



Johnson retires old Sox loyalties to develop Cubs kids at Kane County

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Friday, July 26, 2013*

(Another in a series on Chicago-area minor-league and independent pro teams).

GENEVA, IL. – Turncoat!

Dozens have trodden down the path Mark Johnson has completed, but the journey still provokes strong feelings.

The first-year Kane County Cougars manager has to bleed Cubbie blue in one of the entry points of the player-development system Theo Epstein hopes one day will produce a World Series in Wrigley Field. But Johnson embarks on his mission knowing his roots, the blue pinstripes colored black in his original organization, as one of a host to play for both the Cubs and Sox. Or in Johnson's case, play for one and manage in the other's organization.

Johnson was the White Sox's first-round draft choice in 1994 who ended up the backup catcher on the 2000 AL Central Division champions. A 10-year Sox organizational man doesn't quickly forget his original loyalties and fierce rivalry with the Cubs.

"You come up and got drafted by the Sox, spent 10 years with them. Come up on the South Side, look at the paper every day, and you look at the other (team) and say, 'Oh, can't wait to play those guys and beat those guys,'" Johnson said the other day in his cozy office at Fifth Third Bank Park here.



Mark Johnson as a White Sox catcher in the early 2000s. Photo courtesy of Chicago White Sox.

Oh, how Johnson loved being on duty that 2002 day in U.S. Cellular Field when the Sox stormed back from an 8-0 deficit to beat Kerry Wood and the Cubs. Interestingly, though, he said the passage of time dulls the sharp edge.



Mark Johnson with son Will in his Fifth Third Bank Stadium office.

“You go through that phase,” Johnson said. “After you’re in the game long enough, you realize baseball’s just baseball. It doesn’t really matter what team you’re with. Once you get to the state where I am, you want to help kids get better and get to the big leagues. It’s not about me producing and performing. It’s about getting these kids prepared and getting their routines in check.”

Johnson began to put his old South Side vs. North Side feelings aside at the same time he began thinking about managing – when the same Cubs farm director who hired him as a short-season Boise manager in 2011 brought him onto the Triple-A Iowa roster as a spare catcher in 2005.

Conversion to Cubs started as player

“It was strange when it first happened,” he said. “When I signed as a free agent in ’05 in Triple-A, I had seen Oneri (Fleita) in passing when I had played in minors. We talked here and there. My name came up and he asked if I wanted to play for Iowa as a third catcher.

“When I first put on the (Cubs) pinstripes, it was different. It was a real weird experience. Almost like being traded for the first time, like going to Oakland in ’03. Like going to a new school as a kid. It took a whole year in Triple-A in ’05 to kind of get over that White Sox/Cubs thing. I’d come up within the South Side and we really didn’t care for them that much. That’s just the nature of the beast. “Once you get to that age (30), you figure it’s just a job and you don’t really take sides anymore.”

Now 37, Johnson’s desire to manage grew when he began bouncing around the NL Central – to the Cubs, Brewers and finally the Cardinals in 2008.

“I was blessed to be around Tony (La Russa) and Dunc (Dave Duncan) before they retired,” he said. “I really started to think about it. My body’s not what it used to be. I was catching since (son Will’s) age (7).”

Once Johnson was hired in Boise, where he had distinctive ex-Cub and Red Sox Bill Buckner as his hitting coach, he also learned how to navigate baseball politics. Epstein

brought in own his posse from the Red Sox while hiring some new, younger executives. Eventually, Fleita, the No. 1 confidant of former Cubs GM Jim Hendry, was let go with three years remaining on his contract. But Epstein and new player development chief Jason McLeod retained many of the managers and coaches from the Fleita era.

Johnson did not have to go through a formal indoctrination in the Epstein system.

“Theo, Jed (GM Hoyer) and Jason are really good at what they do,” Johnson said. “They’re such hard workers and detail-oriented guys, just like the best major leaguers are detail-oriented. So they expect the managers and coaches and staff to be very detailed and in tune with the right way to play the game, which is the Cubs’ Way.

“It’s the efficient way of the game, not wasting energy, the way you make turns around the bases, the way you slide, the way you go about your business. Like the Cardinals Way, Dodgers Way, Braves Way. This is just Step One. We’re just getting that ball rolling.”

Patient hitter presides over teaching of patience

Epstein found the right manager to preside over preaching the concept of patience at the plate and working counts, even if that skill is more born than made. Outfielder Albert Almora, Epstein’s first No. 1 Cubs pick in 2012, is a prime candidate to become more patient as he finishes the season in Kane County.

“I think it’s the aptitude you have as a person, your baseball IQ,” Johnson said. “I think guys like Albert can tone it back and learn to be patient, understand situations, pitchers’ tendencies. I was on the other end of the spectrum – unbelievably patient, to a fault. In a minor-league season, I’d have 100, 105 walks. It started when I was in high school, and guys started to pitch around me. I’d lock into the zone, and once you realize it as a player, you can actually get better at that. Some people’s makeup, you’ll never get better.”

“(In 2012) Albert was swinging at balls over his head, or in the dirt. He can shrink the zone. In big leagues, you can start to pitch around a 200-hit player, where pitchers learn to expand the zone.”



Mark Johnson with Lee Tinsley (right), the Cubs' roving outfield/baserunning instructor.

Johnson delegates hitting instruction details to Cougars batting coach Tom Beyers, who “is really good at it...I’ll talk some little things to guys. It’s part of being the Cubs Way. Hands-on, very precise.”

Just then Lee Tinsley, the Cubs’ roving outfield/baserunning instructor, came into the office. Baserunning is another fundamental that left un-mastered results in some Keystone Kops episodes in the majors. Tinsley, with Johnson’s support, has to take the Cougars through different situations when he comes through town.

“Some of the guys who are average baserunners are some of the better baserunners,” Tinsley said. “They have to process a lot of things. They have to really know situations to go from first to third. They have to know it more than a guy who can just flat-out run.

“MJ (Johnson) and I have talked. We’ll get something squared away for working on the field. The more reps you can get, the better for them. Come in and remind them of a lot of the things on the bases. That helps out a ton.”

Too much information or instruction can be detrimental when teaching baserunning situations.

“Most of the scenarios, you don’t want to throw too much at them at one time,” said Tinsley. “You’d rather them focus on one thing and then move to the next, instead of throwing a lot of things together. It kinds of builds up into the total baserunning package.”

More a good cop than tough cop

Johnson is friendly, low key, even-keel. Will Johnson worked a computer at his desk the entire time Dad talked. He’ll maintain that volume of personality the majority of the time as Cougars manager.

“I came up with managers who blew up a lot, (they were) hotheads,” he said. “Now we have a little bit bigger staffs. Before, there was just the manager and trainer. Now we have a hitting coach, pitching coach, player coach, strength guy, video guy, a trainer. In a perfect world, one guy is a bad cop, one guy’s a good cop. Sometimes we’ll flip-flop roles.

“I’m not real good at being really bad. My dad was firm and really demanding. He knew when to pat you on the ass, and kick you in the ass. You’ve got to understand when to be which.”

One time Johnson will show the red side of the posterior is backing up the Cougars in arguments with umpires. In this way, he’s followed the route of Ryne Sandberg, who astounded his fans by getting thrown out of games in his first year managing in Peoria, in the same Midwest League as Kane County, in 2007. Sandberg said he amped up his personality when needed to show the team he was behind them.

So can Johnson be just like Sandberg when needed?

“Absolutely,” he said. “I learned that my first year in Boise. I got thrown out a bunch. As a catcher, I wasn’t buddy-buddy with (umpires), but I was always in their pocket. It was different. I had to really force myself to do it (argue as a manager). I had to think my way through it. But after a few times, you do it. You have to have your players’ back. I was with Ryno in Iowa (in 2010) – I was a player-coach.”

Much lower-decibel conversations take place in this same office at intervals during the season. Just like the players know they’re being watched in person by top brass headquartered only 40 miles away, Johnson knows he won’t have a failure to communicate in person. Epstein and McLeod will pick his brain, and vice versa, with face time.

“We’re lucky we’re that close,” Johnson said. “They’re in here talking and you can feel each other’s sense of what we’re thinking with players and certain situations. It helps these (players), they look in the stands and see Theo, Jason and Brandon (Hyde).

“Back when I was playing at Winston-Salem, the GM shows up, it’s panic setting in as a player. You’re uneasy, you try to do more. Now they’re used to it. They expect someone in the stands, it’s part of the routine. It’s not only good for me, but also good for them, playing in front of the bosses.”

And it’s good for Johnson, working in front of the Cubs brass, to show he can make the conversion, and like it, trading bleeding black for blue.



The Cougars' home clubhouse is as big as the Wrigley Field home locker room used prior to 1984 down the left-field line.