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NBC Sports Chicago

Considering Cubs' budget crunch, was picking up Cole Hamels' option the right move?

By Tony Andracki

Did the Cubs make the right call in picking up Cole Hamels' \$20 million option?

That question was a no-brainer in the first few days of November — an easy call to pencil Hamels into the Cubs rotation for 2019 even if it meant trading away Drew Smyly and his \$7 million contract to the Texas Rangers.

But here on Jan. 8, it's at least a fair question and the answer isn't so automatic, as we discussed on Hot Stove Tuesday.

Mind you, the result is still the same. The Cubs have Hamels under contract for 2019 and his \$20 million salary is part of why Theo Epstein's front office doesn't have much wiggle room to add to the roster.

Epstein and Co. have pointed to payroll issues all winter (the Smyly move to clear some salary for Hamels was a clear indicator), but those woes seem to have hit a crescendo this week as The Athletic's Ken Rosenthal reported the Cubs couldn't even sign a second-market relief pitcher like Adam Warren without first clearing salary.

[Explaining Cubs budget woes: Why Theo Epstein's front office is limited this winter]

Those are some serious financial restraints, though it's understandable. With a payroll projected to surpass \$228 million, the Cubs will pay far more to their roster in 2019 than they have at any other point in franchise history.

But that is not a lot of financial flexibility for Epstein to add necessary pieces. Warren made just \$3.3 million in his final year of arbitration in 2018 and would probably fetch a bit more than that on the open market.

If that's true and Epstein's front office is restricted that much, there's one definite conclusion to be drawn from the Hamels decision: The Cubs clearly felt they absolutely needed the veteran starting pitcher.

Either the budgetary restraints have changed since the Cubs picked up Hamels' option on Nov. 2 (Epstein and Jed Hoyer maintained throughout the MLB Winter Meetings the budget has not changed) or the Cubs felt Hamels was more valuable to the 2019 team than using that money elsewhere to address the other holes on the roster (bullpen, veteran backup catcher, another bat, etc.).

It's tough to argue that point. Bringing Hamels back really was a no-brainer at the time, especially given how he performed in 12 starts down the stretch (2.36 ERA, 1.10 WHIP, 8.7 K/9). Sure, he's 35 and has shown signs of decline in the past, but he was obviously rejuvenated in a Cubs uniform and increased health/mechanics support the boost in numbers over the last two months of 2018.

The Cubs also have serious question marks in their starting rotation beyond maybe only Kyle Hendricks. Jon Lester is 35 and showing some minor signs of decline, Jose Quintana had a bit of a disappointing 2018 despite a strong finish and of course Yu Darvish and Tyler Chatwood are far from reliable options after the way their first season in Chicago played out. Imagine the tenor of fans this winter if the Cubs were planning on cruising into next year with Chatwood as a projected member of the rotation.

There's a strong argument that the reliability Hamels brings is well worth the \$20 million and financial constraints the Cubs now face.

It's much easier to find a reliable member of the bullpen than a solid starting pitcher with the upside of Hamels. Relievers can pop up from all over the place, as Jesse Chavez proved in 2018.

To play devil's advocate, if the Cubs are as limited financially as they are saying, they could've done a whole hell of a lot with that extra \$13 million in savings from not picking up Hamels' option and keeping Smyly instead. (Though that obviously is not enough money to turn around and add Bryce Harper just because Hamels is off the books.)

Smyly missed all of 2018 to Tommy John recovery and \$7 million (\$5 million hit against the luxury tax) would've been a lot to pay for an unreliable option like that, but he showed signs of health in September and would've represented an option in either the rotation or bullpen.

That would then leave \$13 million (or close to it) to fill in other gaps on the roster, namely in the bullpen while also potentially adding a veteran backup catcher and more depth for the starting rotation alongside Smyly, Chatwood and Mike Montgomery.

The offseason is far from over (pitchers and catchers don't report for another 5+ weeks) but as it stands right now, the Cubs bullpen appears in worse shape than it was heading into 2018 spring training. They will be without closer Brandon Morrow for at least the first couple weeks of 2019 due to surgery to clean up his elbow after a bone bruise erased his entire second half.

There's a valid case to be made on either side of the Hamels decision, but the Cubs drew their line in the sand months ago and will have to add to the roster in other ways.

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NBC Sports Chicago

State of the Cubs: Third base

By Tony Andracki

As the Cubs maneuver through a pivotal offseason, we will break down the current state of the team by sectioning it off into position groups. Here is the sixth installment on the third basemen.

The main Cubs third base question of the winter actually has nothing to do with the position at all. It's all about Kris Bryant's bat and whether or not he can return to the MVP-caliber form he put up on an annual basis before 2018.

But there are other questions in terms of how much Bryant will actually play at third base in the coming season. The Cubs always had Javy Baez as an option at the hot corner with Bryant in the outfield, but now David Bote's emergence and Daniel Descalso's arrival present a host of other options for the Cubs.

Depth chart

1. Kris Bryant
2. David Bote
3. Javy Baez
4. Daniel Descalso
5. Phillip Evans

Bryant is expected to be fully recovered from the shoulder injury that sapped a lot of his power in 2018 and assuming he can stay healthy, will likely return to his previous form in some capacity. That's not to say he'll be the 2019 NL MVP, but a healthy Bryant is a major force and will completely change the complexion of a Cubs lineup that fell off a cliff in the second half of last year.

But don't be surprised to see Bryant play that outfield as much as ever in 2019 for a variety of reasons. When facing tough left-handed starters, Bryant could move to a corner outfield spot and get either Jason Heyward or Kyle Schwarber out against the southpaw and another right-handed bat in the lineup in Bote.

Bote also turned a lot of heads with his stellar defense at the hot corner and when the Cubs need their best defensive lineup out there, that might mean Bryant in the outfield, Bote at third and Baez at shortstop. Bote will have to make adjustments to work back to the league after his bat was exposed down the stretch, but at the very least, he looks like he could be a glove-first utility player who can platoon against left-handed pitchers.

Baez will start the year as the Cubs' primary shortstop, but after Addison Russell's suspension is up, Baez may move back to a super-infield role, seeing regular time at short, second and third with Bryant moving to the outfield in that scenario as well.

Descalso has played almost as much third base as second base in his career to date, so he represents more depth at the hot corner. Evans, who signed as a minor league free agent earlier this winter, can also play all over the infield.

What's next?

Likely nothing beyond figuring out the playing time at third base. The Cubs may not have many more moves left this winter as it is, but they surely don't need to shore up third with any more depth.

The bottom line

The focus in spring training will be on Bryant's left shoulder and even if he starts the season healthy, he'll have to prove he can make it through the full 6-7 months of a season without the injury cropping back up.

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NBC Sports Chicago

Where Caesars has Cubs, White Sox win totals for 2019

By Dan Santaromita

The baseball offseason is far from over and the biggest free agents haven't even picked a home yet, but Vegas is already setting lines for how many wins each team will have.

Caesars released its first win totals for the 2019 season and the news is split for the two Chicago teams.

“2019 MLB Season Wins now available @CaesarsPalace ... Always fun! Available in NJ and MS in the next hour. — Jeff Davis (@The_Junkyard) January 8, 2019”

The Cubs are set at 89 wins, which is six wins fewer than the team had in 2018 and would be the team's lowest win total since 2014. Apparently Vegas isn't impressed with the Cubs' lack of activity this offseason. Still, that is the highest total in the NL Central. The Cardinals are projected to be right there with the Cubs, coming in at 88 1/2. The Brewers are expected to have quite a dropoff at 83 1/2.

The White Sox come in at 74.5 wins, which is an upgrade for a team that won 62 games in 2018. The arrival of Eloy Jimenez, another year for the younger players to develop and a beefed up bullpen with Alex Colome and Kelvin Herrera could make the White Sox a better team in 2019. Oh, and the chance they sign a marquee free agent like Manny Machado and/or Bryce Harper.

That would put the White Sox at third in the AL Central, ahead of the Royals (69) and Tigers (67). The Indians (91 1/2) are projected to win the division again with the Twins (84) chasing .

The Astros have the highest projected win total at 97 1/2, just ahead of the Yankees (96 1/2) and Red Sox (95 1/2). The Orioles are last at 59, which would be still a significant improvement on the team's 47 wins in 2018.

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