even out the peaks and valleys of this offense.

"Of course there's going to be a thorough examination," Epstein said. "Of course we're going to spend all our energy into fixing it and fix it. If you look back at the first half of the season, we led the league in runs scored. We led the league in OPS. We led the league in virtually every significant offensive category. We were cruising. We felt really good offensively.

"We had cut way down on our strikeouts. We had sacrificed some power, but not all. We were getting on base at a huge clip and scoring a ton of runs and we felt good about our offensive roster 1-through-13, really. Every player.

"Then, in the second half, things were dramatically different, sort of culminating in what happened down the stretch and these last couple weeks."

Epstein cited the Cubs' record in games in which they scored at least 2 runs in the second half (37-13).

After the All-Star Break, the Cubs ranked 24th in baseball in home runs, 23rd in OPS and 27th in slugging percentage.

From Sept. 1 on, they ranked 25th in OPS (.663) and 27th in SLG (.363). Only two other teams - the Giants and Marlins, who were both well out of the race by Labor Day - hit fewer homers than the Cubs' 22 in September/October.

"We hit more groundballs in the second half than any other team by a huge margin," Epstein said. "Our goal is to hit line drives and fly balls out of the ballpark - but hit line drives.

"...Something happened in our offense in the second half where we stopped walking, we stopped hitting home runs, we stopped hitting the ball in the air and we stopped being productive. Not being able to get 2 runs is really unacceptable and it sort of tells a story a little bit of the end of our season, too.

"We had those three games - Saturday, Monday and Tuesday - where if we win one of those games, we're still playing. In each of those games, we scored 1 run with a handful of hits. Unfortunately that was foretold a little bit by the nature of what happened to our offense in the second half.

"That's unacceptable. We have to learn from it and we have to get better. What's the cause of it? What are the contributing causes? We have some ideas, but that's why we're doing all these exit interviews. ... We just have to figure it out.

"I've never been part of something like this offensively and I never want to be again. We have to be an offensive force. We should be with the talent on our roster, but it's probably time to stop evaluating this in terms of talent and start evaluating in terms of production. We need to do everything we can to produce offensively."

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NBC Sports Chicago

What was, what could have been, and what 2018 says about the Cubs franchise

By Doug Glanville

It is sobering when the season ends no matter how far you expected to go. The Cubs closed out the season with consecutive losses at home and within 48 hours, a division title slipped away and so did their hopes of finding 2016 World Series magic.

The good news is that as a player gets farther from the end of a tough season, the optimism of getting closer to a new one can be the way to move forward. It helps take the sting out. Since I engaged this Cubs team from outside of the uniform this year, I had a chance to cover this team as an analyst. A lot can be concluded about this season from that vantage point.

All season long, I saw a team that expected to find ways to win and for the most part, they found them. There is no better indicator to that spirit when you have new players come on board, whether from the minor leagues or from a trade. These players did not join as opportunists, free agent hopefuls, or checking the box of accomplishment as a call-up; they came to maintain the expectation, and before long, they showed how they wanted to be part of the family and keep the tradition of success.

From David Bote's first run at major league excellence to Cole Hamels' and Jesse Chavez's passion to want to return to the team next season. From rookies to mainstays, they wanted to be here and certainly, they wanted the end to go differently. Maybe more importantly, they wanted the chance to re-write that ending next season.

As Javier Baez expressed last night, the Cubs "struggled all season," which is a credit to what they hoped to accomplish when you see 95 wins on the board after the season of struggles ends. They seemed to win in spite of getting in their own way at times, early in the season, the rotation was finding its footing, the offense had starts and stops all year, the unsung heroes in the bullpen became the anchor until injury to Brandon Morrow and Pedro Strop made the weight difficult to bear. The questions around a teammate like Addison Russell also presented a personal struggle, not just his, but how his brothers in the locker room try and support him while learning more about the larger societal implications. You must go from playing a kid's game to growing up quickly in a split second.

When you put it on paper, you read about a team that lost an ace from Day 1 in Yu Darvish. Tyler Chatwood, meant to anchor the fifth starting slot or better, had command issues to an unsustainable level, an MVP went down in Kris Bryant, the backend of the bullpen broke down due to injury just as the team weathered a nearly endless streak of scheduled games toward the end of the season. This happened to be the time when their opponent, the Brewers, got hot.

Despite all of these challenges, challenges known to all teams, it mostly blew up at an inopportune time: September. This was when the offense became consistently inconsistent and the numbers that kept them afloat as a strength, started to become a liability and sink the ship. On base percentage, which was a hallmark most of the year, became a struggle. The discipline at the plate slipped, just as some tough division rivals were pitching well against them, from the Pirates to the Cardinals to the Brewers.

Yet, no one offers an excuse in their close out interviews. Their expectations have evolved far from the years when I wore the uniform in the mid 90s. They have made the playoff for four years in a row and gone fairly deep in the three prior years. It was not enough to just make it. In fact when they did make it, they did not even celebrate much at all. Anthony Rizzo acknowledged the milestone, but spoke about the team's deeper goal of repeating a championship.

With those level of goals comes a farther fall of disappointment when they are not met. The "C" on their uniform is a bullseye now. That is out of respect. Earned from years of being the team to beat and this year both offensively and defensively, great things were expected coming out of spring training.

And when you are a target, it can bring you closer together.

The players spoke about their team like a family, not as co-workers or business associates. They expressed admiration for their manager in Joe Maddon because of this sense that they can be themselves and play baseball through that perspective.

And it has worked, for the most part. This has not been a dynasty, but then again, the game is not in this time anymore. Astros, Royals, Cubs, all won for the first time in a long time (or ever) over the past few seasons. It seems like you have to just catch your moment and run with it as the window closes and circumstances pop up that are out of your control. Then you get old.

In the meantime, the players will head home, face some uncertainty about their future, spend time with friends and family, re-group, step away, and maybe take a moment to enjoy watching the game for a change.

And in due time, the fire will start burning hot again, never extinguished, but just given new oxygen by what could happen in 2019. And this team seems to welcome the idea that next season, 95 wins and making it, is only something to build on.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs roster outlook for 2019: Who's likely to return and who's likely to depart

By Mark Gonzales

Now that the season is done, the Cubs will have a busy offseason refining and reworking their roster. Here are the current players, listed with their contract status and their possible futures with the Cubs.

Who's likely to return: Pitchers

Tyler Chatwood

Signed through 2020. Couldn't hurt to seek outside help to solve what has befuddled him.

Steve Cishek

Signed through 2019. Best free-agent signing.

Yu Darvish

Signed through 2023. Right arm will dictate if he can fulfill contract with the Cubs.

Carl Edwards Jr.

Likely arbitration eligible. Forearm injury added to second-half struggles, but he needs to regain control.

Cole Hamels

\$20 million team option. Pitched well enough to earn option.

Kyle Hendricks

Arbitration eligible. Mr. Dependable.

Brandon Kintzler

\$10 million team option; if declined \$5 million player option. Cubs paid a steep price for his relief help.

Jon Lester

Signed through 2020. Always looks to get better.

Mike Montgomery

Arbitration eligible. Faces similar swing role in 2019.

Brandon Morrow

Signed through 2019. Lots of TLC with right arm, but likely back in closer role.

Jose Quintana

\$10.5 million team option. He'd likely be gone if not for the continuing uncertainty of Darvish and Chatwood.

Randy Rosario

Under team control. Contributed in spurts.

Drew Smyly

Signed through 2019. Determined to start after missing 2018.

Pedro Strop

\$6.25 million team option. Great mentor, insurance for Morrow.

Who's likely to return: Position players
Albert Almora Jr.

Under team control. Hit right-handers almost as well as lefties.

Javier Baez

Arbitration eligible. Deserves extension talks.

David Bote

Under team control. No worse than a super utility role in 2019.

Kris Bryant

Arbitration eligible. No more headfirst slides, but don't expect a big contract.

Willson Contreras

Under team control. Time to hit the reset button offensively — and to improve his pitch framing.

Victor Caratini

Under team control. Enhanced versatility could lead to more playing time.

Jason Heyward

Signed through 2023. Could get better in 2019.

Tommy La Stella

Arbitration eligible. Knows his role well.

Anthony Rizzo

Signed through 2019. Another sound season.

Ben Zobrist

Signed through 2019. Deserves NL comeback player of year award.

Who's likely to depart: Pitchers
Jesse Chavez

Free agent. Could earn multiyear deal elsewhere.

Jorge De La Rosa

Free agent. Filled a glaring need.

Brian Duensing

Signed through 2019. Ineffectiveness and injuries mean no guarantees.

Justin Wilson

Free agent. Pitched well enough to get a robust deal elsewhere.

Who's likely to depart: Position players

Ian Happ

Under team control. Trade fodder for pitching depth.

Addison Russell

Arbitration eligible. After domestic violence accusation and suspension, he's unlikely to return.

Kyle Schwarber

Arbitration eligible. Power makes him attractive to AL teams.

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Chicago Tribune

Column: Joe Maddon will return in 2019, but his long-term future as Cubs manager is up in the air

By Paul Sullivan

Near the end of a panel discussion at the Cubs Convention in 2015, moderator Lin Brehmer turned to new manager Joe Maddon for one last question.

"Joe, a lot of high-priced managers have come through the Cubs organization over the years," Brehmer said. "Dusty Baker, Lou Piniella and many others have come in, and most left Chicago in straitjackets."

Before Brehmer could get to his question, Maddon interjected.

"Forty-two regular," he quipped, offering up his jacket size for the eventual fitting.

That day hasn't come yet, but the Joe Maddon Farewell Tour might begin in February at spring training in Mesa, Ariz., as Maddon enters the final season of his five-year deal.

Hours after the Cubs bowed out of the playoffs in one of the wildest wild-card games in history, a 2-1, 13-inning defeat against the Rockies, Cubs President Theo Epstein confirmed that Maddon would not be fired, contrary to national media speculation that a quick postseason exit would lead to his dismissal.

So Maddon will be back in 2019 for one more year, and the Cubs will decide whether to sign him to an extension. He makes \$6 million annually after receiving a \$1 million bonus in each of the final three years of his deal for winning the World Series. But despite being the most successful Cubs manager in more than a century — the only one since 1908 to bring home a championship — Maddon apparently will have to prove he's worthy of sticking around for the long term.

"Joe's status remains unchanged," Epstein said Wednesday afternoon during an hourlong postmortem on the 2018 season. "He's the manager of this team, and I'm very happy about that. I know there was

some sort of high-profile report this morning that was not accurate. I didn't read the whole thing, but I saw in there that there were some claims that he and I had personal friction. Not true at all. We have a terrific working relationship.

"We don't agree all the time on baseball issues, and that's the way it should be. I don't want a yes-man as the manager, and I don't want it working as a yes-man relationship the other way either. There should be discord and debate and healthy trusting relationships where you can work together to make the organization better, and that's the way it is.

"I enjoy having Joe around personally, and I like having him as the manager of this club and I really like having the most wins in baseball the last four years. I don't like going home the first (game) of October. That's not on Joe. It's not. I look forward to him coming back next year with some unfinished business, as we all have in this organization."

Epstein was referring to a column by The Athletic's Ken Rosenthal, who also reports for Fox Sports and the MLB Network, that suggested Epstein had a "number of reasons to be irritated" with Maddon that might lead to a change. Among the reported "irritants" were injuries to closers Brandon Morrow and Pedro Strop and Maddon's initial refusal to read the blog post by Addison Russell's ex-wife that alleged emotional and physical abuse. Maddon eventually read it at Epstein's urging. Russell received a 40-game suspension from Major League Baseball on Wednesday.

But perhaps the most damning sentence was Rosenthal's assessment that "it's difficult to imagine the Cubs firing him if their biggest complaint is that Epstein finds him annoying or difficult to work with."

Maddon, 64, is his own man, and he likes to do things his way. It bothers those who prefer a Stepford manager who always goes by the book — or by the computer analysis in this age. He still gets heat for overmanaging in Games 6 and 7 of the 2016 World Series, and Epstein conceded Wednesday that some players get frustrated by Maddon's revolving-door lineups.

Epstein was in a similar situation in 2003 in Boston when he was general manager of a Red Sox team that won 95 games but lost to the Yankees in Game 7 of the American League Championship Series. Manager Grady Little was blamed for letting Pedro Martinez stay in too long and was fired after the season.

But unlike Little, Maddon has won a World Series title, and he was brought in to change the culture into a winning one. Even though he succeeded, Maddon has the misfortune of being a well-paid manager in an era when the trend is to hire inexperienced and relatively inexpensive baseball people who run their clubs in tandem with the front office.

The clones are proliferating, and old-school dinosaurs like Maddon are an endangered species.

Epstein accepted blame for the Cubs' collapse, though his message that the team lacked a "sense of urgency" earlier in the season could be seen as a critique of Maddon's laid-back style. Most of the players came to Maddon's defense after Tuesday's loss and dismissed critics who blamed him for the fall from first place.

Third baseman Kris Bryant called it a sign of the times.

"That's the thing now, I just feel like people are saying more bad things than good things about people in general," he said. "It's tough, but that's the world we live in now. Joe always does a great job for us. He

always has our best interests in mind, and we won 95 games. During the regular season, that's pretty impressive. But we didn't win the one game that counts, and that's where it's going to hurt."

Epstein said he doesn't expect Maddon's lame-duck status to be a distraction next season, which seems like wishful thinking. He said it's "more common in the game" these days, adding that no determination has been made and won't be until he talks to Maddon in the offseason.

One of Maddon's old friends, the late Don Zimmer, was the Cubs manager in 1991 when he told management to renew his contract or he would leave at the end of the season, no matter what. The ultimatum backfired, and Tribune Co. fired him in May. Zimmer said that after 43 years in the game, he didn't deserve to be evaluated after the season.

"What am I? A piece of garbage in Lake Michigan?" he famously said.

Maddon is unlikely to give Epstein an ultimatum, and if the Cubs do go in another direction, he probably will be able to find another gig. It's too soon to know how this saga will end, and there still could be a happy ending.

But if Maddon does go out in that 42-regular straitjacket, at least he'll go out in style.

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Chicago Tribune

Theo Epstein won't say if Addison Russell will return to Cubs after suspension for violating MLB's domestic-abuse policy

By Mark Gonzales

President Theo Epstein wouldn't say whether Addison Russell will play for the Cubs again after he was suspended for 40 games without pay Wednesday for violating Major League Baseball's domestic-abuse policy.

But Epstein said the Cubs wouldn't turn their back on Russell as he participates in a comprehensive evaluation and treatment program supervised by the Joint Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Policy Board. Epstein also said the Cubs would reach out and assist Melisa Reidy-Russell, who two weeks ago accused her former husband of physical and mental abuse and provided details in a subsequent MLB investigation.

"I think it's our obligation as a club and my obligation to see what we can do better going forward, to see what we can do to prevent this from happening again," Epstein said less than an hour after MLB announced the penalty, which is retroactive to Sept. 21.

"We'll reach out to the victim, learn from it and give her support. We'll talk to Addy and give Addy the necessary support so he can get the help he needs to make sure this never happens again."

In a tearful interview that aired Wednesday night, Reidy-Russell told WGN-9 reporter Lauren Magiera that Russell's alleged abuse "was really scary. I didn't know what to do or how to handle it. I just didn't do anything. You know, like, what are you supposed to do? And I didn't tell anybody. And then I made excuses."

She said she gave no thought to how her blog post accusing Russell of physical and emotional abuse would affect the Cubs or baseball, just that it felt like the right time.

“The physical stuff wasn’t like every day or every month. It was just like (expletive) hit the fan,” Reidy-Russell said. “Fights started getting worse. He broke my phone in half with his hands.”

She said some of the Cubs wives “knew bits and pieces of things that I would tell them but they didn’t know fully on the things that ... like I said, you put on a face.”

Given that Cubs Chairman Tom Ricketts tells his players each spring to be responsible citizens as well as responsible players, it seems unlikely that Russell will play for the Cubs again.

Allegations against Russell, 24, originally surfaced in June of 2017 from a third party on social media. Russell’s ex-wife declined to talk to investigators then, but MLB never closed the case. Reidy-Russell chose to cooperate after writing on a blog linked to her Instagram account that she was physically and mentally abused.

Russell agreed not to appeal the ruling less than two weeks after issuing a statement declaring his innocence.

Through his attorney, Russell released a statement Wednesday night saying: “After gaining a full understanding of the situation I have concluded it’s in the best interest of my family to accept MLB’s proposed resolution of this matter. I wish my ex-wife well and hope we can live in peace for the benefit of our child.”

Epstein said he supported MLB’s decision, emphasizing the suspension “is part of the solution going forward.”

“But prevention is a big part of the solution and maybe a more important part of the solution,” Epstein said.

Epstein added that the Cubs’ involvement would send “messages to our fans.”

“I personally think the most important thing is being part of the solution going forward. ... We want to make sure it doesn’t happen on our watch.”

The Cubs faced a tough decision regarding Russell’s future even before the allegations surfaced. He batted .250 with only five home runs and 38 RBIs in 130 games while dealing with a sore right shoulder and a swollen left middle finger.

Russell is projected as a second-year arbitration-eligible player who was set to earn \$3.2 million this season before missing the final 11 days of pay because of his suspension.

Javier Baez filled in for Russell at shortstop in the final 11 regular-season games, including the National League Central tiebreaker, and could play there full time if Russell doesn’t return.

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Chicago Tribune

After late collapse, Theo Epstein says Cubs will shift emphasis from evaluating talent to analyzing production

By Mark Gonzales

The one extra victory they needed that eluded the Cubs likely occurred well before they scored only one run in each of their final three losses that kept them from advancing to the National League Division Series.

And it was more than just an offense that went on a siesta after the All-Star break that led to their shocking elimination and a likely shift of organization emphasis from evaluating talent to analyzing production.

That seems to be the raw truth President Theo Epstein conveyed Wednesday during a 1 hour, 11-minute news conference in which he praised his players and staff for their 95 victories but questioned their ability to sustain intensity. That's something star infielder Javier Baez alluded to after their season-ending 2-1 loss to the Rockies in 13 innings of their NL wild-card game Tuesday night at Wrigley Field.

"Sometimes division (titles aren't) lost on the final day of the season when you only score one run, or that last 1½ weeks when the other team (the Brewers) go 8-0, and you go 4-3 and not 5-2," Epstein said. "Sometimes they're lost early in the season when you have an opportunity to push for that sweep but you already have won two out of three and are not quite there with killer instinct as a team.

"You know what that makes us? Human. But that's something in 2016 we had. And the guys who have been here that whole time acknowledge that."

Manager Joe Maddon will return for the final season of his contract, but Epstein's observation of the occasional lack of urgency would seem to put to task Maddon's slogan of "I like Meatloaf," a reference to the singer's hit single "Two Out Of Three Ain't Bad."

Epstein had high praise for the intensity of the 2016 World Series championship team that didn't let up from start to finish and carried that through the whole postseason. Then, in 2017, the team "didn't show up for the first half of the season."

The grind of overcoming that hole last season and winning the division made the Cubs "fried by October and exhausted, and we didn't accomplish our goal."

In the case of correcting the flaws of the 2018 team that failed to protect the five-game lead it had on Sept. 3, Epstein said he and his staff will look closely at an offense that went from leading the NL in runs and OPS while cutting down on strikeouts while not sacrificing too much power to a feeble attack that scored two runs or fewer in 50 games in the second half.

"The responsibility ends with me," said Epstein, who also accepted accountability for offseason signings that haven't panned out. "It's my responsibility to fix it.

The offense, according to Epstein, produced a 49.5 percent ground ball rate in the second half that made them among the worst in homers, walk rate, OPS and runs.

"I've never been a part of something like this offensively, and I never want to be a part of this again," Epstein said.

Epstein said he had completed only two-thirds of his exit interviews with players before meeting reporters, and he plans to talk to the coaching staff Friday.

Hitting coach Chili Davis fell under scrutiny in his first season, but Epstein isn't ready to jump to conclusions.

“Even if we end up making a coaching change or two, I’m not sure there’s going to be,” said Epstein, again crediting the staff for aiding a 95-victory team. “I think continuity is important as well, and you don’t want to be constantly changing coaches for the sake of changing coaches.”

Epstein didn’t mention names, but Ian Happ and perhaps Kyle Schwarber could be expendable after auspicious starts to their careers have been tempered by uneven progress.

“We have to be an offensive force,” Epstein said. “We should be with the talent on the roster. It’s probably time to stop evaluating this in terms of talent and start evaluating in terms of production and do everything we can to produce offense.”

Epstein would like to keep much of the pitching intact, which includes left-hander Cole Hamels (\$20 million option), and reliever Pedro Strop (\$6.25 million team option).

Another consideration is the need for depth. Yu Darvish and closer Brandon Morrow are expected to make full recoveries from their arm injuries, but Epstein emphasized the Cubs will “recommit” to using Morrow in a structured role after he missed the second half because of a bone bruise on his forearm.

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Chicago Tribune

5 questions facing the Cubs this offseason: Is Joe Maddon the right manager? Will Cole Hamels be back?
By Mark Gonzales

After a sudden and stunning playoff exit, the Cubs must address several issues in the offseason. Here are five questions they face:

1. Is Joe Maddon the right manager?

After winning 95 games despite injuries to key players — including Kris Bryant for nearly one-third of the season and closer Brandon Morrow for half — and no substantial contributions from free-agent starting pitchers Yu Darvish and Tyler Chatwood, Maddon deserves a discussion regarding an extension after President Theo Epstein said Maddon would return for the final year of his contract in 2019.

But the Cubs haven’t been content with simply making the playoffs since turning the corner in 2015 — Maddon’s first season with the team. Epstein and a few players cited a lack of urgency from start to finish. Maddon likes to say, “I like Meatloaf,” in reference to the artist’s 1970’s hit song “Two Out of Three Ain’t Bad.” But winning 95 games wasn’t good enough in 2018, and Maddon might have to push his players a tad harder.

2. Who takes the blame for the late-season hitting woes?

The Cubs fired hitting coach John Mallee after the 2017 season despite scoring 822 runs and hitting 223 home runs. Under Chili Davis, they emphasized hitting to all fields and taking a better approach with two outs. The Cubs led the National League with a .258 batting average but hit only 167 homers while struggling down the stretch.

It would be easy to make another coaching change, but the evaluations of the young hitters could fall short of the organization’s high projections for them.

3. Will starters Cole Hamels and Jose Quintana return?

The multiyear contracts to Darvish and Chatwood are immovable at this point. But given the pair's uncertain contributions for 2019, Hamels is likely to return, although the Cubs will have to commit \$20 million if they pick up his option for 2019.

The Cubs stress starting pitching depth. Jon Lester, Drew Smyly and Quintana are under contract, Kyle Hendricks and Mike Montgomery are under team control and Alec Mills and Adbert Alzolay provide back-end depth.

Quintana finished strong after a choppy start, and the Cubs will need more consistency from him unless others step up and make him expendable to teams seeking starting pitching.

4. Can the Cubs continue to rotate leadoff hitters?

The addition of Daniel Murphy helped the Cubs produce a league-leading .366 on-base percentage from the leadoff spot. But Murphy arrived Aug. 21 — while the offense was in the midst of its struggles — and is expected to depart via free agency.

Albert Almora Jr.'s splits against left-handed and right-handed pitchers were virtually even. Anthony Rizzo produced well at leadoff but a lack of production at the bottom of the order wasted his contributions.

5. Who returns to the bullpen?

The second-half acquisitions of Jesse Chavez and Jorge De La Rosa prevented a taxed bullpen from collapsing. But both will be free agents, and there are financial concerns aside from them. Morrow will earn \$9 million and Steve Cishek \$6.5 million, and the Cubs hold a \$6.25 million option on the popular and versatile Pedro Strop.

But the Cubs are expected to pick up Brandon Kintzler's \$10 million team option (if they decline, he could exercise his \$5 million player option), and left-hander Brian Duensing is under contract for \$3.5 million. Montgomery and Carl Edwards Jr. will be first-year arbitration-eligible players.

Given the financial commitments, the Cubs could be hard-pressed to get similar results from their relievers unless they perform some impressive financial gymnastics.

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