

By Paul Ladewski

Even before Theo Epstein was announced as Cubs president of baseball operations on Tuesday morning, there were signs that hope had returned to Wrigley Field in a big way. One elderly fan in a blue jacket held one near the ticket windows at the corner of Clark and Addison Streets.

“It's Gonna Happen,” it said in reference to a World Series championship, presumably.

The obvious question is, when will it happen? After 103 years, when can Cubs fans expect to experience a World Series championship again?

Asked what his answer to Cubs fans would be, Epstein told the Chicago Baseball Museum, “We'll work as hard as we can to build a foundation for sustained success that will eventually lead to us playing regularly in October and someday winning a World Series.”

And request some patience along the way, as difficult as that may be?

“Absolutely,” he said. “That's a part of it.”

If recent history means anything, then it's not not far-fetched to believe that the wait will be measured in a few short years, not decades or even centuries.

Not only has the 37-year-old Epstein been in a similar situation before, but he has thrived in it. In nine seasons as Boston Red Sox general manager, his teams had a .575 win percentage and claimed two World Series championships.

Like the Red Sox, the Cubs play in a museum-like ballpark located in one of the largest markets in the country. And like the Red Sox, the Cubs have a nation of passionate fans who waited a long time to witness a victory parade.

“To me, baseball is better with tradition,” Epstein said. “Baseball is better with history. Baseball is better with fans who care. Baseball is better in ballparks like this. Baseball is better during the day. And baseball is best of all when you win.”

Epstein assumes a veteran-laden team whose 71-91 record didn't measure up to its payroll last season. The main problems were on the mound and in the field, where it ranked 14th in earned run average and 16th and last in errors among National League teams.

In the post-expansion era, the Cubs have been down this road before. In each case, it didn't take long for them to become playoff contenders.

When Jim Frey replaced general manager Dallas Green in November, 1987, he took over a 76-85 team that hit its share of home runs. It also ranked seventh in errors and 11th in ERA in a 12-team league.

In Shawon Dunston, Mark Grace, Greg Maddux, Dwight Smith and Jerome Walton, the young core that Green had put together was about to come into its own. The additions of Vance Law, Lloyd McClendon and Luis Salazar added depth in the field, while newcomers Mike Bielecki and Scott Sanderson bolstered the rotation. In 1989, the Cubs won 93 games, more than any team in the league.

While the organization doesn't have that kind of young talent on the way at present, Epstein has done his best work in the draft and player development, which he considers to be top priorities. Jacoby Ellsbury, Dustin Pedroia and Jonathan Papelbon were among the Red Sox players drafted in his term. According to Baseball America, the Cubs rank 16th overall in organizational talent, an indication that he won't have to start from scratch.

In July, 2000, Andy MacPhail took the reins of a last-place team that would finish in the middle of the pack on offense and 14th in earned run average. Mark Prior was drafted, Moises Alou and Joe Borowski were signed and Matt Clement and Alex Gonzalez were acquired in trades. Three years later, successor Jim Hendry added Kenny Lofton and Aramis Ramirez before the trade deadline, and the North Siders came within one victory of a World Series appearance.

Other factors point to a quick turnaround. Epstein won't have the same financial

resources as he did with the Red Sox, whose payroll ranked second in the major leagues last season. Then again, he won't require as much. Unlike in the American League East Division, there are no New York Yankees to compete against in this one. As he put it, "There are plenty of resources to win here."

The National League Central also may be weaker next season, as Prince Fielder and Albert Pujols will become free agents shortly. As arguably the two most dominant players in the division, their departures would seriously weaken the first-place Milwaukee Brewers and the runner-up St. Louis Cardinals and make the climb to the top that much easier.

"We'll have to have a high hit rate, take a creative approach to build this team and work extremely hard to be in a position to contend next year and the years that follow, but it can be done," Epstein said. "There are a lot of examples of other teams coming off difficult seasons, pushing all the right buttons, and all of a sudden being in contention."

And for the Cubs faithful who believe in omens, there's this nugget: When the Red Sox won the 2004 World Series, it came in their 103rd season of existence. Or exactly as many years as the Cubs have gone without one.

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