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October 8, 2018

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<https://chicago.suntimes.com/sports/chicago-cubs-theo-epstein-joe-maddon-mlb-playoffs-albert-almora-ian-happ-addison-russell-willson-contreras/>
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## The Athletic

The trade-deadline move that saved the Cubs bullpen, Jesse Chavez, talks first playoff experience, free agency

By Patrick Mooney

The Cubs can't fire all the coaches and sign every big free agent. The ratio of trade rumors to hitters actually moved this winter will be off the charts. Keeping Joe Maddon as manager is valuing continuity and recognizing what went right this year (and the three consecutive playoff seasons and 2016 World Series title before that). Team president Theo Epstein first wants to unplug from this season and avoid making heat-of-the-moment decisions.

In Wrigley Field's dazed-and-confused clubhouse early Wednesday morning after a 13-inning loss to the Colorado Rockies in the National League wild-card game, ESPN reporter Marly Rivera described a scene where Jesse Chavez pointed to the Cubs logo on his shirt and told teammates, "If I'm not wearing this next year, I'm done."

"I'm open-minded to anything," Chavez said in a separate, brief conversation with The Athletic, thinking about what he could do for the Cubs over a full season.

Everyone probably needs a break after riding the Cubbie rollercoaster this year. But Chavez showed how important the trade deadline is (1.15 ERA in 32 appearances) as well as how overrated it can be (since his name generated zero buzz before that July 19 deal with the Texas Rangers). Chavez, who waited until late February before signing a one-year, \$1 million contract with the Rangers, might have pitched his way into the Cubs' 2019 plans or beyond their means.

Because Chavez was even better than advertised, a tough, versatile right-hander who follows the game plan and attacks hitters. Chavez finished with 12 straight scoreless outings as a Cub, including two innings in a Game 163 loss to the Milwaukee Brewers plus the seventh inning of the wild-card game against Colorado.

For Chavez, that marked his first playoff appearance in a professional career that began when Texas selected him in the 42nd round of the 2002 draft. That actually represented a drop from where the Cubs drafted Chavez the year before (the 39th round). Chavez has pitched for nine different big-league teams and been involved in trades that included Kip Wells, Rafael Soriano, Rick Ankiel, Kyle Farnsworth and Tyler Thomas (the Cubs' seventh-round pick in last year's draft).

"It was awesome," Chavez said after getting a taste of the playoffs. "We can all say it's the same inning, the same game, whatever the case may be. But it's not the same.

"You just knew you had to stick to the same thing. And that was my only goal – stick to the same thing you've done since you've been here."

It's important to note that the Cubs identified Brian Duensing as an under-the-radar signing after the 2016 World Series, maximized his talents in 2017 (2.74 ERA in 68 appearances) and made his family feel so welcome that he turned down a two-year, \$10 million offer from the Oakland A's and instead signed a two-year, \$7 million contract. The discounted deal didn't work out the way either side envisioned in 2018, with Duensing putting up a 7.65 ERA while dealing with left shoulder inflammation.

The Cubs also went into last winter talking about trying to find the next Brandon Morrow and wound up signing the actual Brandon Morrow to a two-year, \$21 million contract. Morrow put up All-Star numbers in the first half (22 saves, 1.47 ERA) before ultimately getting shut down with a bone bruise in his right elbow.

Bullpens are unpredictable, but the Cubs knew what they were going to get with Chavez, who gave up only five walks while notching 42 strikeouts in 39 innings.

“You got to love his method, ‘Here we go, let’s go,’” Maddon said. “I can’t even imagine a manager not really loving the way he goes about his business.”

Another point to remember as the Cubs try to build a playoff bullpen for next year, especially after having onboarding issues with 2017 trade-deadline reliever Justin Wilson and \$38 million free agent Tyler Chatwood: pitching at Wrigley Field is not for everyone and you have to recognize who can handle it.

“This has been one of my favorite places to come since I broke into the league,” Chavez said. “This has been one of the best places to come, similar to Boston with the atmosphere, the history, the culture, the clubhouse, the stands, the fans. That whole thing that they built – you just try to embrace it – but (don’t) let it control you.

“That was the biggest thing I learned (here) from the first game out with a doubleheader against St. Louis. You come into a rivalry, how do you embrace it? Well, you embrace it by just going about it like another day. Listen. Hear the sounds. Hear the voices. Hear the people around and you just try and go with it. That’s basically what I tried to do, because when I first got here, it was a playoff atmosphere.”

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## **The Athletic**

Decoding Theo: Our writers decipher five of the Cubs president’s eloquent press conference answers  
By Jon Greenberg

So, Theo Epstein said a lot on Wednesday. I don’t think we ever finished the full 71-minute transcription, but I had it around 6,600 words with 10 minutes or so left. In a 642-word answer to the speculative question “Could this Cubs team have won the World Series had it made it to the NLDS?” he used a form of the word “synthesize” five times.

Patrick Mooney called it a “one-man show.” I loved the Spalding Gray monologues we watched in a college creative writing class, and I think Theo could pull off a baseball one if he wanted to after he steps down as president of the Cubs.

In our podcast, Sahadev Sharma said Theo’s end-of-season press conference is his favorite day of the year, because it falls in that space where he can be his most honest — on the record anyway. It is a pretty transparent performance, one that every team president should do on an annual basis.

But by the nature of his job, Epstein can’t just come out firing on his team. That wouldn’t be good leadership, would it? So we decided to pick five of Theo’s answers (or clusters of answers to the same fundamental question) and give our thoughts on what he was getting at and where those situations could lead. All questions in bold are paraphrased.

### Topic 1: Joe Maddon’s future

This one was pretty straight-forward. Is Joe Maddon the manager of this team going forward? Here’s what Epstein said:

“Yeah, Joe’s status remains unchanged. 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."

Would letting Joe be a lame duck be a distraction?

"First of all it's becoming more common in the game. 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."

Would Joe be attracted to an open job, like say, Anaheim?

"No, I haven't heard anything about that. But when we get together and communicate, we'll discuss anything and everything."

Our thoughts:

Sahadev Sharma: I hate to be a Cub-spiracy theorist, but I never saw a full-on statement that Maddon will be back next season. The closest was this, "And look forward to him coming back next year with some unfinished business, as we all have, in this organization." He stated that their relationship is great, that he doesn't want yes men, that their early exit isn't on Joe, that he would be fine with having a lame-duck manager, but never an unequivocal "Joe Maddon is going to be the manager of the Chicago Cubs in 2019." Maybe he couldn't say that because he hadn't had the exit interview with Maddon yet. And without that, he doesn't know exactly how Maddon would feel about working without an extension or whether he wants the type of extension Epstein has no desire to give.

(On Friday, Cubs general manager Jed Hoyer said on 670 The Score: "Joe is under contract. He's the manager of the 2019 Cubs and he's done a fantastic job.")

And I certainly didn't see any evidence of Epstein saying he would be furious if Maddon wanted to explore other options if an extension isn't a realistic option. I have listened to Epstein enough to believe that he's being careful with his words here. Perhaps that's merely because he just doesn't know what the future holds, not that he doesn't want Maddon back.

In the end, I think Maddon comes back. That's the most likely scenario. But I'm not ready to say anything like, "Epstein has given Maddon a full-throated endorsement and cleared up any confusion about who will be managing this team next season." And I certainly wouldn't be shocked if Maddon decided that trying to get a multi-year deal with another team where he has ties was in his best interest. And I'm not sure if Epstein would bother getting in a bidding war if that were the case.

Patrick Mooney: It's not Maddon's style to force a confrontation and risk losing the biggest job he will ever have. Of course, there's an element of playing to the cameras during those press conferences, but

Maddon means it when he says he stays in the present tense and blocks out as much outside noise as possible. As long as front offices are run by Theo types who dress, think and talk alike, the days of managers getting five years and \$25 million guaranteed are probably over for now. The bottom line is Maddon will make \$6 million in 2019 and the Cubs can't afford to entrust another World Series-or-bust season to a managerial intern who just walked off the golf course or a TV set. It's also time for the Cubs to stop working around the edges and thinking a new coach or two will make a dramatic difference. Maddon will look like a better manager with better players. And the Cubs were already good enough to win 95 games in a year that felt like they had no real rhythm or momentum.

Jon Greenberg: I think Theo had to address Ken Rosenthal's story directly without giving him the satisfaction of saying his name (though USA TODAY's Bob Nightengale also reported that while Maddon was coming back, he wasn't getting an extension Wednesday morning), and had to immediately address "the elephant in the room," as radio legend Johnny Reyes might say. I think the free-flowing discussion in the inner circle of the Cubs front office lends itself to being patient at times like these. Sure, Theo could be mad at Joe, but you can't launch him without a plan. And winning is everything to this team. Joe gives you the best chance. A Twitter follower replied to me recently that it sounded like Theo was daring Joe to ask for an extension, but I agree with Mooney. Joe will manage his lame-duck year and collect \$6 million, plus whatever he makes from Binny's. If the Cubs get off to a good start, the contract pressure goes back on Epstein, not him. If they don't, it's going to be a fun year of twice-a-day press conferences.

Topic 2: What needs to change?

Epstein talked about the talent on the roster and how the Cubs need to change their evaluation process.

"I think it's an examination of the talent that we have and as I said earlier, it has to be more about production than talent going forward. 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."

Our thoughts:

Sharma: I touched on this in my piece from Thursday morning, but he's clearly talking about a few players in particular. It's safe to say that's Kyle Schwarber, Ian Happ and Albert Almora Jr. And tangentially, and probably not in the same stratosphere as those three, Willson Contreras. But I don't think this is just an indictment of those first three players. Yes, it's on the Cubs to determine whom they believe is more than just "talent." They have to figure out who will reach their potential, or at least improve enough to be a part of this core.

But beyond that, this needs to be an introspection of the organization as a whole. Almora, Schwarber and Happ were all drafted high in the first round and developed by this front office. Did the amateur department evaluate this talent properly when they were drafted? Did player development staff do what was right — whether it was proper instruction or the proper timing when it came to promotions — when they were going through the system? Did they have the right coaches in place and tools at their disposal when they finally reached the big leagues? And maybe even asking whether having such a deep roster with so many young players only getting part-time play can severely stunt their development to the eventual detriment of the team. This team needs to be deep, but perhaps being deep with a bunch of 20-somethings isn't the ideal situation.

There's a lot to dive into there, in my opinion, but I think that's where I start.

Mooney: There's no easy answer to this question. The Cubs fired one handpicked hitting coach who did everything the organization asked (John Mallee) and hired another who came in with a great reputation as an instructor, strong connections to Maddon and Epstein and a ton of real-world experience as a former All-Star player (Chili Davis). The Cubs held onto their young core of hitters, in part, because their valuations didn't necessarily match up with the rest of the industry...so do you sell after a down year when everyone knows you're looking to make changes? Once the Cubs cool down and remove the emotions from the equation, it's obvious that a healthy Kris Bryant makes the entire lineup better, and he will be motivated after essentially the first major setback in his charmed baseball life.

Greenberg: I think we too often focus on everyone but the players in situations like this, or I should say more than the players. It's tough to hit a baseball, so maybe we just innately understand that, or perhaps we know you can't just fire the talent. (Most of the time.) But I think Epstein, while understanding how difficult this game is, is annoyed at some of his players for not living up their standards. The Cubs have given these players a first-class environment in every way, from training to nutrition to infrastructure. But they can't go into the box with them. That's why they speak so highly of Javy Báez nowadays. He's just mentally and physically tougher than every other position player in the clubhouse. When it comes to player movement, I wonder if someone like Schwarber gets moved for a small package of relief pitching and a prospect. The Cubs need to restock that farm system and if they add a big free agent, like say an outfielder with voluminous hair, maybe they focus on getting minor leaguers in return.

Topic 3: Save us Bryce Harper. You're our only hope.

The 2018 free agent class is top-heavy and has been looked at as the medicine for what ails this team. Theo can't come out and say, "We're going to recruit the hell out of Bryce Harper and Manny Machado," or mention anyone's names in particular, but here's what Epstein said about free agency, which didn't exactly help the Cubs this season.

"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. Some impact players out there. We'll get together and figure out what's possible, what's not possible and all the best approaches to this offseason."

Our thoughts:

Sharma: As long as they bring Cole Hamels back, I assume they stay away from adding any significant starting pitching. I think going into next season with Brandon Morrow as the primary closer would be a huge mistake. I think it makes a ton of sense to actually pair him with a lefty who has closing experience and have them share the duties in a sense. There are certainly options available there, including Andrew Miller and Zach Britton in free agency.

Of course, the offense has to be addressed in some way. If you haven't heard, there are a couple big bats available. I don't know if the Cubs get one of Harper or Machado, but I'm certain they'll try. Odds are they won't get one, but obviously either changes the look of the offense dramatically. After those two, it's clear something needs to be done to shake up the offense. There are other options out there, none as impactful as the first two choices, obviously, but perhaps enough to create a lineup that's a bit more diverse in both skill set and experience.

I also think a veteran backup catcher that can frame pitches, call a game and do some of the little things well makes a ton of sense. I'm not hung up on this team finding a leadoff guy (they were second in baseball — first in the NL — in on-base percentage from the top of the order), but it's also not like there's a logical one available on the market. Adding Triple-A depth for the starting rotation and position player unit would be nice as well. They did it for the relievers this past season, pulling it off for the rest of the team would really help them weather injuries and ineffectiveness.

Mooney: The Cubs can start by adding that experienced catcher to take pressure off Willson Contreras and add a different leadership element to the clubhouse. Remember how much Jon Jay helped the 2017 team because he wasn't treating that season like a World Series victory lap? The right veteran hitter, even in a supporting role, could bring a sense of urgency and new perspectives when the offense inevitably slumps. But, of course, this is all about the Harper/Machado sweepstakes and how hard the Cubs will go after a superstar, because you know they will be involved somehow. Epstein always tries to downplay expectations while constantly thinking big and never ruling anything out. Stay tuned.

Greenberg: It would be irresponsible for the Cubs not to have major pitches lined up for Machado and Harper. I honestly think there's a strong chance they both stay where they are right now, Los Angeles and Washington D.C. I know the latter seems like a stretch, but if the Lerner family pays up, you never know. How could the Dodgers let Machado go? So while the Cubs will try to sell these stars — and I bet Epstein convinces Tom Ricketts to spend on them — they need to be focusing on other additions as well, like a middle-of-the-infield stud to replace Addison Russell, who will surely be departing one way or another. (I'm guessing they just don't tender him a contract, because who's going to trade for him?) How about DJ LeMahieu? He just hit a career-high 15 homers this season. I know one Chicago reporter who would be delighted. The Cubs need to add a backup catcher and relievers on the market, for sure. But yeah, the initial focus should be on the big-ticket guys. Free agency won't move too much until they make their decisions.

Topic 4: Where's the fire?

Epstein spoke very clearly about a lack of urgency on this team, something he saw in the first half of 2017 as well. Is he talking about Maddon's laid-back managing style? The players who have a "It's just one game" attitude all year?

"But that's something in 2016 that we had. The guys who have been here that whole time acknowledge that. Game 1 to 162, we had that sense of urgency, there was no complacency, we were completely on mission and we showed up to assert ourselves and win every day. And 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 to 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 in the first half of the season. And that put us in a five and a half 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, we all admit in talking to the players, we all know that we had our chances to put away this division. Whether it was things that happened in the first half or when we started to get some momentum building with 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 end it right there and 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 Pirates 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. We were 37-13 in the second half when we got to two runs or more and we couldn’t do it in those big three games.

“This year it manifested that we had chance after chance to put away the division, and we didn’t do it. So we have to own that. I don’t think there’s some sort of fatal flaw at all in the clubhouse. I just think, 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’ll end up one game short. And that’s now who we are. It’s now who we should want to be. It’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.

“You’ve already won two on the road and now you’re playing a getaway day at noon and two out of three seems good enough. But no, show up every single game as much as you can and get back on mission the entire length of the season. That’s something that there’s no fingers pointed, that’s all of us collectively. But if there’s one thing that we can change besides the fundamentals next year, we will remember that feeling of falling one game short and try to apply it 162 games. You had a number of guys who were really proud of the season and of everything that our guys overcame. Including missing a number of key players due to injury, but also that grind of the schedule. It was really relentless for the players, it was a gauntlet. It was 42 in 43, which is unheard of. That’s a quarter of the season. And they did stick together and really grind through that in a positive way. And we played winning baseball through that stretch. I understand where they’re coming from and I share a lot of those sentiments. That is something to be proud of, but not an excuse at all.

“On the other hand, there were players who were looking at it a little differently. Like Javy, for example, talking about in some ways we struggled all year. And in some ways something was off a little bit all year. We never got on that roll. We have to own that, and I agree with that. And Jon Lester putting it in his own way, dragging body parts in the dirt leading to an acknowledgement of where we are or where we aren’t. Maybe that’s a good thing in the long run in that it’ll lead to the universal recognition that nothing will be given to us. I very much understand those types of sentiments too.

“I think if we’re being totally honest, this a theme that’s come up a little bit with some of the players as we talk to them and that we felt over the course of the year. There was a lot to grind through and there was a lot to be proud of, but we could’ve done more from day 1 to 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 day. Again, 95 wins is tremendous. But sometimes divisions aren’t lost on that last day of the season when you only score one run, they’re not lost that last week and 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 that sweep but you’ve already got twos throughout the course of the season.”

(Whew. That was a long one.)

Our thoughts:



Sharma: Can we spread the blame here? I did find it odd that not a lot was made of this long diatribe by Epstein, who is, in my opinion, connecting this problem to Maddon. Most people seemed to just focus on the players here, and I think that's where the main issue is, but this team certainly has taken on the cool-as-a-cucumber attitude of its manager. After all, he is the one who instantly says, "Meatloaf" once he gets in front of the media following a potential sweep of an opponent turning into a two-out-of-three series win.

That attitude certainly works in many situations, especially when things get tough and a bad moment arises. But I do agree with Epstein (and Javier Báez and Jon Lester, among others in that organization) when he says there was a lack of urgency with this group. It got frustrating to hear players dismiss any sort of question about concerns, particularly with regards to the offense. Sure, it's baseball. Bad baseball.

All jokes aside, I don't think this is Epstein ripping Maddon or Anthony Rizzo or any one person. Rizzo was certainly not thrilled after Tuesday's loss. And I think it would be a big mistake for Maddon to change the way he carries himself. This team put themselves behind the eight ball in 2017 at the break, but at least eventually they admitted it. And they turned it on and by the time October arrived, they were burned out. What was bothersome about this year was that we didn't really hear many of the truly vocal players in the clubhouse say anything about needing a sense of urgency until the season was over.

Báez was saying it, but to be honest, I don't think he put it in a way that could be taken as him calling out teammates for not having a World Series edge. He kept saying that the team needed to forget about outside noise and other teams and just play for themselves (or some version of that) and they'll be the team they know they are. What he was asking for was for everyone else to stop acting like things would be OK and that they could just coast on their talent and allow the problems to fix themselves.

Fixing those problems is up to Epstein and his staff. One of their biggest issues this offseason will be figuring out if, as Epstein said, losing will bring that edge to the group or whether they need to add a new element to the clubhouse like they did when they signed John Lackey prior to the 2016 season.

Mooney: Epstein is crushing everyone, and no one in particular. Because this is an organization-wide issue. The Cubs try to put their players in the best position to succeed and give them every resource possible, but at times that makes it feel like a country-club atmosphere. Maddon's positive attitude and patience with young talent is exactly what the Cubs needed in 2015, but the team's lack of urgency in 2017 and 2018 is not a good look for the manager. Rizzo figured out what works for him, but everyone isn't wired the same way. Look, the Cubs have to find the right balance here. Epstein should feel a sense of attachment to the players who won the 2016 World Series, without letting the clubhouse become stale. Maddon should be proud of his record, and won't fundamentally change in his mid-60s, so bring in a veteran player or two with that killer instinct. Let Rizzo be Rizzo, just don't anoint him as the sole leader or think he should be some sort of everyday captain. A lot of what's right about The Cubs Way is Rizzo's unshakeable self-confidence, ability to make adjustments, desire to play every day and tremendous off-the-field contributions.

Greenberg: As someone said to me, only Rizzo hits that homer off Josh Hader in the regular season. His heart rate stays consistent. He's also the perfect guy to lighten up a bad mood. Just a funny goofball who can hit dingers. But I think the Cubs need to add a hard-ass veteran or two, like how I mentioned LeMahieu above. Remember when he got into it with Javy? Sometimes you need those dudes.

The Cubs loved that Daniel Murphy became an "adult in the room," a baseball rat who loves talking hitting. At the end of the regular season, we talked to Murphy in full uniform a half-hour after the game

ended because he was working on his hitting. A day or two later, Rizzo was still in his uniform hitting. I'm not saying you bring him back. Epstein basically he said he belongs in the AL now because of his limited range on defense (though I respect how he played the hell out of first base Tuesday night). The Cubs always thought Schwarber would be a vocal leader of this team, but his own struggles have probably limited that impact. After the game, I wrote about how he gave Willson Contreras a pep talk and a big hug. If Schwarber sticks around, and hits consistently, I hope he takes it unto himself to be more vocal. B  ez has clearly become a vocal leader now that his game is in order.

#### Topic 5: Accountability is a two-way street

Epstein talked about accountability and suggested there should be organizational introspection this offseason, from top to bottom. Will it happen?

"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. And so, 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. And it put us in a little hole early with our starting pitching that we all had to work hard to overcome. We have to own that and I have to own that and find a way to be better with those decisions and how certain things worked out."

Our thoughts:

Sharma: I do think Epstein is good at introspection and trying to learn from his mistakes. My guess is he looks at Tyler Chatwood as a clear mistake, Brandon Morrow as a risk he was willing to take that backfired and Yu Darvish as a move that was mostly taking advantage of a suppressed market that was an utter disaster in Year 1. Remarkably, with pitching being the focus of last offseason and nearly every move being a near non-factor, it was the offense that sunk this group.

As I said above, that's where the introspection must focus. Whether it's their ability to evaluate talent, develop it or just bad luck with regards to players not reaching their potential, something needs to be done. I've said and written this many times already, but if they come back with the offense not altered in some significant fashion, I think it'll be looked at as an inexcusable mistake.

Mooney: Maybe some of this change will be organic after such a disappointing finish, or maybe typing "organic" is a sign of listening to too much Maddon. The farther the Cubs get away from 2016, the harder it becomes to say, "Well, we've done it before." It becomes easier to look in the mirror and make those changes. In basically a 17-hour period at Wrigley Field, from the moment the clubhouse opened after a stunning wild-card loss to the middle of Epstein's exit press conference, enough influential Cubs smashed the idea that we should all R-E-L-A-X and stopped the spin about this season being some triumph over injuries and rainouts. Winter is coming and the Cubs should look different by the time pitchers and catchers report to spring training.

Greenberg: I don't think Maddon will do much introspection, frankly. Maybe he'll tinker with his spring training routines, perhaps he'll be more of a regular presence around the clubhouse, if not in it. He does chime in when he sees something that bothers him — that's what he says anyway — but maybe the Cubs need more from him. I think self-evaluation is really important for the front office on acquiring and dealing players and for the players starting next spring. Offseason work is fine, but none of the hitters

are having 2016 Jason Heyward problems. They need to have more of a “win the day” attitude next season, and for that, they have to be in the right mental place next March in Mesa.

If you listened to the press conference, or just have some thoughts on these Epstein quotes and our reactions, head to the comments section like you’re Javy rounding third and ignoring Brian Butterfield.

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## **The Athletic**

Why the Cubs’ offensive issues go beyond Chili Davis

By Sahadev Sharma

Following the Cubs’ quick elimination from the postseason, amidst the cursing and grumbling as fans filed down the Wrigley Field ramps, there was only one name uttered nearly as frequently as Bryce Harper’s: Chili Davis.

The public pariah of the team’s offensive collapse, Davis’ first year as Cubs hitting coach didn’t net the results anyone was hoping for. Was Davis’ mental and more contact-oriented, opposite-field approach the main contributing factor to the Cubs’ offensive woes?

“Ultimately everything that happens on the baseball field, in our whole baseball operation, the responsibility ends with me,” Cubs president Theo Epstein said Wednesday. “So when something’s not right, it’s my responsibility to fix it, and especially, it’s important for me to step up when things aren’t right. So it’s me. And that’s why I didn’t sleep much (Tuesday) night, and couldn’t wait to get here in the morning and try to channel some of that frustration and energy into finding solutions. And unfortunately you can’t take that on the field, but you can take it into exit interviews, and trying to get better. So yeah, it’s on me, it’s on all of us. I’m the leader of this group, and I need to lead the charge to fix it.”

Epstein had yet to hold his exit interviews with the coaching staff by Wednesday afternoon. The reality that the team still expected to be playing at this point led Epstein to hedge a bit when asked about the staff in general. When it came to Davis in particular, Epstein remained positive, but non-committal.

“He worked his tail to make guys better,” Epstein said. “So in that respect, he did everything that we asked of him. The goal, what Joe (Maddon) mentioned and certainly what I was hoping for, was never to sacrifice power or in my opinion, launch angle. It’s not a fad. The bottom line is, line drives and balls in the air are way more productive than ground balls. We weren’t looking to sacrifice power and walks in exchange for ground balls and opposite field hits. But in the second half, that’s what the results were. That’s not what we’re looking for.”

There were some positives to the Cubs’ offense. They were second in baseball and led the NL with 383 opposite-field hits. When they put the ball in play to the opposite field, they hit .358, also tops in the NL. But they just weren’t regularly putting the ball in the air with any authority.

Epstein mentioned the second-half offensive collapse, one in which the team led baseball in ground-ball rate (48.6 percent) by a wide margin. Former Cubs hitting coach John Mallee used to say that you get your slugging in the air, and he’s absolutely right. Unsurprisingly, the difference between slugging percentage this season on line drives (.913) and ground balls (.266) was nearly 750 points.

If Davis preached contact and an all-field approach, while Mallee was more about launch angle and slugging, did the Cubs get stuck in between philosophies?

"I don't fully buy into that," Epstein said. "I think the core offensive philosophy of this organization remains unchanged. We want to be selectively aggressive, get pitches we can drive, and drive them hard in the air, including out of the ballpark, line drives. We want to have professional at-bats, be relentless, and as part of that selectively aggressive approach you're going to draw walks, and we should be getting on base a ton, leading the league in on-base percentage, as we were at the All-Star break."

The Cubs went from a 9.7 percent walk rate and .265/.345/.426 (.161 ISO) slash line at the break to an 8.1 percent walk rate with a .249/.316/.389 (.140 ISO) slash line in the second half. One could argue that this offense was already good, but needed to mature after 2017's postseason exit, when the offense went out with a whimper. That's what Epstein hoped Davis would provide.

"What we're trying to do to finish the development of our hitters is, especially with runners in scoring position, when you're facing the best pitchers, to take what the pitcher gives you, use the whole field, have great situational and professional at-bats," Epstein said. "We did lead the league in opposite-field hits, and so there was some progress in that area. But the bottom line is we stopped walking, and stopped hitting the ball out of the ballpark, especially in the second half. We hit the ball on the ground a ton."

Over the years, the Cubs have struggled with situational hitting, and it's been a persistent point of contention over the last four seasons under Joe Maddon's leadership.

With runners in scoring position, the Cubs have posted a wRC+ of 90, 100, 99 and 88, ranking 24th, 14th, 17th and 24th from 2015 to 2018, respectively. It was in these situations this season where the power really cratered, as they posted a measly .131 ISO with runners in scoring position. When it came to driving in runners from third base with fewer than two outs, the Cubs converted those situations 40.5 percent, 49.7 percent, 48.3 percent and 49.1 percent of the time, ranking 30th, 18th, 28th and 20th from 2015 to 2018, respectively.

Ultimately, all these little details are just part of a bigger problem right now. Davis was supposed to put the finishing touches on the Cubs' young bats, but there's been far too much regression, particularly in the power department.

Here's the easy narrative, the one Davis detractors will point to. Last season, the Cubs ranked ninth in baseball with 223 home runs and 10th with a .182 ISO. This season they collapsed in both categories, ranking 22nd in both homers (167) and ISO (.152). The Boston Red Sox, Davis' old team, jumped from 28th in ISO (.149) and 27th in homers (168) to fourth (.185) and ninth (208), respectively, from 2017 to 2018.

While Davis' impact (or lack thereof) shouldn't be ignored or dismissed out of hand, he may not necessarily be the problem. All the facts must be considered, including that in the offseason, the Red Sox added J.D. Martinez, who delivered 43 homers and a crazy .299 ISO. You think adding Bryce Harper, who had 34 homers and a .247 ISO, would help the Cubs in these categories next season, even with Davis still as hitting coach?

But it wasn't just Martinez. Mookie Betts put up an MVP-caliber season, turning into about as complete a player as one could imagine. Davis was his hitting coach in 2016 during his breakout season, before Betts took a step back in 2017. Which season was Davis' fault? Did he start telling him to change things from 2016? Or is it just the natural course of things when you consider he was a 24-year-old kid tasked with carrying an offense that had just lost David Ortiz?

How much pressure did Betts feel to pick up his offensive workload with Ortiz was gone and Boston's front office doing nothing to make up for it? There were a few situations like Betts', like with Andrew Benintendi and Xander Bogaerts, where one could suggest it was Davis or maybe just the non-linear quality of player development. It's up to Epstein to really figure this out, as he was the one who believed in Davis over Mallee.

One of Epstein's several interesting comments on Wednesday was in regard to launch angle — "It's not a fad," seemed in direct contradiction to what Maddon had preached, at least to the media, during much of the season.

"Keep your launch angles. Keep your exit velocities. Give me a good at-bat," Maddon said after an April victory.

He expounded a few weeks later.

"My innuendo has been out there based on all the discussion about it," Maddon said. "I would not teach a young kid to do that. If you came down from Mars tomorrow — and I wanted to teach you hitting — I would not start with launch angle. That would be the last thing I talk about.

"It's not like we created this new method of teaching hitting. We're not big advocates of taking the guy and all of a sudden trying to teach him to lift the ball now."

Epstein tried to clear that up on Wednesday.

"I think with Joe and talking about launch angle, sometimes the phrasing and the way it's presented as launch angle exclusively in the face of other really sound hitting principles, that really bothers him," Epstein said. "When you actually sit down and talk about what it means beyond the nomenclature and the way it's sometimes used as shorthand, I think there's more agreement than disagreement. There are times when it's not appropriate, situational at-bats or against certain types of pitching. If you have a certain type of swing, that particularly bugs Joe. If you take a guy who's built one way with a swing that is built for more low line drives, like take an (Albert) Almora or something, and the contact he has, no one is ever going to try to take him and make him scoop under the baseball. That's something that would bother Joe. But Joe's not out there telling guys to hit down on the ball and hit ground balls, not at all."

Assistant hitting coach Andy Haines is more mechanically focused and preaches getting the ball in the air when appropriate. But he explains it as "contact point" a method of teaching that's been around for as long as any of them can remember. Launch angle isn't a fad, but it is a buzzword that can infuriate some who know it's nothing new. But focusing on these little nuances, like exit velocity, swing path and launch angle (or contact point) can certainly help the right player. David Bote wouldn't be in the majors without it.

But it does seem a bit odd for Maddon to sound so down on a concept that really shouldn't be ignored. And when you see the team start pounding the ball into the ground regularly and completely lose any semblance of power, you wonder whether messages aren't being conveyed in a productive way.

"I wouldn't say caught in between, but I think still evolving," Epstein said about the idea of multiple philosophies over the years impacting the offense. "And if we were so caught in between approaches, why were we the best offense in baseball in the first half? So I do think something happened in the second half, and especially down the stretch, and has demonstrated most poignantly and painfully these last few games that we have to get to the bottom of."

Epstein was also careful not to put all the blame any one person.

"This isn't on the coaching staff," he said. "Even if we end up making a change or two, which I'm not sure there's going to be, I think continuity is important as well. You can't be constantly changing coaches for the sake of changing coaches. We truly have not made any determination on our coaches yet. But they were a big part of us getting to 95 wins."

Davis deserves some credit for helping maximize Javier Báez's potential. If anyone aced Davis' finishing school, it would be Báez, as he launched his career to a new stratosphere, becoming an MVP candidate and an invaluable defender at three different positions. While Mallee and others certainly helped Báez progress over the years, many coaches around this team believe Davis helped Báez tremendously.

Davis also helped Heyward regain some confidence and a bit of opposite-field pop as well. There's no doubt trying to tweak Heyward's swing when he arrived in 2016 led to disaster, which may be the prime example of Maddon not loving launch angle as a universal teaching method. Each plan much be adapted to the individual and the type of swing they have. Heyward's power comes with a contact point deeper in the zone. A launch angle approach led to what we saw during his first two seasons in Chicago. While his 99 wRC+ wasn't anything special this season, there were many more signs of a Heyward resurgence in 2018 than ever before.

But there were obviously plenty of issues on the offense, from Ian Happ's inconsistencies to Willson Contreras' complete inability to drive the ball in the air with power. How much of that is Davis' fault is what Epstein will spend the next few days figuring out. And after that, going about making sure things change dramatically in 2019 from the second half of 2018 will be the primary directive of the upcoming winter.

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### **Cubs.com**

Pelicans jersey with special significance in HOF

By Carrie Muskat

A Myrtle Beach Pelicans jersey worn by manager Buddy Bailey as part of the team's "Deaf Awareness Night" promotion was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame on Friday.

The script on the front and back of the Pelicans' jerseys was done in American Sign Language, part of an extensive and well-received event at the Cubs' Class A Advanced affiliate.

"Deaf Awareness Night" was held Aug. 19 and was sparked when a father in the Myrtle Beach area asked Ryan Cannella, the corporate marketing manager for the Pelicans, about what he could do for his 4-year-old daughter, who is deaf.

The Pelicans staff then brainstormed, and the day included a free baseball clinic for the deaf community conducted by former Major League outfielder Curtis Pride, who is deaf. The jerseys were changed, and there were sign language interpreters stationed throughout TicketReturn.com Field in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

"It was really cool to see fans communicating in sign language from across different sections," Pelicans general manager Ryan Moore said Friday during a discussion at the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. "Traditionally, when you go to a ballpark, you communicate with the person sitting right next to you. It was a unique experience."

Families from 10 different states attended the game, which drew 4,855 fans, including a mother from Chicago, who heard about the game and flew down with her daughter, who is deaf.

On Friday, Bailey's No. 46 jersey was accepted for the Hall of Fame's permanent collection.

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## **Chicago Tribune**

5 questions about Cubs starting pitching

By Mark Gonzales

This is the first in a series of a position-by-position analyses of the Cubs entering the offseason.

First up: Starting pitching.

1. Was the rotation that good, based largely on how well it performed at the end of the season?

The addition of Cole Hamels on July 27 masked the disappointing seasons of Yu Darvish and Tyler Chatwood. Kyle Hendricks got stronger after a rough June, and Jon Lester epitomized the role of ace with an All-Star season capped by a strong September, not to mention his blunt assessment of the 2018 season after the Cubs' elimination in the National League wild-card game.

The rotation finished sixth in the league with a 3.84 ERA but ninth in innings pitched (888) and strikeouts (769). The lack of strikeouts put pressure on the defense, and the lack of innings by the starters was due in part to a lack of early run support. Manager Joe Maddon was criticized for his frequent use of the bullpen, but the Cubs managed 40 comeback wins due in part to Maddon stopping the midgame bleeding so his offense could remain within striking distance.

Maddon's spring training declaration that this was the best rotation in his four seasons in terms of talent was too lofty, based on the fact that the 2016 staff remains underrated and because Darvish and Chatwood weren't finished products.

The rotation was good, but it needs to be more consistent to make Maddon's midgame decisions even harder in low-scoring games.

2. How important is it for the Cubs to retain Cole Hamels?

It's essential for many reasons. First, There's no guarantee Darvish will revert to top form after his injuries. Second, Chatwood has yet to prove he can throw strikes with any semblance of consistency. Third, Jose Quintana has suffered baffling bouts of wildness.

Hamels looked much more comfortable pitching at Wrigley Field and in the National League than he did pitching at Globe Life Park with the Rangers in the AL. Even at the plate, he never gave away an at-bat and fit in seamlessly with his teammates. The younger pitchers can learn from watching his sound mechanics.

Hamels expressed a desire to stay with the Cubs well before the season ended. It could take some minor adjustments to retain him, but the Cubs don't have any top-of-the-rotation starting prospects ready to challenge for a starting job.

### 3. What must be done with Yu Darvish?

From the time he arrived at the spring training complex in mid-February to the final game, Darvish seemed in a rush. It appeared as if 2018 represented the perfect storm, from stomach issues that scratched his first spring training start to Darvish needing 102 pitches to throw only 4 1/3 innings in his regular-season debut March 31 in Miami to a late-August diagnosis that revealed a stress reaction in his right elbow.

Management and the coaching staff gave him a grace period through the end of April. At times, there seemed to be a disconnect between Darvish and the team regarding what pitches were preferred and the pitches he threw. Certain pitches likely suffered from his elbow problems, but there were glimpses of dominance, particularly with his slider.

Darvish's elbow will have time to heal over the next four months. Management and the coaching staff will also have time to let him know that he remains an important part of the Cubs' future, and that making direct eye contact with individuals other than his teammates isn't a bad thing.

### 4. How do you fix Tyler Chatwood?

You can't blame pitching coach Jim Hickey for a lack of trying. The Cubs tried having Chatwood work exclusively out of the stretch and take the ball out of his glove sooner, but those moves didn't curb his wildness.

The Cubs cannot give up on Chatwood, who is owed \$25.5 million over the next two seasons. He has swing-and-miss stuff that was on display throughout spring training.

President Theo Epstein wasn't ready Wednesday to discuss what's in store for Chatwood.

Minor-league pitching coordinator Brendan Sagara and/or special assistant Jim Benedict could be called on to work with Chatwood. They were hired last season in an effort to improve the quality of the organization's pitching.

At this point, any input can't hurt. Here's my two cents: Seek an independent pitching expert who can work with Chatwood for a few weeks this winter to at least find an approach he can carry into the spring.

### 5. Can the Cubs afford to trade Jose Quintana?

At this point, no way, not with the uncertainty surrounding Darvish and Chatwood. And despite Quintana's inconsistent season, he still posted a 3.17 ERA against National League Central opponents, including a 4-1 record and 2.13 ERA against the division champion Brewers.

There were some interesting theories on Quintana's up-and-down season. Longtime observers believe he threw too many high fastballs, which led to his wildness and ineffectiveness instead of keeping the ball down as he did throughout much of his career with the White Sox.

But Brewers manager Craig Counsell cited Quintana's ability to throw to all quadrants of the strike zone, including the high-and-tight area to right-handed hitters, as one of his strengths against his team.

Quintana didn't allow a walk in his final three starts, and he allowed only three runs in his final two starts, so he should be given the benefit of the doubt heading into 2019. But Drew Smyly is determined



to win a spot in the rotation, although his innings may be limited because he's returning from Tommy John surgery. Quintana's team options for the next two seasons are affordable, which could attract teams seeking starting pitching.

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### **Chicago Sun-Times**

Time for Cubs to focus on players' production, not talent or potential

By Rick Morrissey

About 20 minutes into his 70-minute, touch-all-the-bases news conference Wednesday, Cubs president Theo Epstein said something that didn't get much attention afterward but should have.

He was talking about how the team might address its offensive struggles, which had been perfectly and painfully on display in a 2-1, 13-inning loss to the Rockies in the National League wild-card game the day before.

"We have to be an offensive force; we should be with the talent on our roster," Epstein said. "But it's probably time to stop evaluating this in terms of talent and start evaluating in terms of production. That means doing everything we can to produce."

The Cubs have been blinded by some of their young players' potential. And it's not just Epstein and manager Joe Maddon who have had eyesight problems. It's Cubs players, fans and we in the media.

Ian Happ, Willson Contreras, Albert Almora Jr. and Addison Russell are examples of players who have been given oversized praise in the last few years. That's not to say they can't be very good major-league players. It is to say that they haven't always earned what has been handed to them.

For his 462 plate appearances this season, Happ gave the Cubs a .233 batting and 167 strikeouts. His .353 on-base percentage was good, but he didn't do enough to merit the trust and the playing time he received.

At one point this season, Maddon said Contreras might be the best catcher in baseball. Not long after, Contreras began struggling behind the plate, where he couldn't seem to block balls consistently, and at the plate, where his power went away. The more Joe gushed about him, the worse it seemed to get.

Almora hit .319 in the first half and .232 after the All-Star break. But even when he was doing well, he was getting a lot of ground-ball hits, which points to some luck. Almora's playing time fell in the second half as he struggled.

Russell, the baseball player, has been an organization favorite since Epstein traded for him in 2014. But he's a .242 career hitter and his power has disappeared. Maddon continued to play him at shortstop even after it became clear Javy Baez was superior at the position. Russell's 40-game suspension for violating Major League Baseball's domestic-violence policy make his on-field problems almost insignificant, but the point here is the way the Cubs fall in love with their own and stay in love.

Epstein always has said that the Cubs are a meritocracy and that playing time is based on performance, but that hasn't always been the case. If it had been, Jason Heyward and his \$184 million contract would have sat on the bench a lot more in his three seasons with the team.

I'm not comfortable putting Kyle Schwarber in the group of overrated Cubs, at least not based on this season. His on-base percentage (.356) and slugging percentage (.467) were good. But if Epstein is serious about emphasizing production over talent, he might be more willing to entertain trade offers for Schwarber, the fourth player taken in the 2014 draft. Maddon sent him to the plate to face left-handed pitchers only 91 times in 2018. Of Schwarber's 26 home runs, one came against lefties. Teammates love him, but is that enough to override his limitations?

After the loss to the Rockies, first baseman Anthony Rizzo scanned the Cubs' clubhouse and talked about all the talent he saw before him. Is it really there, or was Rizzo simply repeating what he has heard so often?

It's something Epstein will have to weigh in the offseason. It dovetails with the issue of Maddon's constantly changing lineups. The idea behind all those different lineups is that, with so much talent, the Cubs have to find at-bats for a lot of players. Hence, lineups that look like merry-go-rounds spinning.

The Cubs need to start being honest with themselves. Do some of these young players deserve all those at-bats?

"I think the right thing for the organization overall is to have too many good players instead of not enough," Epstein said. "[If you have] eight guys for eight spots, then the second you suffer one or two or three injuries, your whole season's down the tubes.

"But I think it's fair to ask ourselves: Can we handle it better? Do we need to communicate more? Do we need to spread the playing time around a little bit differently? Do we need to consider lineup issues differently? Is there a way to get everyone on the same page with it more, so the players don't have any questions or doubts and we get the benefit of certainty while still having a surplus?"

As much as anyone, Epstein fell in love with the promise of some of his players, so much so that he didn't address offense much last offseason. But he's not alone. Fans tend to cling to potential. We all cling to bright-eyed hope and fresh-faced possibility.

There has been a lot of clinging going on. Too much.

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### **Chicago Sun-Times**

Cubs wild man Tyler Chatwood '100 percent sure' he'll be back in command in 2019

By Steve Greenberg

Jon Lester stood in the quiet of a losing clubhouse and ticked off the challenges the 2018 Cubs faced that contributed to their undoing. Yu Darvish. Brandon Morrow. Kris Bryant. More than once, the veteran lefty named names. If only they'd been healthy, if only they'd been themselves, how different things might've been.

Alone in a chair at his locker stall — not 10 feet from Lester and able to hear it all — sat Tyler Chatwood. Lester had declined, or perhaps simply forgotten, to mention him.

Chatwood, 28, who signed a three-year, \$38 million free-agent deal with the Cubs heading into 2018, was perhaps the biggest disaster of all. His rate of 8.2 walks per nine innings, highest in Cubs history, rendered him of no use to the team.

“It sucks that it happened,” he said. “It definitely stunk to not be out there every fifth day, able to help.”

Will Chatwood even get a chance to turn his Cubs story around? Will he be dealt in the offseason? If he were to go to spring training with the Cubs and pitch well, would there be, even in the best-case scenario, an opening in the 2019 rotation for which he could compete?

For what it’s worth — and no matter how many people who read Chatwood’s words roll their eyes — he is hell-bent on returning to top form and proving he’s worthy of all the encouraging things Cubs team president Theo Epstein said about him last December.

“Uber-talented.” “Moving into his prime.” “Great makeup.” Those were just a few of them.

“I’m 100 percent sure and there’s no doubt in my mind I’ll be back to what I know I can do,” Chatwood said. “I know my stuff is still there. It’s not like I was getting hit around. It’s just [about] me, my command. I still have all my stuff. There’s no doubt I’ll be back out there.”

There will be no more changing his delivery in hopes of helping to locate his fastball, Chatwood insisted.

“For some reason, I switched things up this year mechanically. If you watch, I had quite a few different deliveries. That’s not me. I have my delivery and that’s what I know; whenever things go wrong, I know how to fix it. But when you switch things up, it’s tough. You don’t really know what to correct. You get lost.”

Chatwood has had enough of being lost. He’s aiming to find his old self and be rediscovered in the process.

“I didn’t do what I wanted to do coming here,” he said. “It was a bad season. But I don’t think the [Cubs] window is closed. I’ll be ready.”

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### **Chicago Sun-Times**

How last winter’s free agent busts led to unusual rotation depth for Cubs in ’19

By Gordon Wittenmyer

Cubs manager Joe Maddon spent much of February and March talking about a starting rotation that looked as strong as any he’s had since arriving in Chicago.

Then the season started, and \$164 million of misspent optimism disappeared in Tyler Chatwood’s historic pile of walks and Yu Darvish’s poor performances and injuries.

By May, the Cubs were plugging holes with sixth man Mike Montgomery, a July trade for Cole Hamels and the occasional Luke Farrells, Duane Underwoods and Alec Millses from the farm system.

But what if last winter’s failed gambles with the rotation turn into even stronger reason for optimism this winter?

The Cubs, it seems, are banking on it.

“We’re set up to have some depth in the starting staff next year,” team president Theo Epstein said Tuesday, a day after a season of injury pressure and inconsistency ended suddenly in a 13-inning loss to

the Rockies in the wild-card game at Wrigley Field. “We’re not looking to get rid of starting pitchers. We’re looking to have as much depth as possible so we can withstand multiple injuries.”

That’s why the Cubs are expected to exercise Hamels’ \$20 million option for 2019, despite having Darvish under contract for five more years, Chatwood for two and everybody else who made more than two starts under club control next year.

“He’s absolutely someone we’d love to have part of the mix going forward,” Epstein said of Hamels, who went 4-3 with a 2.36 ERA in 12 starts down the stretch — plus two scoreless innings of relief Tuesday. “Cole was such a breath of fresh air for us. He made an unbelievable impression. For a guy who’s only been here a couple of months, he’s as universally respected in that room as anyone I’ve seen. He’s a pro’s pro and contributed tremendously on the field and off the field, with a great engaged, accountable, possible presence in that clubhouse, who really cares about his teammates and helped make them better by example and by discussion, too.”

So Hamels, plus all the incumbents from this year’s opening roster. And that doesn’t even count left-hander Drew Smyly, who signed a back-loaded two-year deal last December while rehabbing from Tommy John surgery, with an eye toward a spot in the 2019 rotation.

So that’s Hamels, Smyly, Darvish, Montgomery and Chatwood.

And Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks and Jose Quintana.

Assuming they’re all back when next season starts — which assumes no takers for Chatwood — the Cubs will have by far their most expensive rotation in franchise history and, maybe, their deepest.

It certainly figures to simplify the priority list for this winter as they look to strengthen the bullpen and fix the lineup.

And they might have rotation depth that nobody in the National League this side of the Dodgers has been able to approximate in recent years.

That’s necessary if they plan to keep their competitive window open. There are question marks involving, in increasing order, Lester (age, workload), Hamels (age, workload), Smyly (first year back from Tommy John), Chatwood (if he’s on the roster) and Darvish.

Darvish, the four-time All-Star who went on the disabled list in May with a triceps strain, had two failed rehab attempts before his season finally was shut down because of a bone bruise diagnosed in September. Another visit to his longtime friend/orthopedist in Texas then resulted in an arthroscopic “clean-out” surgery on his already surgically repaired elbow.

“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. That’s on us.”

Epstein recalled the questions that persisted throughout the summer: Could the Cubs expect Darvish to come back, and at what ability, to help the team win in October?

“Well, we hoped he could come back, but in the end he wasn’t able to, and that’s part of the reason we got Cole Hamels,” Epstein said. “And our starting rotation ended up being a strength. 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, we can't let one injury sink our season."

#### BIG IDEAS, BIG DEALS FOR CUBS 2019 ROTATION

The Cubs could have as many as eight experienced big-league starters heading into next season, accounting for roughly \$100 million of the payroll (Opening Day ages listed):

LHP Jon Lester, 35

2018: 18-6, 3.32 ERA, 32 GS

2019 Salary: \$22.5 million

All-Star selections: 5

Comment: Workhorse starter has 11-year streak of making at least 31 starts and is 9-7 with a 2.51 ERA in 26 career postseason games (22 starts).

LHP Cole Hamels, 35

2018: 9-12, 3.78, 32 GS

(4-3, 2.36, 12 GS for Cubs)

2019 salary: \$20 million\*

All-Star selections: 4

Comment: Stabilized the Cubs' rotation after being acquired in a July trade from Texas and could be the key to the rotation's depth next April.

RHP Yu Darvish, 32

2018: 1-3, 4.95 ERA, 8 GS

2019 salary: \$20 million

All-Star selections: 4

Comment: Season-ending injury saga that began in May has Cubs looking at Year 2 of a six-year megadeal with cautious optimism – and with plenty of backup options.

RHP Kyle Hendricks, 29

2018: 14-11, 3.44 ERA, 33 GS

2019 salary: 2nd year arbitration (\$4.175 million in '18)

All-Star selections: 0

Comment: Is the Cubs' best pitcher down the stretch this year on the brink of competing for a first All-Star appearance?

LHP Jose Quintana, 30

2018: 13-11, 4.03 ERA, 32 GS

2019 salary: \$10.5 million\*

All-Star selections: 1

Comment: Teammates love him almost as much as the Brewers hate him, and only Lester matches him for durability the last six years.

RHP Tyler Chatwood, 29

2018: 4-6, 5.30 ERA, 24 G (20 GS)

2019 salary: \$12.5 million

All-Star selections: 0

Comment: His 8.2 rate of walks per nine innings set a dubious Cubs record by more than a full walk over Sad Sam Jones in 1955 (6.89). Could be a late-spring trade candidate with decent early performance.  
LHP Mike Montgomery, 29

2018: 5-6, 3.99, 38 G (19 GS)

2019 salary: 1st year arbitration (\$611,250 in 2018)

All-Star selections: 0

Comment: He said last winter he should be given the chance to start, then proved it after replacing Darvish with a 3.69 ERA in 19 starts.

LHP Drew Smyly, 29

2018: DNP (Tommy John rehab)

2019 salary: \$7 million

All-Star selections: 0

Comment: Smyly said he was ready to pitch in relief down the stretch, but the Cubs played it safe after his lengthy rehab and shut him down. In a best-case scenario, he provides 150 good rotation innings next year.

\*-Club contract option

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### **Daily Herald**

Rozner: Cubs, Hamels should find common ground on deal for 2019

By Barry Rozner

Sometimes when a player walks into a clubhouse, the room is a better place because of it.

There is no metric for it, but there is little doubt Cole Hamels is one of those guys.

"Cole was such a breath of fresh air for us," said Cubs president Theo Epstein. "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."

So you'd like to find a way to have Hamels back in 2019?

"Absolutely," Epstein said. "He's a pro's pro and contributed tremendously on the field and off the field. He was a great, engaged, accountable, positive presence in that clubhouse, someone who really cares about his teammates and helps make them better by example and by discussion.

"We'd love to have him be part of the mix going forward."

The Cubs won't be excited about his \$20 million option for next season, but with the Rangers paying his \$6 million buyout, the Cubs will hope Hamels would come back for something less, perhaps in the \$13 million range.

"We haven't gotten to that level of detail in our postseason planning," Epstein said of how much room the Cubs will have to maneuver this winter. "This is the time of year when you kind of engage on that and figure out exactly what you have left.

"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's obviously a lot of attractive and impact players out there. We'll get together and figure what's possible and what's not possible."

Hamels will be 35 come spring training, but in two months and 12 starts with the Cubs he pitched to a 2.6 WAR, behind only Jon Lester (3.3) and Kyle Hendricks (3.0), who were here all season.

With a 2.36 ERA and WHIP of 1.17, Hamels looked reinvigorated with the Cubs, who know full well of Hamels' postseason pedigree, which includes 100 innings in 17 postseason games and MVP awards for the 2008 NLCS and World Series.

"When I got here, I saw the similarities to Philadelphia right away," Hamels said. "You definitely could put the teams I was fortunate to play on in Philadelphia up with this team."

"We have the big hitters. We have the tremendous defense. We have the big-game pitchers and that's what it takes to win. That's the excitement, to be a part of that."

Hamels said "we" often in discussing his desire to return to the North Side and make another run at a ring.

"I would love to be here," Hamels said. "This is a tremendous environment to play baseball in. This clubhouse, this is awesome be a part of."

"As much as I was only able to get two months with them, it would be a joy to be able to do it from spring training on and the rest of the year with the ultimate goal of winning the World Series here."

With the uncertainty of Yu Darvish and Tyler Chatwood, bringing back Hamels to join Lester, Hendricks and Jose Quintana in the rotation would give the Cubs some comfort if they could get it done before November free agency.

"The Cubs have always been one of the top teams I wanted to play for," Hamels said. "It didn't happen in 2015. I was fortunate to go to Texas, but the Cubs were always a team I welcomed being a part of, to play in front of these fans and for this organization."

"It's a tremendous clubhouse with tremendous talent and it was great to be able to toe the rubber and have these guys behind me."

Even with all the Cubs players who have experience in the toughest of moments, with so many who survived Game 7 in Cleveland, it doesn't hurt to add -- or keep -- players who are unafraid of the big stage.

"The ultimate goal is winning a World Series," Hamels said. "If you want to do that, it's not easy. You're going to have to play some tough teams at some tough moments. It's high intensity and high stakes."

"That's the reason the team that wins the World Series deserves it, because they're the ones that got through all the trials and tough games and tough breaks. They fought through and had the good result."

"There's a lot of guys here with playoff experience. They know they don't have to be the hero."

"Everybody just plays their part. If something doesn't happen, you can pick up your teammate."

"I saw a lot of that here. I would love to be a part of this next season."

The first step is mutual interest and that exists. The next step is a fair number that both sides can accept.

For the sake of that rotation, here's hoping this one happens fast.

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