



Theo needs to study 1984 Cubs as model Wrigley Field lineup, rotation

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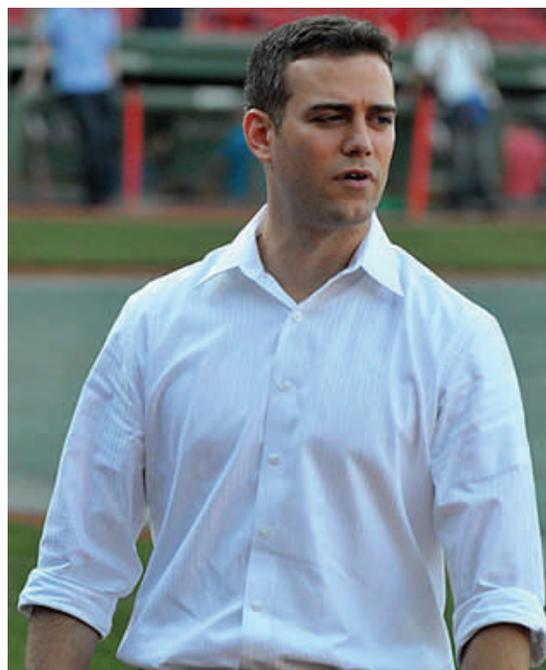
Open letter to Theo Epstein:

I see some frustration has crept in at your top management levels. Your Cubs not only played below your expectations in 2012 – you projected as many as 93 losses, not 101 – but they’ve also played like Keystone Kops so far in 2013.

Five wild pitches in one inning. Blown saves right and left. Re-making the bullpen on the fly after only 12 games. The expected pitch-and-putt attack, with the bad relief work negating some spirited comebacks by the under-powered lineup.

You’re staying the course, of course. You’re building from the ground up and not trying to advance the program well ahead of schedule with millions wasted on middle-level players perceived not getting you more than a whiff of contention.

Now, here’s the tough part. You’re not from Chicago. You grew up in a literary family in Brookline, Mass. Your formative baseball experience was as a Red Sox fan, frustrated by repeated pennant-race and World Series failures. Yet the cause of that frustration in no way compares to what Cubs fans have endured. This is where you need to earn your chops as an émigré to the Midwest. This is where you have to wonder if you threw too much baby out with the bathwater in the front-office housecleaning that dispatched several old-timers who weren’t past colleagues and thus part of your new-age baseball program.



Theo Epstein has all the information on the 1984 model lineup, plus enough videotape, to guide him in future talent acquisition. Photo credit [Scott Slingsby](#).

You were 10 years old in 1984, becoming more and more aware of the challenges of your favorite Red Sox. You likely cheered Tony Armas' 43-homer season, rooted for Red Sox old-timers Dewey Evans and Jim Rice, wondered how this recent draftee named Roger Clemens would work out in the rotation, and gnashed your teeth at the fourth-place finish under, of all people, former longtime Yankees managerial stalwart Ralph Houk. In your passionate Red Sox world, the only connection to the Cubs of that season was a late-spring trade that dispatched former Boston pitching favorite Dennis Eckersley to Chicago for first baseman Bill Buckner, made expendable by the emergence of Leon "Bull" Durham in the North Siders' lineup. Otherwise, the Cubs might as well have been in Tacoma or Bellingham or some faraway Left Coast city, playing in the National League and having zilch to do with all things Red Sox and rivalries with the Yankees.



Bob Dernier, as a Cubs coach in 2011, helped enable the 1984 Cubs to play "under" the fences and the in-blowing Wrigley Field winds with his speed. Photo credit [John W. Iwanski](#).

Unless you watched Saturday NBC Games of the Week or somehow had access to superstation cable telecasts of the Cubs, you weren't too aware of the interesting developments at Wrigley Field. Not expected to contend in '84, the Cubs got off to a hot start, the entire lineup producing. And not just by the concept of belting the pelota around and out of the Friendly Confines.

Speed, OBP set the table for lineup

The Cubs did things offensively that they hardly ever had done before – and rarely have duplicated since. They had an exquisite blend of speed, on-base percentage, batter's patience and run production that took full advantage of the first three attributes. You're a big OBP guy with 21st Century metrics, yet what the Cubs put forth in '84 should be your role model for assembling the contender you vow to build.

Amazingly, that model was available to successive managements after the 1987 departure of GM Dallas Green, who assembled many of the parts. But apparently the troika of 1994-2006 team president Andy MacPhail and his

hand-picked GMs, Ed Lynch and Jim Hendry, had not paid enough attention – all having not lived in Chicago in '84. Lynch, though, was a Mets pitcher involved in a famous August knockdown-pitch dustup with Keith Moreland and the Cubs, and should have had an opponent's awareness. The lack of remembrance of 1984's lessons condemned the Cubs to chronic problems with OBP for most annual team editions going forward, with the notable exception of the 97-victory NL Central champs in 2008.

Here's what happened. Leadoff man/center fielder Bob Dernier and No. 2 hitter/second baseman Ryne Sandberg comprised what Harry Caray termed "The Daily Double," twin lineup igniters who got things going with hitting and speed. Dernier swiped 45 bases, while NL Most Valuable Player Sandberg heisted 32 – a combined stolen-base total never reached before or duplicated since with the Cubs. Too many Cubs execs were tricked by Wrigley Field's cozy dimensions and ignored speed. The most egregious example was head coach (really, the manager) Bob Kennedy, who decades later admitted he failed to run Lou Brock enough in front of Billy Williams and Ron Santo in 1963-64.

The swifties are needed because speed never takes a day off and will work in any climactic conditions. Wrigley is notorious as the best pitcher's park in the game about half the season due to the in-blowing winds in April and May, later in September and even periodically in the summer months. If the Cubs can't play below the fences consistently, they're cooked. Dernier and Sandberg were the prime examples. In addition, their OBPs were in your ballpark. Dernier had 62 walks with an OBP of .356. Sandberg's walk total was no issue. He got 200 hits, boosting his OBP to .367. He scored 114 runs.

Then the Cubs experienced the cherry on top of their OBP sundae. Gary "Sarge" Matthews changed his usual power-style that once netted a megabucks free-agent contract from Ted Turner. Batting third, Sarge in effect became a second leadoff man. He was the last Cub to lead the NL in walks with 103. Combined with a .291 batting average, Matthews sported a 21st Century Red Sox-level .410 OBP.

Cubs lineup loaded with run production

The effect of all those baserunners rippled throughout the lineup. Only two Cubs exceeded 20 homers – Durham with 23 and Ron Cey with 25. Yet six regulars, including Sandberg and Matthews, had at least 80 RBIs. Cey paced the Cubs with 99 despite hitting just .240. Durham, who had 96 RBIs, added 69 walks to compile a .369 OBP.

The Cubs paced the NL with 762 runs. Whenever the Cubs led the league or were in the top four in plating runners, they invariably were in contention. That's the historical trend. The team OBP of .331 ranked second.

The key here, though, was the speed at the top. Speed is coming back into the game in the transition from the steroid era. Epstein, GM Jed Hoyer and player development



Hall of Famer Ryne Sandberg, pictured here with Dr. David Fletcher, president of the Chicago Baseball Museum, combined base-stealing prowess with extra-base power in 1984.

chief Jason McLeod must groom a couple of burners who also can exercise patience at the plate. This is how the organization can feature a multi-dimensional lineup that can play through any conditions at Wrigley Field.

Meanwhile, the 1984 Cubs overall pitching statistics don't shine on face value. The 3.75 team ERA ranked 10th out of the 12-team NL at the team. However, it's *when* you pitch well that counts. The brilliant June deal that landed ace Rick Sutcliffe from Cleveland set the pace. The pitchers, shaky early on, turned around 180 degrees with Sutcliffe leading the way with his Cy Young Award-winning 16-1 record. Nearly forgotten in Sutcliffe's dream season was Eckersley's 8-3 finish after a 2-5 start coming over from Boston. In the bullpen, George Frazier of all people was a hot reliever in the second half.

Speed, OBP, RBIs and quality pitching. It was an unbeatable combination at 96 victories – until the final three games of the NL Championship Series. Five-game series, then and now, are the huge trap for superior teams in the postseason.

The numbers are preserved for all time. Plenty of WGN and NBC videotape from 1984 still exists for the Epstein crew's examination – should they wish to watch. The deficit is in the live people who have exited from the organization.

Dernier was dismissed as first-base coach after the 2011 season, when Epstein and Co. came in. Sandberg is manager-in-waiting for the Phillies, having lost out to the short-lived Mike Quade for the Cub's skipper's job for 2011 after paying his managerial dues at four levels of the farm system from 2007 to 2010. Matthews is a Phillies TV announcer. Epstein also dispatched Scott Nelson, longtime director of baseball operations, who was an assistant to then-Cubs player development guru Gordon Goldsberry in 1984.

Theo, you can consult with Moreland, now the Cubs' radio analyst. "Zonk" knows all about clutch hitting and OBP in 1984 – he was NL Player of the Month in August of that season. But the overall institutional memory to provide testimony about the near-dream season is gone from the organization. Team chairman Tom Ricketts was a college student watching from the bleachers in '84. Maybe your boss can give you and your aides some personal recollections of the fun lineup.

In this instance, Theo, the baseball intellectual in you needs to be Theo the baseball historian.



Gary "Sarge" Matthews served as a second leadoff man in the 1984 lineup. Photo credit [Dealphungo](#).