



Fighting off hype as tough as fighting off knee-buckling pitches for young Cougars

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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(First in a series on Chicago-area minor-league and independent pro teams).

GENEVA, Ill. -- Long before they set foot in Wrigley Field – and that’s still an if – the likes of the Kane County Cougars’ Albert Almora and Dan Vogelbach must learn to deal with the hype as much as knee-buckling breaking pitches.

“I try to stay away from all that (hype),” said Almora, the first No. 1 draft choice of the Theo Epstein-Jed Hoyer Cubs regime. “I’m just focused on playing the game wherever I’m at, each and every day. If it’s time, it’s time. You just play hard nine innings every day.”



Rock Shoulders (from left), Albert Almora and Dan Vogelbach are together on and off the field with the Kane County Cougars.

Vogelbach is more expansive on the concept.

“That’s the way I’ve been brought up,” the stocky first baseman said of brushing away hype. “I’ve been blessed with a mom and dad who brought me up the right way. I don’t read stuff, newspapers, and articles. It doesn’t matter what people say, good or bad, because that doesn’t determine how I get to the big leagues.

“How I get to the big leagues (is determined) by what effort I put in each day and worrying about what I can control. That’s going out, playing hard, working hard, and going about my business helping the team win any way I can.”

A teammate and roommate of Almora and Vogelbach has a slightly different view of advance promotion coming his way. He has a distinctive name – Rock Shoulders. And if folks start noticing his athletic skills on account of his name, so much the better.

“I like that my name is what it is,” Shoulders said, “because it got me noticed before I could get a chance to let people know me about my ability to play the game. I just want to take the time to show people how I can play the game, and hopefully one day get the Cubs to a World Series.”

Long, long way to Wrigley Field

One step at a time, though. Getting the Cubs to the long-absent Fall Classic is the reward at the far end of the rainbow for Almora, Vogelbach and Shoulders. They first have to finish a developmental season in the low-Class A Midwest League – one level above the short-season rookie league – at Kane County in far west suburban Geneva, Ill. Then begins the arduous climb through high-A Daytona Beach, leading to Double-A Tennessee. If they make it that far, Wrigley Field can be reasonably glimpsed as a possibility.



After their classic baseball pose, Shoulders, Almora and Vogelbach desired a photo with caps turned around.

At so many junctures along the way, the trio and all other Cubs hopefuls can be derailed. Baseball, after all, is a game of failure. A big producer in low-A could end up with a slider-speed bat at Triple-A Iowa. A blazing fastball at Kane County better be complemented by pitches that bend three levels higher. The washout rate is brutal. Half of first-round picks like Almora never make it in the majors.

If most of the Epstein-Hoyer plans to develop a home-grown flow of position players pan out, then Almora, Vogelbach and Shoulders, among others, won't have to wear the burden of franchise saviors. The attention would be diffused on a number of hopefuls. And the Cubs are

developing Javier Baez, Jorge Soler and Junior Lake to this end. They've just added top college hitter Kris Bryant, the 2013 No. 1 draft pick, to the mix.

Since the early 1990s, the Cubs farm system operated at such a deficit in grooming impact position players that talents such as Corey Patterson and Felix Pie played in a fishbowl. When they stumbled in the majors, the disappointment was keen with no one else to pick them up.

In reality, a good farm system will spew forth several everyday types for the lineup each year, and no one player has to bear the burden of hope.

Right now, the Cougars' trio is handling the pressures well while having fun in the first season the 22-year-old Cougars have been affiliated with the nearby Cubs. All Florida-raised, Almora, Vogelbach and Shoulders have found a home away from home at Fifth Third Bank Stadium, long a pleasant, inexpensive, promotion-filled summertime destination for west suburban fans. Now, Cubs fans who don't want to deal with the non-contending teardown-rebuild situation at Clark and Addison can come on out to envelop themselves in futurism in Geneva.

Home away from home at Kane County

If the trio make it all the way, they'll certainly credit their warm welcome at Kane County for part of their development.

"This is awesome," said the athletically-talented, but as yet-unfinished physical specimen Almora. "Being 30, 40 minutes from Chicago is a blessing. These fans are great. Being close to where the futures are is awesome."

Shoulders is simply amazed at the Kane County atmosphere.

"It helps out with the fans," he said. "I've always heard about the good fan base the Cubs have had. We've had some of the coldest days I've ever been a part of, and there's still almost 2,000 people sitting in the stands. We haven't had the best season, and to still see people come out and support us just helps us want to play harder every day. It's a great ballpark."

Unlike other minor-league stops, where young players away from home for the first full season live in spartan conditions in cheap apartments, the Cougars benefit from a long-running "host family" program. Local residents put up the players for the summer. Almora, Vogelbach and Shoulders all room together in the home of Warren and Sam Drew. The backyard leads right to the Fox River, where Vogelbach, accompanied by Almora, has snared bass and catfish.

"They're real great. They treat us like we're they're kids," Almora said of his hosts.

"We all get along so good," said Shoulders. "Sitting down and watching TV is a fun time for us. There's no telling who's going to crack a joke. We respect them and try to keep the house as clean as possible. They cook us dinner, and most times we'll try to help by cleaning up the table."

In the end, though, all the fans will care about is if the Cubs wannabes can clean up on the bases. Epstein and Hoyer have established a hitting philosophy emphasizing on-base percentage and working counts. No, they do not want their kids to go up there looking for walks. The brass desire their players to be selectively aggressive and be able to identify hitters' pitches.

Almora probably still is the biggest work in progress in the patience game. He drew just two walks in 33 games in his first pro season in 2012. But this year, Almora had a .330 average with .373 on-base percentage in his first 49 games. He had 12 walks. Almora

knows he has to become more selective. In one recent game, a 3-2 loss to the Great Lake Loons (a Dodgers farm club), Almora had a swing-first mentality even when he got ahead in the count.

“That’s something that I’ve been working hard since I signed as a pro,” he said. “It’s getting better, but it’s not where I want to be.”

Almora plays center and typically bats second. He’s long and lanky at 6-foot-2 and 180 pounds. Whether he’ll be a power-speed type remains to be seen. Just 19, he has time to fill out in his body type.

Vogelbach is Kruk-like

Vogelbach already is in full bloom at 6-feet, 250 pounds. The left-handed hitter was one of the top high-school power prospects in the country in Ft. Myers, Fla. in 2011, when then-scouting director Tim Wilken picked him in the second round. He reminds an observer of John Kruk in several ways. Vogelbach fortunately is not a big swing-and-miss man with 63 strikeouts in his first 413 plate appearances to go along with 42 walks and 14 homers. He has a short game, too, being able to punch singles over the infield, as he did in the game against the Loons.

“They preach in spring training about it,” Vogelbach said of patience. “They talk about going up there, getting your pitch, and not hitting the pitchers’ pitch. Not being afraid to go 0-2, because you can turn the count around to 3-2 as fast as you can go 0-2. I try to pick my pitch and stay in the middle of the field. I pride myself in not striking out. That comes from being patient.”

Shoulders, also possessed of a strapping build at 6-foot-2, 225 pounds, has had a little bit of everything in his line so far in his third pro season after being picked in the 25th round in 2011 out of a Sarasota, Fla. junior college. In his first 336 plate appearances, the left-handed hitting infielder, primarily a third baseman, had 99 strikeouts, 48 walks, 15 homers and a .354 on-base percentage. He got off to a hot start in April with five homers, seven doubles and 16 RBIs, earning him the Cubs Organizational Minor League Player of the Month.

“I wouldn’t consider myself a patient hiter, but I also wouldn’t consider myself a free swinger,” Shoulders said. “If I get a first-pitch fastball, I’m ready to swing at it. But if I get a first-pitch curveball, I feel I have the ability to lay off of it and try to work the count, get something I can hit.”



John Kruk is the big-league player whose build, hitting style and personality seems to most resemble Dan Vogelbach's.

Other baseball fundamentals are on the batting-practice schedule for the young Cougars. Patterson earned criticism in the majors for his inability to bunt and take advantage of his blinding speed. Almora does not want to get caught short in the same situation.

“It’s something I’ll definitely work on in my game,” he said of bunting. “I’ve never been a bunter. In high school, I always was a three-hole hitter. But it’s something I’m working on a lot this year. You don’t know what weapons you’ll have under your belt.”

Meanwhile, Vogelbach – who had defensive issues at first – doesn’t want to be labeled as a DH-type only able to play in the American League.

“You can get better any way in any part of the game,” he said. “The first thing I’m trying to get better at obviously is my fielding. I go out every day with MJ (manager Mark Johnson to practice) every day. I have a lot of confidence in my fielding. I want the ball hit to me. Before, I was hoping it wasn’t hit to me.”

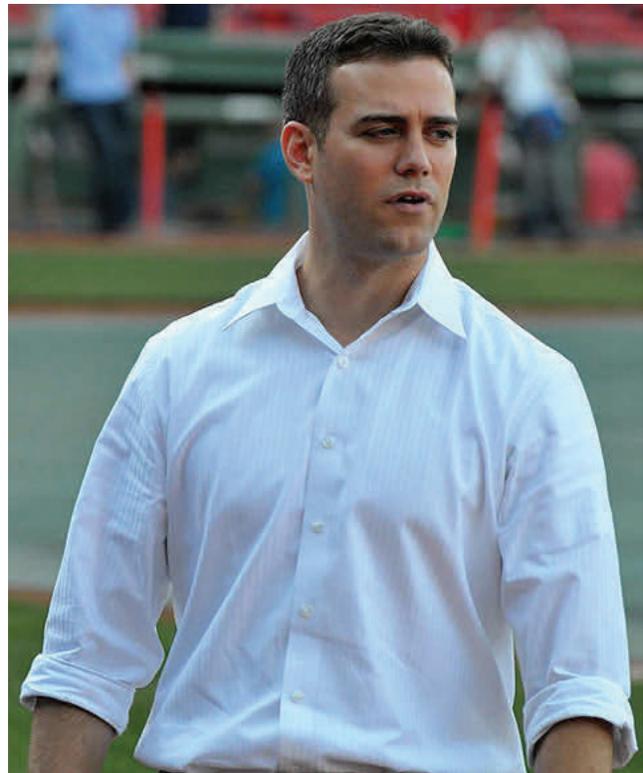
Top Cubs brass seen in stands

All three players know they have to be on their toes daily at home. They never know if Epstein or Hoyer will be watching, given the short drive from Wrigley Field. If the top brass aren’t present, certainly a player-development official will be scouting them.

“We’re being watched for everything,” said a realistic Almora.

“They’re here all the time,” Vogelbach said. “I tell everybody, that doesn’t affect me. That shouldn’t change the way you play (depending) on who’s in the stands and who’s not in the stands. Go out each and every day and play the right way, play hard.”

While learning on the job is the No. 1 task, there’s plenty of room for personality and individualism. When asked to pose for a group photo, the trio gladly obliged – but all wanted a shot with their caps turned backwards. They did the classic Mickey Mantle pose first, then got to do the 21st Century style.



Theo Epstein can personally scout the Kane County Cougars given the short drive from Chicago. Photo credit [Scott Slingsby](#).

Vogelbach in particular looks like the fun-loving type who will always be quoted for his wit.

“It goes back to the way I was raised,” he said. “My mom and dad told me, if you’re going to do something, you might as well have fun at it. When the minute I stop loving it is the day I’ll quit playing.”

Shoulders, whose given first name is Roderick, will never stop telling how he got to be called “Rock.” No, he’ll never be “Rocky,” a classic baseball nickname, because of the way “Rock” came about.

“(It started with) a friend’s parent when I was 4,” Shoulders said. “They couldn’t really say my name so they just dropped a couple of letters out of the middle and combined the first and last (letters). I love it.”

In the end, the players’ ability to rise to their destination is based on focusing their dreams.

“I want to be a player known as going hard every day,” summed up Almora. “You can’t have four hits every day. It’s a sport of failure. But you can control how you play and your actions, and that’s what I want to be known for.”