



# CHICAGO CUBS DAILY CLIPS

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- The Athletic, **The drama is only just beginning for Joe Maddon's agent, Theo Epstein and the rest of the Cubs**  
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## **NBC Sports Chicago**

The most underrated storyline of the Cubs offseason

By Mark Gonzales

How do you fix an offense productive enough to contribute to a 95-win season?

The Cubs took the first step toward addressing their flaws when they dropped hitting coach Chili Davis for Anthony Iapoce.

That change was only the first step of a long process that is expected to carry into mid-February when pitchers and catchers report for spring training.

Free agency will be fluid, from mega-ticket talents such as Bryce Harper and Manny Machado to under-the-radar switch-hitting infielder Eduardo Escobar expected to receive robust interest.

But internally, here are two ways the Cubs can improve, based on observations from two scouts familiar with the Cubs' talent and second-half struggles:

1. Get healthy.

"You could tell some guys weren't at full strength, just by their swings," one scout said.

Kris Bryant immediately came to mind for both scouts, as the third baseman battled a left shoulder injury that affected his power and ability to drive outside pitches to the opposite field with authority.

“(First baseman Anthony) Rizzo had the lower-back problem early, and that hurt the offense,” the other scout said. “He got back to being Rizzo, but it took a while, and I think it was because his timing was disrupted during the time he missed (eight games) because of the injury.”

The first scout observed that Willson Contreras, who caught a major league-leading 1,109 2/3 innings, would have benefited from more rest, although manager Joe Maddon played backup Victor Caratini more frequently in the second half.

“This is the first year it hasn’t been a great year from an injury prevention standpoint, so you double your efforts to get better,” President Theo Epstein said in his end-of-the-season news conference.

## 2. Better focus.

“I saw a lot of weak contact,” one scout said. “It seemed to me like there was a lot of guessing.”

The increase in the Cubs’ strikeout rate from the first half (21.2) to second half (22.5) was nominal, but the dip in OPS (from .771 to .705) was astounding, as well as a .316 on-base percentage and 285 runs after the All-Star break.

“They won 95 games because they got a lot of talented hitters and hit terrible pitching,” the other scout said. “They’ll hit if they’re focused.”

The scout added that Javier Baez showed remarkable improvement in hitting more breaking pitches and cutting down on his wild swings on pitches out of the strike zone.

Epstein wants all his hitters to be better prepared to compete every game from the start of the season.

“If you just show up, playing it cool, knowing you’re talented, knowing it’s a long season and trusting the talent will manifest over the course of 162 (games), sometimes you end up one game short,” Epstein said. “And that’s not who we are or who we want to be.”

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## **Chicago Tribune**

5 reasons for Cubs fans to root for the Brewers in the NLCS

By Paul Sullivan

The Brewers and Dodgers played one of the dullest postseason affairs in years Tuesday night, combining for 32 strikeouts while scoring only three runs on 15 hits over 13 innings in a 5-hour, 15-minute Game 4 of the National League Championship series.

You couldn’t wait for it to end, and I’m guessing most viewers didn’t, opting for bed over yet another pitching change.

During one of the dozens of mentions of “Hey, Google,” the ubiquitous playoff ad that’s already on your last nerve, you felt like asking “Hey, Google, what’s the most boring playoff game in baseball history?”

Answer: The one you’re watching.

Nevertheless, we persist in watching, because ... well, it's October.

When I asked Cubs pitcher Kyle Hendricks after the wild-card loss to the Rockies if he would continue to watch the playoffs, he answered succinctly: "Yeah, that's what we do."

Yep. We sure do.

So for Cubs fans who feel obligated to watch the NLCS, here are five reasons you should be hoping the Brewers advance to the World Series.

#### 1. Dreaded World Series hangover

The Cubs told us it was real during the first half of 2017, when they sleepwalked until the All-Star break before turning it on and winning the NL Central. The potential of a Brewers World Series hangover, whether real or media-driven, would be something they would have to answer to next year. When the Washington Post asked last spring about the possibility of suffering from the dreaded World Series hangover, Astros starter Dallas Kuechel shot back: "We're not the Cubs. I firmly believe we have better players." Like the defending-champion Cubs, the Astros made it back to the league championship series, and Kuechel seemingly was correct in his assessment of the talent levels of the two teams. So would the Brewers have a World Series hangover, or would the fact the team is named for beer-makers make it a moot point?

#### 2. Jon Lester's dirt theory

After the wild-card loss, the veteran Cubs left-hander made the blunt assessment teams sometimes "need to get your (expletive) knocked in the dirt to appreciate it. Maybe we needed that." Truer words never were spoken, and nothing would leave the Cubs (expletives) in the dirt like having to watch their division rivals play in the World Series, except, of course, for watching the Brewers win it all. Few would expect the Brewers to beat either the Red Sox or Astros, but getting there in the second year of their rebuild would be an achievement even Cubs President Theo Epstein couldn't accomplish. Either way, Epstein, manager Joe Maddon and the players all will be rising from the dirt after the bad ending to 2018.

#### 3. More tickets available for Cubs-Brewers games at Miller Park

There's no doubt the Brewers will raise ticket prices next season, as every team that makes the playoffs does. It makes sense to cash in when the going is good. But making the World Series could lead to a rather significant price hike, meaning season-ticket holders will have to decide which tickets to sell to make it work for them. So look for the secondary market to be flooded with tickets to the three Cubs-Brewers series at Miller Park, which once again will be filled with Cubs fans. Just ask Cole Hamels.

#### 4. Joe Buck annoys Wisconsin

Residents of the Badger State have been griping for years about play-by-play man Joe Buck on Packers telecasts. (We don't have that problem in Chicago thanks to the Bears' recent ineptitude.) And now they're complaining on social media about Buck's calls on the Brewers-Dodgers games, even though he has been fawning over both teams, at least when he's not saying "Hey, Google." Listen, no one likes Buck. He has been overexposed since the '90s. But if he's annoying to Cheeseheads, that's just fine with Cubs fans.

## 5. Dodger Stadium organist

The idea of listening to the Dodger Stadium organist play “Let’s Go, Dodgers” every five seconds during the World Series is reason enough to root for the Brewers. There is no more obnoxious stadium in terms of extraneous noise between pitches. Organist Dieter Ruehle is a nice guy, but he simply can’t stop playing, and the telecast can’t mute him. I have nothing against organ music per se. The Brewers have one as well, and the Cubs were the first to hire a full-time organist at Wrigley Field in 1941. It’s all part of the ballpark atmosphere. But enough is enough. It’s up to the Brewers to silence Dieter — before he spoils our World Series.

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### **The Athletic**

The drama is only just beginning for Joe Maddon’s agent, Theo Epstein and the rest of the Cubs  
By Patrick Mooney

Near the beginning of Joe Maddon’s welcome-to-Chicago press conference at The Cubby Bear, Cubs president Theo Epstein made a point to acknowledge and thank Alan Nero, an unexpected gesture appreciated within the Octagon agency’s Michigan Avenue headquarters.

Nero wasn’t up on stage with Maddon, Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer at the bar opposite the Wrigley Field marquee on Nov. 3, 2014. But as Maddon’s agent, Nero had a front-row seat for the negotiations that drove the star manager away from the Tampa Bay Rays, shrewdly putting an escape clause in the contract that triggered once Andrew Friedman left to run baseball operations for the Los Angeles Dodgers.

The Cubs really couldn’t have scripted this any better (except for the awkward part about dumping Rick Renteria, a cold-blooded move that caused almost no blowback because Maddon represented such a clear upgrade). Maddon talked about getting to work in a baseball cathedral and taking a last-place team to the playoffs next year. They recreated the recruiting scene from the RV park on the Florida panhandle. Epstein referenced “Casablanca,” the screenplay that earned his grandfather and great-uncle Academy Awards: “We’ll always have Pensacola.” The bar reminded Maddon of his blue-collar hometown in Pennsylvania so much that he promised to buy the first round, a shot and a beer, “The Hazleton Way.”

That flashback explains the very strange place the Cubs are in now with a manager who has gone 4-for-4 in playoff appearances and maxed out his five-year contract to \$28 million with World Series bonuses.

Whether it’s a sign of the Cubbie circus coming back to town — or the way nature abhors a vacuum with Wrigley Field going dark after only two October games — Nero dialed up the offseason pressure with a media blitz.

First Nero vented to Chicago Tribune baseball columnist Paul Sullivan, who’s still waiting for the drinks Maddon promised to buy at The Cubby Bear and counting down toward the four-year anniversary. (Sully had to work after that press conference.) In a story published online Tuesday, Nero denied there’s any friction between Maddon and Epstein and blamed the media for focusing on the manager’s job security and lame-duck status: “You guys fired everything up.”

Nero then did a segment on Wednesday with 670 The Score, the team’s flagship radio station, expressing optimism that Maddon will eventually get a contract extension during a pointed interview that lasted about 16 minutes.

“There’s no sense of urgency,” Nero said on “Bernstein & McKnight,” the show that regularly features Maddon throughout the season. “Joe and Theo have a great relationship. They’re going to continue to try to make the decisions that will make this team better. There’s no sense of urgency on our part, so this is all coming from the media. It’s not coming from Joe or Theo. This will all happen in due course.”

Nero is a widely respected figure in the industry, the managing director of a baseball division that helped deliver 2016 World Series MVP Ben Zobrist to the Cubs. Nero pointed to the GM meetings in Southern California in early November — and the winter meetings in Las Vegas in mid-December — as “appropriate” venues to sit down with Epstein and discuss Maddon’s future.

“What’s the big deal?” Nero said. “This will all be settled in the next few months and we’ll be having a different conversation.”

WSCR co-host Dan Bernstein asked: “Settled how?”

“One way or the other,” Nero said. “To me, I don’t think there’s an issue. I think Theo and Joe will sit down and we’ll get in there and we’ll do what has to be done to get an extension. But this is not coming from us — it’s from you (in the media). Every day that it doesn’t happen, one of your brethren is going to bring it up.”

Bingo. Especially when Epstein gave such long, detailed answers during his 71-minute end-of-season press conference about how the Cubs didn’t play with enough edge and urgency throughout the season and didn’t make the necessary adjustments as an offense, a breakdown that already got hitting coach Chili Davis fired.

Epstein believed that sharper daily focus — instead of the overall feeling “that everything will just be OK because we’re the Cubs” — might have been the difference between winning the National League Central and losing a Game 163 against the Milwaukee Brewers and avoiding the Colorado Rockies in a 13-inning wild-card loss.

Epstein also wasn’t thrilled with the way Maddon handled injury-prone closer Brandon Morrow, or the manager’s flippant answers to serious questions about shortstop Addison Russell, who’s since accepted a 40-game suspension under Major League Baseball’s joint domestic violence policy with the players’ union.

Of course, Maddon also might have done his finest work with the Cubs, guiding the team to 95 wins with his upbeat confidence, never-panic attitude and data-heavy approach to lineup construction and bullpen management. Maddon didn’t sign Yu Darvish and Tyler Chatwood. Maddon couldn’t heal Kris Bryant’s left shoulder.

Maddon’s camp is also facing headwinds as teams seek to hire younger, cheaper, malleable managers. Nero built out a business beyond representing players by working with towering managers like Lou Piniella and Davey Johnson and understands what the landscape looks like now.

“First and foremost, everything in life goes through cycles and changes,” Nero said on The Score. “When I first started representing managers, which was about 20 years ago, managers were hardly making any money and they basically were given take-it-or-leave-it opportunities. And the really great managers had a lot of power and they actually quit jobs to move from team to team.”

“It finally got to a point where they were getting meaningful extensions. And before you know it, the managers were making a lot of money and the GMs were not making as much. You had veteran, old-school GMs and they managed the front office and the managers basically were not told what to do. There was not a lot of interaction regarding the GMs and the managers.

“Now in today’s world, we have a sport that is governed more by analytics. The dialogue between the GMs and the managers has gotten to a point where it’s critical. You can see some of the very successful young managers — like Alex Cora and Dave Roberts — and the extensive dialogue between the front office and them.

“The jobs have changed. And now all of a sudden, these young managers that are rookies (are) making very little money. The GMs that have elevated themselves to a very high level — because of the way the game is being approached intellectually and analytically — are making significantly more. Now that will go through cycles.”

It’s not so much adapting to that power structure. Setting aside some of his press-conference bluster, Maddon is actually a receptive employee with an open-door policy and an inclusive leadership style that is supposed to empower players and coaches and the geeks who give him R&D reports.

The bigger question is how a Hall of Fame-level manager — a grandfather who will be 65 next year — creates that harder clubhouse edge without sounding phony or betraying his own core beliefs.

“Joe and Theo are not going to have a lot of problems being on the same page,” Nero said. “Joe is very smart, and Theo is very smart, and I don’t think that Joe is going to disagree with Theo on very much, so I think we need to let them do their jobs and let’s sit back and enjoy it. But I think Joe’s going to be very open to anything that will make them better.”

Believe Maddon when he insists he doesn’t really pay attention to the palace intrigue, because this job already pulls him in so many different directions and he has so many off-the-field interests. Nero has also described his client as a one-in-a-billion personality who sees the world differently — Maddon said he didn’t even know about the opt-out clause in his contract with the Rays until his agent told him about it. But after the perfect opening scene at The Cubby Bear, Maddon, Epstein and Nero are going to experience a lot more drama before the end of what’s been a spectacular run at Wrigley Field.

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## **The Athletic**

How Pedro Strop is becoming a Cub for life

By Patrick Mooney

Feeling too much negativity since the Cubs lost Game 163 and the National League wild-card game and then fired their hitting coach? Still trying to figure out the Chili Davis effect on the Boston Red Sox? Having second thoughts about Manny “Johnny Hustle” Machado as the answer to fixing this offense? Wondering if the Houston Astros built a superior culture to the Cubs, or got through their World Series hangover with a little help from a Spygate scheme?

As an uncertain offseason begins with a lot of questions, it’s also important for the Cubs to not overreact after a 95-win season and channel some of Pedro Strop’s attitude. It’s too early for Strop to start stocking up on Under Armour polo shirts and Lululemon pants, the unofficial uniform of Theo Epstein’s special assistants and front-office lieutenants who work at Wrigley Field. But it’s already clear that Strop is becoming a Cub for life.

Just look at Strop's unbelievably consistent numbers since coming over in a franchise-altering trade, his walk-off high-stepping captured in the 2015 "Wrigleyville is Winnerville" Sports Illustrated cover and, of course, his 2016 World Series ring. Listen to how Javier Báez calls Strop "one of my best friends in my whole career" and the way Epstein talks about the high-energy reliever who screams, pounds his chest and points to the sky while walking off the mound.

"He's such a big part of the heartbeat of this team," Epstein said. "I hope he can be part of this organization when he's done playing, because that's how impactful he is to the other relievers and to the team as a whole."

It took an up-and-down season on the Cubbie rollercoaster to fully appreciate Strop's reliability, optimism and stature within the clubhouse. Strop reminded Báez to contain his frustration and set a good example in April — before Pittsburgh Pirates manager Clint Hurdle criticized El Mago's bat toss and sent a respect-the-game message through the media. Cubs manager Joe Maddon graded out "Dress Like Pedro Strop" as one of his favorite themed road trips ever after a gold-chains-and-tilted-hats flight to Kansas City in August.

Strop (13 saves) covered for injured closer Brandon Morrow, who didn't appear in a single game after the All-Star break. Strop became a what-it-means-for-October focus when Maddon let him hit for himself during an extra-inning/makeup game on Sept. 13 at Nationals Park and watched him strain his left hamstring while running to first base.

Strop essentially talked his way back from that injury and into the ninth inning of the Oct. 2 wild-card game at Wrigley Field.

"I have no words to describe how much pain it was," Strop said after throwing his scoreless inning in a 2-1, 13-inning loss to the Colorado Rockies. "I also didn't want to show it. Because I knew when I showed the pain, they would take me out of the game."

Epstein described a normal timetable for Strop's injury in the four-to-six-weeks range. Strop returned in 19 days, fired a 95.7-mph fastball with his first pitch and struck out Colorado's Nolan Arenado swinging at his slider in the first ninth-inning at-bat.

So, yeah, it's difficult to see how the Cubs would've survived a five-game series against the Milwaukee Brewers, and then counteracted all the options the Los Angeles Dodgers present in the NLCS, and then beaten an American League super-team in the World Series.

"It was just a weird one," Strop said, reflecting on the season as a whole. "It's not a secret that our offense wasn't what everybody was expecting it to be. But those guys worked really hard to help us win games. I really appreciated the way they work. They tried everything to score runs. This was one of the things that made me go in that (wild-card game), knowing I was going to be hurt after, because my teammates — there's no words to describe it."

Even if Jake Arrieta had never blossomed from a Triple-A pitcher into a Cy Young Award winner, the Scott Feldman/Steve Clevenger flip deal with the Baltimore Orioles would be one of the best trades in franchise history. In the middle of a 96-loss season in 2013, the Cubs acquired a talented, trusted reliever who has now made the most postseason appearances (20) in team history.

Look at this snapshot from the Cubs' season-in-review file:

- Strop and Dodgers closer Kenley Jansen are the only pitchers to appear in at least 50 games and post a sub-3.00 ERA in each of the past five seasons.
- Strop is the only pitcher in franchise history with at least five seasons of 50-plus games and a sub-3.00 ERA. He also has the franchise record for holds (114) and ranks fourth in relief appearances (361).
- Among Cubs relievers all-time with at least 100 games pitched, Strop ranks second in ERA (2.63), third in batting average against (.181) and sixth in strikeouts per nine innings (10.21).
- Opponents have a .187 batting average against Strop at Wrigley Field, where only Carlos Marmol (.182), Arrieta (.182) and Sandy Koufax (.187) have posted better marks.

“I bring a positive vibe to the clubhouse,” Strop said. “Sometimes guys are a little down and I feel like I help them when I come with my energy. It’s just me, though, and they accept me the way I am, and I love the way that they accept it.”

Given some of the durability issues with this pitching staff — and Epstein’s concerns about a complacent clubhouse — it sounds like the Cubs will make the obvious decision on Strop’s \$6.25 million team option for 2019.

“Just a great disposition and a great heart,” Epstein said. “And a great pitcher. I’m glad he had that opportunity this year to close games and get some much-deserved recognition for how good he is — and what he means to this team — even if it was only for six weeks or so. A lot of fans tipping their cap to him, or moving it to the side for him. We fully expect him to be back next year and playing a huge role.”

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