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February 8, 2018

- Chicago Sun-Times, **It's time for the Cubs to break the free-agent impasse and sign a pitcher**
<https://chicago.suntimes.com/sports/chicago-cubs-yu-darvish-jake-arrieta-theo-epstein-tom-ricketts/>
- Chicago Sun-Times, **PECOTA predicts Cubs will win 89, White Sox will lose 89**
<https://chicago.suntimes.com/sports/pecota-projections-wins-mlb-cubs-white-sox/>
- The Athletic, **Letters from Camp: Mike Montgomery sees a broken MLB system while waiting for Cubs to make next big move**
<https://theathletic.com/234057/2018/02/07/letters-from-camp-mike-montgomery-sees-a-broken-mlb-system-while-waiting-for-cubs-to-make-next-big-move/>
- The Athletic, **Who gave Kerry Wood a Hall of Fame vote? This guy did, and he had a perfectly nice reason for doing it**
<https://theathletic.com/233745/2018/02/07/who-gave-kerry-wood-a-hall-of-fame-vote-this-guy-did-and-he-had-a-perfectly-nice-reason-for-doing-it/>
- Cubs.com, **Zobrist looks to re-establish presence at camp**
<https://www.mlb.com/cubs/news/ben-zobrist-a-player-to-watch-at-cubs-camp/c-265972682>
- ESPNChicago.com, **With or without another pitcher, Cubs need familiar faces to take next step at the plate**
http://www.espn.com/blog/chicago/cubs/post/_id/46380/with-or-without-another-pitcher-cubs-need-familiar-faces-to-take-next-step-at-the-plate

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Chicago Sun-Times

It's time for the Cubs to break the free-agent impasse and sign a pitcher

By Rick Morrissey

The clock is ticking for the Cubs. It's ticking for them to sign a top-tier starting pitcher before Spring Training starts, and it's ticking for them to take advantage of the seven-year window that president Theo Epstein opened in 2015. The two elements might be inextricably tied to one another.

All we've heard the past few months is that baseball free-agent signings have gone into hibernation, for reasons that still aren't clear. Teams and players are doing a slow dance that looks more like a statue convention. Everybody is waiting for everybody else.

Suggestion: Why don't the Cubs, with all their massive profits, make the first move? How about the Cubs, an industry leader, taking the lead?

Pitchers and catchers report to Mesa, Ariz., on Tuesday, and it's important that one of those reporting pitchers be a freshly signed star. What was the Cubs' slogan a few years ago? Let's Go? Yeah, Let's Go already with a signing.

At this point, no team seems willing to give Yu Darvish or Jake Arrieta anything beyond a four- or five-year contract. Both pitchers, emboldened by Max Scherzer's seven-year, \$210 million contract from three years ago, expected to get contracts of five years or more worth \$25 million to \$30 million a year. Some of that confidence was fueled by Arrieta's agent, Scott Boras. Why those pitchers and other players haven't gotten close to what they want is open to interpretation, with some people, noses up, smelling collusion among owners.

The argument in some corners of Chicago is that it's too risky to give any pitcher a five-year-plus deal, arms being as unreliable as they are. I'd argue that it's riskier to go into the heart of Epstein's window with a big hole in the rotation. The Cubs have a number of players heading into the meat of their careers. Now is the time to take advantage of that.

Money isn't the issue. It can't be. Whatever financial constraints the club had early in the Ricketts family's ownership are no longer there. Fans have lined up to buy whatever the Cubs have put in front of them, including higher-priced tickets.

Because everyone is a general manager these days, some fans are worried about the team surpassing the luxury tax in 2018, especially when the Cubs are almost certain to do so in 2019, a big year for talented (and expensive) free agents. Surpassing the luxury tax two years in a row brings with it harsh penalties for teams, including loss of draft-pick position. Nobody wants that.

But for the Cubs to take full advantage of their window, they need to spend money on pitching. The trade market isn't in the picture. They've looked at it but don't have the minor leaguers to get a big deal done.

They have money for free agents. Do they have the will to spend it? I keep coming back to this five-year-old quote:

"All I can tell you is when Theo and Jed (Hoyer, the Cubs general manager) get to the point where they need more resources to execute their plan, the Ricketts family will be there for them," team spokesman Dennis Culloton told the Sun-Times. "It's as simple as that."

The Cubs will be good in 2018. The question is whether they can be great as constituted. I don't think so. So there are two approaches:

— Don't pay big money for a pitcher. View this season as a holding pattern for 2019, in the hope that slugger Bryce Harper will be there for the nabbing.

— Do what it takes to get Darvish or Arrieta in a bid to win a World Series in 2018. Worry about luxury tax repercussions later.

Don't the Cubs owe it to their fan base to do whatever it takes to try to win every year, especially after trying not to win during the rebuilding years? There's no guarantee that next year's crop of free-agent pitchers will be better than this year's.

Everything is a risk. Nothing is certain. Harper might not want to come to the North Side. Darvish's arm might fall off after he finishes signing a contract with the Cubs.

Part of the Cubs' dilemma stems from Epstein's history of going heavy on position players in the draft and paying little attention to pitching in the higher rounds. And that's OK. Who can argue with what their farm system has produced and what the big-league team accomplished the past three seasons?

If one World Series is enough for you, fine. It's hard to argue that the 2016 championship isn't enough, give the century of futility that came before it. But if the "sustained success" that Epstein promised makes you hungry for more, then the Cubs need to plunk down money for quality pitching.

The Brewers and Cardinals already are better than they were last year. Now is the time for the Cubs to move. That's not panic, it's fact: Their rivals have upgraded.

To those of you counting on the midseason trade deadline for answers, remember that the Cubs were close to pulling the plug on last season because of a slow start. Being aggressive at the trade deadline isn't a given for this club. The time to act is now.

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Chicago Sun-Times

PECOTA predicts Cubs will win 89, White Sox will lose 89

By Dan Cahill

With Spring Training just around the corner and hope springing eternal for most baseball fans, Baseball Prospectus' PECOTA projections always have to ruin it for some.

The Nate Silver-inspired algorithm that digests decades of data, grinds it up into team depth charts and spits out a win-loss projection has just been released.

Since its inception in 2003, PECOTA, which stands for Player Empirical Comparison and Optimization Test Algorithm, has been quite accurate with forecasting outcomes.

Last season, for example, PECOTA had the Cubs winning 91 games; they won 92. It also had the World Champion Astros leading the AL with 99 wins; they won 101. And, it had the NL Champion Dodgers winning 99; they won 104.

In 2016, it correctly picked all five NL playoff teams.

This season, PECOTA has the Cubs projected to win 89 games, tops in the NL Central with the Cardinals (84) and Brewers (83) in pursuit.

As for the rebuilding White Sox, PECOTA forecasts a 73-win season in the AL Central, far behind the division-leading Indians (97).

PECOTA projects the Astros and Dodgers to top both leagues again with 99 wins apiece.

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The Athletic

Letters from Camp: Mike Montgomery sees a broken MLB system while waiting for Cubs to make next big move

By Patrick Mooney

MESA, Ariz. — Mike Montgomery isn't obsessively checking his phone to see the latest rumors about the Cubs. He joked that he's still living in 2004 — no Instagram account, a Twitter feed he rarely uses and a basic Pandora plan with commercials.

But this winter slowdown forced Montgomery to become engaged and informed — and not just because he would get bumped to the bullpen if the Cubs sign Yu Darvish or Alex Cobb.

Montgomery is thinking about the future, because he is positioned to be a free agent at the same time this labor deal expires in December 2021, the battle lines already forming in the dueling press releases between Major League Baseball and union chief Tony Clark.

Montgomery is wondering how the Major League Baseball Players Association responds when All-Star-caliber players like Jake Arrieta, Lance Lynn, Greg Holland, J.D. Martinez, Eric Hosmer and Mike Moustakas are still looking for jobs and barely getting mentioned in free-agent rumors.

"If those guys aren't getting signed and we're a week away from spring training, then there's definitely something wrong with how the system is set up," Montgomery said Wednesday after working out at the Cubs' complex. "There's a lack of incentives for teams to spend money to try to win. I think it's unfair to the fans. It's unfair to — not just the players — but the owners are doing a disservice to themselves.

"But at the same time, that's the way the agreement is right now, so they don't have to spend the money. They look at it from a business standpoint, so I get it, but it's just not fair to the fans, to not try to put a winning team out there."

Fans aren't going to care how the two sides split up a \$10 billion industry. But Montgomery is right in that there is enough blame to go around now.

The union slipped on economic issues and collectively bargained a system where the luxury-tax threshold triggers penalties at \$197 million this year, limiting big spenders like the New York Yankees, Los Angeles Dodgers and San Francisco Giants.

MLB has placed severe restrictions on acquiring amateur talent and incentivized tanking. Franchises are trying to copy a Cubs Way blueprint — which ultimately required hundreds of millions of dollars in free-agent investments — and writing off multiple big-league seasons without much blowback.

If the Miami Marlins weren't such a dysfunctional mess, imagine Arrieta and another legitimate starter backed by an everyday lineup featuring Giancarlo Stanton, Marcell Ozuna, Christian Yelich, Dee Gordon and J.T. Realmuto. Once the model for pitching wealth and sustained success, the Atlanta Braves haven't yet signed a major league free agent this offseason. The Baseball Prospectus PECOTA projections released Wednesday featured only three National League teams above 86 wins.

Those big-picture issues became impossible for Montgomery to ignore, even as he spent most of his winter here in Arizona, training to be a starter, whether or not the Cubs make a late splash and sign someone like Darvish.

"It's been a weird offseason market," Montgomery said. "Right now, I think there are some things that are wrong with baseball. I think it's pretty obvious to everyone.

"Who knows? It's out of my control. But, look, I want to win another World Series, so I want the best team possible. I want to be on the best team, and be a part of it. We'll see how that plays out."

Whatever happens, Montgomery will adapt, the way the lefty swingman's gone from a first-round pick of the Kansas City Royals to a project with the Tampa Bay Rays and Seattle Mariners to the guy who notched the last out in Game 7 of the 2016 World Series.

The Cubs see Montgomery as a staple of their pitching staff because he's so versatile, 6-foot-5 with velocity and a curveball, not even arbitration-eligible yet and only 28 years old.

Montgomery still sent the message through the media that he wants the chance to be in the rotation this season — without requesting a trade — because he believes he can be the kind of pitcher who someday commands a big contract. Whatever that will be after this fight between labor and management.

"I'm not in a position right now to demand anything," Montgomery said. "But I wanted it to be known that I want to be a starter. I want it to be known — not only with Chicago, [but in] the baseball world — that my goal is to be a starter. And I think I've proven that I'm capable of that.

"My goal and my mindset right now is to be a starter and get in that routine. And if something changes, it'll change. But for now, I'm ready to take that starting role."

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The Athletic

Who gave Kerry Wood a Hall of Fame vote? This guy did, and he had a perfectly nice reason for doing it
By Jon Greenberg

Baseball Hall of Fame voting lost some mystique when Ryan Thibodaux began tracking votes.

His @notmrtibbs Twitter account has helped bring more transparency and organization to the voting process for sports' already most organized and transparent Hall of Fame voting procedure.

But when this year's voting totals were released, there was still a little mystery.

Namely, who were the two people who voted for Kerry Wood?

Wood, who isn't without a sense of humor, had joked to the Chicago Tribune's Phil Thompson he wasn't expecting many ballots with his name marked.

"If I get one vote, we're having a blowout party," he told Thompson. "I'm going to call the guy who voted for me, whoever voted for me, and apologize. If they voted me they're probably losing their credential."

On Wednesday, the Baseball Writers Association of America released a chunk of public ballots, including some not tracked by Thibodaux, and we got a partial answer as one of those ballots included a vote for Wood, who finished a star-crossed, 14-year career with a very impressive 1,582 strikeouts in 1,380 innings, a 3.67 ERA, two All-Star appearances, a Rookie of the Year award, an NLCS home run, an 86-75 record and a lot of simulated games.

The voter in question was Alan Hoskins, an 81-year-old former sports editor and columnist for the Kansas City Kansan (now an online-only outlet) and current part-time sports information guy at Kansas City Kansas Community College. (Hoskins is a Hall of Famer at the school.)

I emailed him about the vote and he called me back within minutes.

“Well, let’s be honest, his career didn’t amount to a Hall of Fame one,” Hoskins told me at the beginning of a 10-minute phone conversation.

So why vote for him, then? How about kindness.

“I didn’t want to see him go without a single vote,” he said. “I didn’t know if anybody else would vote for him and so I wanted to give one of my 10 votes for him. It’s pretty simple.”

Hoskins said he met Wood once after a game in Chicago early in Wood’s career — “I thought he was a nice guy,” he said. — and like many people, has fond memories of Wood’s record-tying 20-strikeout game against the Houston Astros in 1998.

“I think it’s the greatest game that’s ever been pitched,” he told me.

Is one special game worth a Hall of Fame vote? Probably not. And given his current job status and the new rules for voting eligibility, I was surprised Hoskins still had a vote.

But Hoskins’ ballot is otherwise strong and for a man of his generation, very open-minded. He voted for winners Vladimir Guerrero, Trevor Hoffman, Chipper Jones and Jim Thome, along with Edgar Martinez, Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Curt Schilling and Sammy Sosa.

Hoskins said he doesn’t see the point in penalizing PED abusers retroactively for what they did in baseball’s lawless, homer-happy era. He noted that doing what earns you a 50-game suspension today (or like four games if you’re in the NFL) shouldn’t equal a lifetime ban in the Hall of Fame for the likes of Bonds, Clemens or Sosa. You might not agree with him, but there’s logic to his argument.

“The penalty doesn’t fit the crime,” he said.

Hoskins isn’t a day-to-day, or even week-to-week, baseball writer anymore, but he still gets out to Kauffman Stadium to watch the Royals on occasion and checks out the Cubs on his MLB TV package. In a funny moment, he told me he was just trying to sign up for The Athletic to stay up to date on the Cubs, but was having problems signing in. (I told him I’d have our support staff send an email.)

Voting transparency comes with the expectation of criticism. We love to make fun of bad HOF ballots, dumb MVP votes and in general, illogical thoughts different from our own. So I give credit to Hoskins for putting his ballot out there. And I have to say, I found the vote for Wood, and the reasons for it, endearing. I don’t think Wood would have had his feelings hurt if he went vote-less like his old rotation mate Carlos Zambrano, but who wouldn’t want a HOF vote in their only year of eligibility?

“I hope I didn’t abuse my privileges,” Hoskins said. “But I just thought it didn’t hurt anybody else in the voting and I just wanted Kerry to get a vote. That [20-strikeout] game was so overwhelming, it was unbelievable.”

If you haven’t guessed by now, yes, 81-year-old Alan Hoskins grew up a Cubs fan. According to the community college website, he’s from Zearing, Iowa and went to the University of Iowa, where he was the sports editor of the Daily Iowan. He worked as a reporter in Iowa until joining The Kansan in 1976. He’s worked at the community college since 1983 — while still writing on the side.

"The Cubs were the only team we got on the radio," he said of his childhood. "This is before TV. My parents were big Cubs fans too. I can remember in 1945, they asked me if I wanted to listen to the World Series. ... I've been following the Cubs ever since."

And now he's a very minor part of Cubs lore.

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Cubs.com

Zobrist looks to re-establish presence at camp

By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- While most Cubs fans will want to how see skinny Kyle Schwarber is or watch new closer Brandon Morrow or check out promising pitching prospect Adbert Alzolay this spring, the player to watch is Ben Zobrist.

Zobrist, 36, is coming off a season he'd like to forget and seems to be the forgotten man in the Cubs' lineup. When he signed a four-year contract with the Cubs two seasons ago, Zobrist was projected to be their second baseman. However, Javier Baez asserted himself at second, starting all of the 2016 postseason games there.

A sore left wrist and neck issues nagged Zobrist most of last year, and he posted a .232 average, his lowest since breaking into the big leagues with the Rays. But the switch-hitter also admitted he began the 2017 season not fully recovered from back-to-back trips to the World Series, winning with the Royals in 2015 and the Cubs in '16.

"Last year, it was about getting the proper rest," Zobrist said. "[Manager Joe Maddon] knew I was exhausted going into Spring Training last year ... talking about rest as the next thing that we have to really pay attention to to make sure you're playing at an optimum level.

"I think we all knew that I was pretty exhausted after the last two postseasons, and I think that led to a lot of the breakdown with the body early in the season and having to go on the [disabled list] midseason. By the time the All-Star break came around, I felt great. I felt I could play every day."

Zobrist did get more starts at second in the second half, although part of the reason was that Baez was needed at shortstop to fill in for an injured Addison Russell.

Zobrist was so unhappy with how the 2017 season went that he took less than two weeks off after the last game before getting back to work in the weight room. By mid-November, he was in the batting cages.

Maddon has known Zobrist since the versatile player joined the Rays in 2006. Every year, they have a private conversation to talk about Zobrist's Cutlass and playing time, and most likely, in that order. One of the strengths of the Cubs' roster is its versatility. Zobrist knows his role is evolving.

"That will be an ongoing discussion," Zobrist said about his conversation with Maddon. "I've done everything I needed to do so far this offseason to get my body in prime optimal playing position, essentially to play every day again. I feel better than I've felt in at least five, maybe seven, eight years. My body is way better than it has been over the last few years.

"I'm motivated and excited to get out there and just play hard and enjoy it and keep growing as a player. I'm 36 and one of the older guys on the team, but I look forward to growing in whatever capacity I'm given. If that means I don't play as much as I have in the past, and I do more veteran-presence type of things, then I'll do whatever that takes."

The Cubs do need a leadoff man. As much as Maddon liked Zobrist batting behind Anthony Rizzo, which is where the veteran was slotted in 2016, the Cubs could insert Zobrist into the No. 1 spot to set up Kris Bryant, Rizzo and Willson Contreras.

Zobrist has the most seniority of any of the Cubs' position players -- this will be his 13th season -- but he has to show what he can do this spring.

"If I'm feeling good and playing well, I wouldn't be surprised if they play me more," Zobrist said. "It always comes down during the season to who's playing the best and who feels the best. The good thing is we have so many different guys who can fill those needs and holes, so everybody will stay ready."

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ESPNChicago.com

With or without another pitcher, Cubs need familiar faces to take next step at the plate

By Jesse Rogers

CHICAGO -- After a winter makeover on the mound -- which still might see more changes -- the Chicago Cubs enter spring training with a very familiar group at the plate. In fact, when it comes to position players, there is not one new face outside of a backup catcher (Chris Gimenez) who might or might not make the team.

The Cubs lost Jon Jay to free agency but will go to battle this season with every other hitter who helped them to a third consecutive playoff berth last year. That might come as a surprise, as the team expected a potential trade for a pitcher this offseason, but phone calls with opposing front offices never led to anything.

That part should not come as a surprise, considering what other teams are looking for and how they value certain Cubs hitters. Multiple executives indicated throughout the offseason that if they were calling Chicago, they weren't looking to "buy high" on Kyle Schwarber or Ian Happ, for example. Meanwhile, the Cubs undoubtedly view both those players in higher regard. They know them. They know their drive. Even Schwarber's obvious body transformation wasn't enough to sway a rival executive to give up an elite pitcher. Shortstop Addison Russell was dangled as well, according to league sources, but the match never fit there, either. All this means the core group gets another chance to do something special.

"I think 2018 is the year where our guys are going to take a big step forward," general manager Jed Hoyer said last week on his way to Mesa, Arizona, for spring training. "Most of our guys are in their mid-20s, entering their prime years. I think this group is really going to come together."

More than ever, the Cubs will need to become more reliant on their offense, as their lack of pitching depth is starting to catch up with them. They drafted hitters high, which means at some point those players need to be the strength of the team as the front office figures out how to revamp the staff. Six free-agent pitchers should help, but they also bring question marks.

On the other hand, there should be no questions about Kris Bryant, Anthony Rizzo & Co. But there are once you get to the "& Co." Sure, a healthy Willson Contreras has become someone to count on, but what about three other core guys who have shown inconsistent tendencies? This trio will decide if the Cubs' offense becomes a dangerous beast or continues to show its warts.

Kyle Schwarber

Those who have scoffed at his body transformation simply because it doesn't mean he can hit fastballs again actually do have a point. We don't know if he'll return to being a fearsome hitter -- at least not yet. What we do know is that getting into great shape has never hurt anyone. If Schwarber can leg out one more hit per month, it can be meaningful. If he plays defense, say, just 25 percent better than he has in the past, it can be meaningful as well. Those things are now possible, but he'll be judged on his contact rate more than anything. The power is there.

"I know I can hit home runs," Schwarber said this winter. "I'll always have power. I have to get back to being a hitter."

That is what Theo Epstein and the coaching staff echoed. Can Schwarber be a hitter and not just a slugger? The answer will make a huge difference in the Cubs' lineup.

Addison Russell

Let's face it: 2017 was a throwaway year for Russell. He was hurt, faced off-the-field issues and rarely looked like his old self, both in the field and at the plate. Talk about a misleading stat: Russell actually hit one point higher in 2017 than he did in 2016, but no one who watched him would think that his season last year was anything close to the season he had when the Cubs won the World Series. The big hits and big plays were few and far between in 2017. It leads to one simple question: Are Russell's health issues behind him? If so, then his paltry .304 on-base percentage in 2017 should improve, as should his play in the field. The bar is high for him on defense. It's not like he was bad last season, but he needs to stay healthy.

Javier Baez

The favorite of many a fan, he can frustrate even the most die-hard Baez lovers. It's not so much how many times he strikes out as it is how he goes down. Usually, it's on a breaking pitch nowhere near the plate. Having said that, Baez's OPS was .796 last year. One more leap, and he will be a real difference-maker. He was having just an OK season on defense until Russell went down with an injury. Then he picked up his game. If Baez can play 162 like he did while filling in for Russell, he will finally shed the "inconsistent" label. First things first: Lay off those breaking balls, and take some walks. Everything else will follow.

Of course, the team isn't reliant on just these three hitters, but these three have the highest ceilings. It's these three players -- with a nod to Albert Almora as well -- who are X factors who have shown flashes of greatness, but we don't yet know how good they can be over the long haul. This is the year when they need to bring it for a full season.

The Cubs are counting on it. After all, they kept everyone around.

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