



CHICAGO CUBS DAILY CLIPS

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Cubs.com

Maddon emphasizing energy and enthusiasm

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- By the time Joe Maddon completes his cross-country drive and parks his RV in Mesa, Ariz., he should have his 2018 theme set. Whether he picked up any additional pitchers along the way remains to be seen.

With most of the roster returning from a team that has reached the National League Championship Series three years in a row, the Cubs might be content to head into this season without making many changes. But president of baseball operations Theo Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer knew they had gaps to fill in the rotation and hope to address other areas with changes to the coaching staff.

You'll hear plenty of stories from Cubs camp about how slim Kyle Schwarber is. The Cubs need to focus on their pitching. Among the new faces in camp when pitchers and catchers have their first workout Feb. 14 will be Tyler Chatwood, Brandon Morrow, Steve Cishek and Drew Smyly. Smyly is coming off Tommy John surgery and isn't expected to help this year. Chatwood will be inserted into the rotation while Morrow is the new closer, the Cubs' fourth in the past four seasons.

The Cubs saw plenty of Morrow last season in the NLCS. Los Angeles' pitchers held Chicago's hitters to a .156 average and took the series, 4-1. For the season, Morrow, 33, posted a 2.06 ERA over 43 2/3 innings.

"You've got to have that great bullpen to play the last game of the year and win it," Maddon said.

That's true, but the Cubs also lost Jake Arrieta and John Lackey to free agency, and have filled only one of those holes with the addition of Chatwood, who was 8-15 with a 4.69 ERA with the Rockies. The pitching prospects in the Cubs' system aren't quite ready, which could mean that lefty Mike Montgomery, projected for the bullpen, will be starting if they don't add another pitcher.

A lot of time this spring will be spent on introductions. Jim Hickey and Chili Davis join Maddon's staff as the pitching and hitting coaches, respectively. Hickey, a Chicago native, was with Maddon in St. Petersburg.

"He's old school, super dry humor," Cishek said of Hickey. "His scouting reports are excellent. He tells you just enough information not to overbear you or put too much on you, and he tells you enough that you feel you'll be successful when you go out there. It's a little bit different than other styles. It worked well for me."

Maddon has known Davis since both were on the Angels. They spent time in a back room talking about hitting philosophies. The Cubs scuffled with situational hitting at times and Maddon is hoping the young roster can graduate to another level under Davis.

"Chili played for 19 years and switch-hit and all those things, so he brings a different perspective and a different mindset," said Jason Heyward, who started working with Davis in Mesa in November. "For me, Chili is somebody who is team-oriented at-bat-wise and has a plan and wants to get that across to the group and everybody going in the same direction."

Maddon's past themes have included "Embrace the Target" and "Be Uncomfortable." During the Cubs Convention, Maddon said he was still working on his theme for 2018.

"The two most important items all summer will be energy and enthusiasm," Maddon said. "We've been [to the postseason] three years in a row, right? We're pretty good, we have good guys coming back, we acquired some good guys [for 2018]. If you show up with energy and enthusiasm every day -- they'll do their work, they'll study, do the video -- what else could I possibly ask them to do? If you show up with the right mental attitude every day, that's when all that stuff really kicks in. If I'm going to make an emphasis on anything, it'll be that."

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NBC Sports Chicago

From Left Field: Is a hot dog a sandwich?

By David Kaplan

To some, an athlete who shows passion and personality is considered a hot dog. But to those who love to see an athlete play with fire and an outward display of emotion, it's a refreshing change from the vanilla way that many in the world approach their jobs.

Cubs catcher Willson Contreras approaches his job in such a way that his teammates feed off of his emotion and passion. He plays as hard as he can every second he is on the playing field, and that approach has quickly made him one of the most popular members of this current Cubs team.

There are many players around baseball who are personable and charismatic in their approach to playing the game. However, there are very few players who not only have that internal fire that they

outwardly display, but also are among the best players in the sport. Contreras is an elite defensive player with a cannon for an arm that allows him to control an opponent's running game at all times.

He is also a tremendous offensive force, not only hitting for a solid average but possessing outstanding power to all fields and can change the game with one swing of the bat. Add in his ability to hit in the clutch and the Cubs have found a cornerstone player for the next decade to anchor their team. Contreras is a student of the game and he has gained the trust of veteran pitchers like Jon Lester in developing a game plan and calling pitches.

However, it is his fire and passion for the game that attracts the most attention. Some may call it hot dogging, but those who are around him on a regular basis know it is the enthusiasm that he has for his craft that brings out the competitor in him.

No, Willson Contreras isn't a hot dog, he is just an all-out warrior every time he steps on the field.

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Chicago Tribune

Anthony Rizzo's worth has increased exponentially, but his contract remains a bargain
By Paul Sullivan

It sounded like a primal scream at Wrigley Field when Anthony Rizzo shouted, "Respect me," while standing on second base during the eighth inning of Game 3 of the National League Division Series.

Nationals manager Dusty Baker chose to pitch to Rizzo with a man on second and two out, and Rizzo responded with a bloop single to short center to give the Cubs the go-ahead run in a 2-1 win.

It was out of character for Rizzo, who isn't known as the chest-thumping type.

At the Cubs Convention, three months after the scream, I asked Rizzo if he got a hit after his "respect me" moment.

"Did I?" he said. "I think I got one, didn't I?"

True, Rizzo did get one hit in the NL Championship Series against the Dodgers, but he was 1-for-25 post-scream.

It was a painful ending to an otherwise productive season for Rizzo, who needs no motivation as he enters his seventh season on the North Side. He knows what's expected of him and his teammates and believes the postseason drubbing at the hands of the Dodgers will only strengthen the Cubs' resolve as they begin to write a new chapter next week in Mesa, Ariz.

"To get so close again and lose in the NLCS again is tough," he said. "We grinded, we battled, but we just ran out of gas. I think everyone here seems pretty revamped."

The Cubs mostly escaped criticism for their NLCS performance, and everyone shared blame for the dismal ending. But Rizzo was surprised manager Joe Maddon took so much heat and wondered if those who criticized his in-game managing were real fans or bandwagon jumpers.

"I don't understand that," he said. "Joe has won every year — 100 games and (92) last year. If you're criticizing that, you need to take a step back as a fan and rethink what you're saying."

“If you’re taking these times for granted, go back 107 years. What’s going on right now, 20 years from now, you’re going to be telling your kids and grandkids about (us). These are good times, and Joe is the main reason. He runs the ship.”

The good times aren’t guaranteed forever, but the Cubs’ window to win should be open for several more years. One of the reasons is Rizzo’s relatively inexpensive contract, which helps the Cubs spend more elsewhere, knowing they’ll have him at an affordable salary through 2021.

“No question,” general manager Jed Hoyer said. “We’ve always known as these players start getting into arbitration, they start getting more and more expensive, which they should. Having some cost certainty is incredibly valuable in that regard.”

According to USA Today’s updated figures, Rizzo’s \$7.28 million salary for 2018 ranked 174th among major-leaguers Monday. That ranking is certain to drop as many of the 100-plus free agents finally ink deals in the coming weeks.

That’s the risk Rizzo took in May 2013 when he signed a seven-year, \$41 million deal in his second year with the Cubs. He called it a “surreal moment” at the time and said the security of a long-term deal lifted the weight of the world from his shoulders.

“I feel like I’m playing Little League right now,” he said then.

The deal took Rizzo through his arbitration years and three years of free agency, assuming the Cubs pick up the options. His salary increases to \$11 million next year, and the Cubs hold \$14.5 million options for 2020 and 2021.

Rizzo’s worth has increased exponentially since 2013, and now he’s vastly underpaid by current standards. His partner in crime, Kris Bryant, vaulted ahead of him this winter with a one-year, \$10.85 million deal to avoid arbitration, a major-league record for Bryant’s service time.

But don’t cry for Rizzo. He understands the system and doesn’t begrudge anyone else for getting their money.

“It’s kind of fun to see all these guys breaking (salary) records,” he said. “You can start dreaming: ‘Hey, if I keep this pace up, what can I make in a few years?’”

The Cubs eventually will have to sign Bryant and some of their other young stars to megadeals to keep them from leaving via free agency. And if Bryce Harper’s interest in signing with the Cubs is real, he’s going to get a huge chunk of change.

“Yeah, it’s a lot of money that’s going to be dished out pretty soon,” Rizzo said. “We have a lot of young superstars on our team that are going to be getting more expensive.”

Hoyer wouldn’t say whether the Cubs would consider extending Rizzo’s deal before 2021, when he’ll be 32. A lot can happen over the next four seasons, and there is no rush to extend him.

Who knows whether long-term megadeals will still be in vogue when Rizzo hits the market. Will this year’s freeze-out be a mere blip, or is it a sign of a more conservative trend toward spending?

Either way, Rizzo is focusing on 2018. He hopes to remain a Cub the rest of his career but doesn't care to look that far into the future.

"I love playing here," he said. "This is like home to me. I'm very comfortable here. I love the fans. I love what we have going on and the Ricketts (family). I want to be here as long as I can be. I'd love to play here my whole career.

"But obviously there is a business side of it. You just never know what's going to happen. That's four more years away. That, I can't control."

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Daily Herald

Rozner: Pace of MLB conversation remains sluggish

By Barry Rozner

As my grandmother used to say, you can't have it both ways.

She might not have been the first.

Regardless, baseball wants faster contests and Commissioner Rob Manfred is willing to do just about anything to get games under three hours.

As if the key to growing baseball at the major-league level is to play a game in 2:55 instead of 3:05.

This is mind-boggling, indeed.

Baseball is the only game without a clock, and most baseball fans appreciate the beauty of that.

But now pace of play is all the rage and Manfred is convinced that young people will be more interested in it if the game is played at a modern stride and by shaving a few minutes off the average.

Fine. Whatever.

The problem is you can't have it both ways.

Baseball doesn't train pitchers to throw 130 pitches or 9 innings anymore, which means more pitching changes and a longer game.

You want to tell teams they have to leave their starters in longer?

You can't have it both ways.

But using 10 pitchers per game -- which was about the combined average last year -- means more time spent with pitchers, coaches and managers walking to the mound.

The reliever hasn't seen his catcher since before the game and, because he doesn't know what he's doing, that means a visit from the catcher as well.

These guys are so filled with statistical information that they just can't take the baseball and throw a pitch. They need a refresher course on what they were told before the game.

Analytics are good. In fact, they're great. It's a huge advantage for smart teams and smart players, but the reality is most pitchers just aren't that smart.

You want to outlaw metrics?

You can't have it both ways.

The trend is toward more relievers per game, not fewer, so unless you're going to legislate pitching changes, games will get longer.

You want to tell general managers they can't use four relievers a game, or five or six or seven in a postseason game?

You can't have it both ways.

Theo Epstein has made a career out of ruining opposition pitching staffs by finding players who can work a count, get on base and get into the bullpen quickly.

It's smart baseball. It's a great way to win a World Series. And it makes the games very long.

You want to tell Epstein and Jason McLeod to find players who swing at the first pitch?

Sorry, Mr. Manfred, but you can't have it both ways.

A reasonable amount of time on a pitch clock is not unreasonable. Forcing a batter to stay in the box is entirely fair.

But limiting the number of visits per game by a catcher is going to be a huge problem, especially in the postseason when teams haven't seen each other for a while -- or maybe all season.

With a runner on base and a new set of signs against a hitter the pitcher doesn't know, you're going to tell the catcher he can't talk to his pitcher because he's exhausted the number of mound visits?

You're willing to risk losing a World Series game to save 15 seconds? Is that really good for the game? Is that really going to grow the game?

You want more offense, but you want shorter games. You want to raise the strike zone to make it easier to score runs, but you want shorter games. You want more home runs, and teams want more walks, but you want shorter games.

We're always willing to help with math here, so this is for you, Rob Manfred, and you should probably sit down for this:

If you want faster games you call more strikes, not fewer.

But you can't have it both ways.

The Super Bowl is over and spring training is only weeks away, and talk of these alterations is going to become an issue as the players association fights the commissioner on trying to make fundamental changes to what is still a beautiful game.

Change is not bad. All sports change and evolve. But change for the sake of it, with little hope of really making a difference, is ridiculous, especially when it's done for window dressing.

The games are longer because pitchers aren't good, aren't effective and aren't smart, mostly because they haven't been trained to go longer, pitch smarter and throw faster.

They don't get the ball and throw it quickly, like some of the best of all time, because they aren't prepared for what comes next.

At the same time, managers can't wait to get into the bullpen and GMs are working to give them as many arms as they can, some of them dreaming of a day when they can use an entire 13-man staff in every game of every season.

Think that's going to speed up the game?

If batters are going to work counts, games are going to take a long time to play. It's smart baseball. It's not fast baseball, but it is smart baseball.

So unless you start telling batters they can't see pitches, and managers they can't change pitchers, games will continue to take a long time.

Sorry, Mr. Commissioner, but while your attempt to speed up the process is admirable, you can't have it both ways.

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The Athletic

10 Questions: After recovering from World Series hangover, who will lead the Cubs clubhouse?

By Patrick Mooney

With spring training almost here, we are pondering 10 crucial questions the Cubs have to answer this season, beginning with "Who's the ace?" and "Who's batting leadoff?" Next up: Who will lead the clubhouse?

Analyzing the 2017 Cubs became a kind of personality test.

Could you see the flaws in the 43-45 first half? Do you believe in the team that surged in September and knocked the Washington Nationals out of the playoffs? Are you concerned about how quietly the Cubs went out against the Los Angeles Dodgers in the National League Championship Series?

Did those mood swings reveal any fundamental issues about The Cubs Way, or could it all be written off as a World Series hangover?

This is what the Philadelphia Eagles will be dealing with after their Super Bowl parade along Broad Street toward the "Rocky" statue. It has made the New England Patriots such a cold-blooded, efficient operation.

"We talked about it all winter after we were done celebrating," team president Theo Epstein said during his opening remarks at Cubs Convention last month, addressing a hotel ballroom filled with diehard fans. "And then in spring training, we talked about tackling this head-on, (how) we believe in our guys.

They had all thought about how they were going to turn the page and get past the World Series. I thought we were really prepared.

“And then we just went out there the first half of the season – and you guys saw us play – we just weren’t all there. We weren’t completely focused. We didn’t have that edge that we need to be successful.”

Epstein publicly made those same judgments in real time last summer, admitting the Cubs were one or two bad series away from seriously considering selling off short-term assets like Cy Young Award winner Jake Arrieta and All-Star closer Wade Davis at the trade deadline.

It wasn’t a great look for manager Joe Maddon, who will be working with a dramatically different staff in spring training after the Cubs fired coaches Chris Bosio (pitching), John Mallee (hitting) and Gary Jones (third base). Two coaches who were close to the players also left for new jobs — Nationals manager Dave Martinez and Los Angeles Angels hitting coach Eric Hinske.

That leadership dynamic will be fascinating to watch next week when pitchers and catchers report to Arizona. Don’t focus so much on the mimes and zoo animals summoned from the sick mind of strength and conditioning coordinator Tim Buss for those morning workouts.

It’s making sure the Cubs are ready to hit the accelerator on opening day, not expending so much energy to catch and pass the Milwaukee Brewers and then running out of gas in October.

“It was a really good learning year for everybody,” general manager Jed Hoyer said. “We had a very frustrating season that ended in the NLCS, if that’s possible. We were two games under .500 at the All-Star break and certainly struggled for different periods of the year. It was certainly no smooth ride.

“In some ways, 2016 may forever taint us in how we look at it, because that was as smooth a ride as you’re going to have through a baseball season, and that’s probably not going to happen again.

“I’m hoping our young players learned a lot about what it takes to sort of bounce back after success and be consistent. Because with this group, we’ve obviously always tried to surround them with veteran guys that are leaders. At some point, they have to become the leaders themselves.

“That’s something that we want to emphasize. The days of bringing in David Ross — at some point those guys have to be able to stand on their own and lead the clubhouse.”

Arrieta may have been a bit of a clubhouse loner at times, but no one doubted his commitment to conditioning, take-all-questions approach to the media and confidence in the playoffs. As super-agent Scott Boras has said: “He’s a big squirrel with a lot of nuts in his trees.”

Davis developed a reputation for breaking down at-bats innings in advance, like CBS analyst Tony Romo predicting plays before they happen on NFL broadcasts. Lefty reliever Brian Duensing once laughed at the idea of Davis jumping up and down in the Wrigley Field bullpen and clowning around for the video board and inevitable GIFs.

“He’s not a dancer,” Duensing said. “He said he’ll never dance. The funny thing is we never asked him to. We kind of just know that he’s not going to be a part of it, which is fine. I’d rather have him focused and shut the door down.”

Davis will bring that sense of calm and professionalism to the Colorado Rockies after signing a three-year, \$52 million contract, an exceptional deal in a winter when everyone from Arrieta to respected veteran role players like Jon Jay are getting squeezed and still looking for jobs.

It was Jay who called the team meeting on Sept. 10 after the Brewers swept the defending champs at Wrigley Field and the Cubs saw their NL Central lead sliced to two games. A team that had mentally checked in and out responded by winning seven games in a row, nine of its next 10, and 15 of its last 19 to close out the regular season and back-to-back division titles.

“Everyone kind of knows their role,” said Anthony Rizzo, the face-of-the-franchise first baseman. “Your role switches a little bit every year, but I think with our group, we just pick up where we left off. We’re all getting, obviously, a little older here and there, but we’re friends.

“It’s not like it’s hard for someone to have a conversation and (give) constructive criticism to one another, because we are friends and it’s easy to talk to them.”

Rizzo’s strengths played up more when the Cubs felt the weight of history, reminding teammates to stay loose and still have fun. Kris Bryant sets an example with his daily preparation and inner drive, but even he admitted he felt physically exhausted and mentally drained by the end of last season.

Kyle Schwarber’s football mentality can’t energize the clubhouse when he’s hitting .171 or working on his swing at Triple-A Iowa. Jason Heyward and Ben Zobrist are widely admired for their consistent personalities, but they have to stay healthy and productive and might only be part-time players this year, anyway.

When Mike Montgomery, who notched the final out in Game 7 of the 2016 World Series, lets it be known he wants to start, stopping just short of demanding a trade in reports from The Athletic’s Ken Rosenthal and local beat writers, it makes you wonder what happens to the egos and the chemistry the further the Cubs get from that dream season.

Then again, the Cubs have first-division problems, roughly \$30 million-plus still to spend this offseason, at a time when so many other teams don’t even care about trying to win in 2018.

“I think the way I look back at last year is we’ve made it to our third straight NLCS, and all of us were probably a little bit disappointed at the end,” Epstein said. “And that’s a great place to be.”

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