



Dombrowski still knows value of a dollar even after shelling out nine-figure contracts

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The nine figures on the contracts Palos Heights native Dave Dombrowski completes as president of the Detroit Tigers would have seemed like science fiction to Dombrowski and mentor Roland Hemond while working for the White Sox three decades ago.

A \$292 million, 10-year deal for uber-hitter Miguel Cabrera and base \$180 million, seven-year deal for ace Justin Verlander were beyond the outer limits for Oak Lawn-Richards High School alum Dombrowski in his early years in the game. And starting out, Dombrowski made even less -- just \$8,000 a year as an administrative assistant in the minor league and scouting department at old Comiskey Park in Jan. 1978. Even traditionally low-paying starter journalism jobs shelled out \$2,000 a year or more than Dombrowski's first salary. A certain Chicago Baseball Museum historian that spring started his first post-college job at \$12,500 for World Book-Childcraft in Chicago.

In 1978, then-Sox general manager Hemond was just six years removed from sending baseball into a tizzy with Dick Allen's \$250,000 Sox contract. The first \$1 million annual contract, for Nolan Ryan, was still almost two years into the future. Starting out the 1977 season, an Associated Press survey showed \$400,000 was the top salary of any player in Opening Day lineups. Plenty of players made only mid-five-figure salaries as the 1970s ended.

Perhaps as free agency, then less than two years old, had an increasing effect on the game, the 21-year-old Dombrowski had an inkling the bucks would increase when he



Dave Dombrowski cold-called Roland Hemond for advice on his college paper in 1977 -- and the rest of his baseball career was history. Photo credit: [Nolan Treadway](#).

made probably the most effective cold call in the game dialing up Hemond as a Western Michigan University student in 1977.

“He had called me,” remembered Hemond, now a senior advisor for the Arizona Diamondbacks. “He was working on a paper for college. He wanted to know how the general managers handled the different rules and growth of the game. So he could envision, I guess, the prices might be higher later. I told him I could go back (as far as) the early 1950s.”

Dombrowski works for an activist owner in Little Caesar’s impresario Mike Ilitch, who has mandated the big payouts to Cabrera, Verlander and others to bring a world championship to Comerica Park. The strategy is obviously on-target. The Tigers have zoomed to baseball’s best record in the season’s early going. The team has not missed a beat in changing managers from Jim Leyland to rookie skipper Brad Ausmus or trading power for lineup-igniting by Dombrowski dealing Prince Fielder to Texas for Ian Kinsler.

The money is still mind-boggling

Dombrowski still has to take a breath and pause when he signs off on these deals. He has not forgotten that every dollar had to be carefully apportioned in the cash-crunched Bill Veeck ownership regime in which he began. Even though he’s far-better compensated compared to his 1978 salary, Dombrowski realizes he’s hardly in the category of his stars, who earn Hollywood celebrity-level pay.

“Anytime you’re dealing with the type of dollars that we’re talking about for the big contracts, sure, you shake your head,” he said. “I think you’re taken aback. It’s hard to keep in perspective when you’re talking about that.

“But what we’re really talking about, we’re in the entertainment industry. You’re talking about star performers, just as you would about a star in a movie, lead actor or lead actress in a movie. It’s the same in our game. When you’re talking \$20 million or \$25 million for somebody, it’s hard to comprehend. Even if you (had first) come in the game in the mid-1990s, you’re still be taken aback.

“The whole structure has changed. The revenues are so much later. The TV ratings are larger. We’ve grown into a big business in many ways. Before, we were much smaller. We were on national TV once a week on a Saturday. If you drew 1 million in a lot of markets, it was good. Now if you’re not drawing 2.5 top 3 million people in a lot of markets (teams have some difficulty). I read the other day where the commissioner says we’re reaching \$9 billion (annual revenues). Thirty years ago it wasn’t more \$1 billion.”

But Dombrowski, who counts consistent success and three World Series among the four teams for which he has worked, has managed to change with the times. He lis-



Roland Hemond was mentor to Dave Dombrowski in every way with the White Sox.

tened early and often to Hemond, whom he surprised by showing up on his own dime at the 1977 winter meetings in Honolulu. Impressed, Hemond ran Dombrowski through multiple interviews up through Veeck. Just as Hemond started at \$28 a week in baseball 25 years earlier, Dombrowski got a shot to work his way up from the bottom in baseball.

“As you go along, know the rules inside-out, adjusting to the (changes in) game,” was Hemond’s first bit of advice to Dombrowski, who worked his way up to assistant GM alongside Hemond by Nov. 1981, after Jerry Reinsdorf’s and Eddie Einhorn’s first season running the Sox as Veeck’s ownership successors.

Even with the billions paid out in national and regional TV contracts, Dombrowski knows the cost spiral can’t continue indefinitely.

“There’s always limits and you have to be aware of it,” he said.

Never forget affordable seats

In the meantime, he believes smart team operators will still keep baseball economically accessible to fans accustomed to a game that always undercut the other pro sports in affordability. At 57, he can easily recall paying \$2 or under for seats at old Comiskey Park or Wrigley Field in the 1970s.

“Ownership, if you’re doing your homework, there’s all different price ranges in the ballpark and you make sure there’s affordable seats in the ballpark,” Dombrowski said.

“I think in most places it is (most accessible and affordable). When you talk about our situation, you’ve got some (costly) box seats down close, but you’ve still got some very good seats where you can still come into the ballpark and you pay a cheaper price than you pay in a movie theater. It’s incumbent of upon everybody in different markets in having a pulse of doing that for their fans. We need to be able to make sure it’s still an affordable place for entertainment for families to come with their children. You’ll still get good seats in the ballpark.”



Miguel Cabrera is likely Dave Dombrowski's best-ever trade. Photo credit: [Cbl62](#).

No matter what the price, those seats have to be filled by a winning team to keep the owners in the black, Dombrowski has proved more capable than most in accomplishing

that goal through different owners, different markets and different financial parameters. He was a proactive executive, learning French to better relate to the natives in Montreal, picking up Spanish to handle the Marlins' market in south Florida and the Caribbean and having a steel-trap mind for talent analysis.

“To me, he had sort of a photographic mind,” Hemond said. “He would remember a scout talking about a player in January the previous year. In June of the following year, the scout was expressing himself about how that player had grown. Dave might say, ‘I don’t think you liked him that much early, but then you’ve changed your mind, which is OK.’ He could give verbatim about how the scout had expressed himself the previous time about the same player.

“His retentive mind allows him to make adjustments about the game. But he’d praise someone who had changed his mind (positively).”

Late-night Bards Room education

Dombrowski also got a “speedy education,” Hemond said, from late-night, post-game bull sessions in the old Bards Room presided over by Veeck, Paul Richards and other Sox officials.

Dombrowski eventually left the Sox during the ill-fated one-season stint of Hawk Harrelson as Sox GM in 1986. But like manager Tony La Russa, another departee under Harrelson, he punched a ticket upward in the game by joining an Expos franchise that had a strong farm system almost since the team began in 1968.

So when Dombrowski left for the expansion Marlins as their first GM in Sept. 1991, the Expos were stocked with prime young talent. Thornwood High School product Cliff Floyd was Dombrowski’s No. 1 draft pick in 1991, eventually following him to the Marlins. Like the White Sox, the Expos were thwarted from potential greatness by the 1994 strike, and the franchise never recovered.

Dombrowski helped build up a productive Marlins system, including logical inroads in Latin America, through the 1990s. Then, prompted by owner Wayne Huizenga, he ramped up spending on veterans, resulting in the 1997 World Series title, fastest ever – in their fifth season – by an expansion team.

But the South Florida market would not prove to be the gold mine for pro franchises as its advance billing seemed to indicate. Huizenga soon ordered Dombrowski to break up



Cliff Floyd of south suburban Thornwood High School was Dave Dombrowski's No. 1 draft choice with the Montreal Expos in 1991.

the champions. Eventually, he moved on to Detroit for another rebuilding project at the end of 2001.

His work was a bottom-up process. The Tigers had wallowed in mediocrity much of the 1990s. In Dombrowski's second season in 2003, they chased the 1962 New York Mets' all-time losses record of 120, falling short by one defeat. But the rebuilding cycle kicked in quickly with the likes of Verlander winning as soon as he was promoted to Detroit. Hiring Jim Leyland, his '97 Marlins manager, to run the club, Dombrowski's 2006 team made the World Series, losing to the fast-finishing St. Louis Cardinals.

But he hardly stood pat. In ensuing years Dombrowski pulled off big deals that netted Cabrera from the Marlins, Max Scherzer from the Diamondbacks and Austin Jackson from the Yankees. The latter trade cost the Tigers a clubhouse leader in south suburban Lynwood's Curtis Granderson, now with the Mets.

The art of the deal

"I like making deals," Dombrowski said. "I do like that part of the game. I like putting together the structure of the club to have you win. We've been close a lot of years. Making the trades, signing the free agent, developing young players, it all leads to trying to win at the big-league level."

The trades harken back to the type of wheeling-and-dealing in which Hemond specialized and Dombrowski, helping in the process as assistant GM, had to take notes.

"I used to tell him don't wait for the phone to ring if you can possibly make a deal," Hemond said. "He was better prepared than most general managers, I would say, because he also listened to his scouts. You'd say we're only as the people working with us. That's the way Bill Veeck talked: 'You're not working for me, you're working *with* me.'"

"When you make a trade, it doesn't have to be an overwhelming (favorable) trade. If you make your club a little bit better...the player you give up, maybe you have excess (talent), and you have a player in return if given the opportunity might blossom."

Not everything about the front office has changed into a heavily corporate environment compared to Dombrowski's more modest roots under Veeck.

"I always enjoyed that (old-school setup)," he said. "I enjoy it now. Depending on how you structure it, you still have close relationships and close friendships. One thing, the game on the field hasn't changed at all. For us, the love of the game, that's what you're in it for the game itself. That hasn't really changed. There have been rule changes here, rule changes there. The competition on the field...love of baseball. I enjoyed it then and I enjoy it now."

The Tigers have beat a constant drum on the Sox since mid-season 2010. Their lineup is full of lifetime Sox killers, led by Torii Hunter and Victor Martinez. And yet the head-to-head matchups might get a little more competitive after Sox GM Rick Hahn freshened the lineup – and clubhouse atmosphere – with the likes of slugger Jose Abreu and lineup sparkplug Adam Eaton.

“They’ve done a nice job here,” Dombrowski said. “You tip your cap to them. They’ve really changed the feel of their organization. They’ve broken young players in, they’ve acquired them in different ways and that’s not easy to do.”

And it’s not easy to have the record Dombrowski has amassed. He fortunately had one particularly crafty teacher whom he can still call and talk baseball.