



Don't put all your emotional eggs in prospects' future baskets

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Let the baseball buyer beware.

We're now coming out of the part of spring training where we typically take a leap into our baseball future.

The first half of Arizona and Florida drills feature each team's top prospects working out before they're dispatched to minor-league camps. The only aspect greater than their momentary feats against often second-line pitching in games is the media hype accompanying their very presence.

We scribes and mic jockeys are even more guilty than teams themselves in building up these alleged harbingers of better tomorrows. In reality, a prospect is just a prospect until he becomes a successful, consistent major-leaguer. He's as much of a suspect as a prospect. The only accurate way to gauge a promising young player's ability, and the quality of the player-development system, is when the player is well established in The Show.

For want of better storylines of a team coming off a 101-loss season, shortstop Javier Baez and outfielder Jorge Soler – both of whom require much more minor-league seasoning – have been under the microscope in Cubs camp. Some 30 miles to the west in Glendale, Arizona, infielder Carlos Sanchez has been the recipient of a publicity buildup as if he's a potential Gordon Beckham successor. Fortunately, the White Sox outfield is crowded with veterans, so top outfield prospects Courtney Hawkins and Jared Mitchell have only received moderate raves.



Kip Wells, pictured here with the Nationals, was still bouncing around the majors a decade after he was supposed to lead a wellspring of Sox pitching prospects to the South Side. Photo credit [Cathy I](#)

However, the true measure of a good scouting and farm system is a consistent flow of talent up to the big-league level where four or more players, some of whom don't get the buildup, typically seize regular's roles every season. See Atlanta Braves every season or Minnesota Twins up to the last year or two.

There's not the manic focus on one or two touted prospects as if they are saviors of the organization. In the best systems, there is room for multiple kids to move up without being blocked by too many highly-paid, entrenched veterans. The kids, plural, are expected to seize the moment once promoted to the majors. That has been the key in the Braves being a contender in all but a couple of seasons since 1991.

Too much focus on too few prospects

Where the disappointment has been keen with Chicago teams is twofold: the continual focus on a couple of top prospects as potential superstars and overrating by the new-age analysts of farm systems as among the game's best. Hence the words of caution in hanging one's hopes on Baez, Soler, Sanchez, Hawkins, et. al.

My personal experience of getting ensnared in hype takes me back to Lansing, Mich., and the 97-degree sultry end of July 1999. After nearly a decade of mediocre player development in the post-Dallas Green/Gordon Goldsberry era, the Cubs finally seemed to have turned the corner in reviving their farm system in the fifth season of the Andy MacPhail and Ed Lynch regime. MacPhail even urged me to journey to Michigan's state capital to see the highly-touted prospects playing for the Class A Lugnuts of the Midwest League.



The over-hyped Corey Patterson suffered a double whammy -- he was rushed to the Cubs. Photo credit [Keith Allison](#).

The hype was heavy for the crop of kids led by center fielder Corey Patterson, Korean first baseman Hee Seop-Choi, third baseman David Keltton and catcher Jeff Goldbach. This was lower-A ball, for cryin' out loud, but the Cubs talent assembly line had been so barren folks were looking all the way down into the system for hope. Fans even called the Lansing ballpark urging the Cubs to promote the 19-year-old Patterson to Wrigley Field NOW, even if he couldn't hit yet. Just run fast and snare those fly balls.

I watched the Lugnuts in action, studying the quartet of hyped position-player kids. The pitcher that hot Sunday night was not among the touted prospects. He was an 18-year-old Venezuelan signee named Carlos Zambrano. He pitched well and the Lugnuts won. I didn't think much of Zambrano, though, as I wrote about the Big Four. And over the next two seasons, Zambrano wasn't even rated the Cubs' top pitching prospect. Juan Cruz had that honor, while Zam-

brano was targeted to be converted to the bullpen.

Zambrano only one with long-term success

In the long run, Zambrano, the man lacking the hype, had by far the longest, most successful Cubs career, his histrionics notwithstanding. Cruz became a journeyman pitcher. Patterson suffered a season-ending knee injury in mid-2003 when all his indicators were pointed up, but never was consistent when he came back. Cubs manager Dusty Baker later claimed Patterson was rushed to the majors. Like Cruz, Patterson kept bouncing around the majors, his left-handed bat and speed always getting him an end-of-the-roster spot.

MacPhail constructed his roster to accommodate Choi's eventual promotion as the home-grown power threat. Turned out the signee of Leon Lee, Derrek Lee's father, had a too-long swing for the majors. A collision with Kerry Wood pursuing an infield pop in a big game against the Red Sox at Wrigley Field in 2003 didn't help, either. Choi eventually was traded to Miami for Derrek Lee, then washed out through several other organizations.

Kelton had only a couple of cups of coffee with the Cubs, always thirsting for a third baseman. Goldbach never made it above Double-A for an organization that craved a home-grown catcher.

And yet Baseball America made a famous proclamation at the turn of the millennium: the Cubs had the No. 1-rated farm system in the majors. But the analysis of sabrematians and great thinkers has often proved off-target. None of those position players plugged any holes in Wrigley Field.

Meanwhile, a MacPhail-mandated strategy to emphasize the stockpiling of pitchers backfired. MacPhail believed the excess of arms could be used to trade for other needs. Problem was, virtually none of the arms panned out, leaving the Cubs system short of quality position players, who had to be picked in the higher rounds of the draft or gleaned from Latin American development. MacPhail kept a lid on most signing bonuses, a policy only rectified in the 2011 draft that yielded Baez. The end result was a barren farm system that greeted Theo Epstein, Jed Hoyer and Jason McLeod upon assuming control of Cubs baseball operations going into 2012.

Lots of Sox arms that did not pan out

The Sox also were victims of over-hyping and over-rating.

Recall how the South Side farm system was touted as one of baseball's best, a wave of talent ready to replenish the 2000 AL Central title roster when needed. To be sure, the Sox had done a relatively good job developing quality position players starting with the 1988 draft that snared third baseman Robin Ventura. Frank Thomas came in the 1989 draft. Second baseman Ray Durham and center fielder Mike Cameron were signed in 1990 and 1991, respectively. Latin scouting produced outfielders Magglio Ordonez in 1991 and Carlos Lee in 1994. The Cubs surely were envious of that record.

By 2000, the Sox supposedly had a long line of pitchers being prepped for delivery to U.S. Cellular Field, drawing the Baseball America raves: Kip Wells, Matt Ginter, Josh Fogg, Dan Wright, Josh Stewart, Rocky Biddle, and so on. They were the next waves after home-grown rotation mainstays Mike Sirotko, James Baldwin and Jim Parque. But of all these arms, the only home-grown Sox who had a long-term impact was a 38th-round pick in 1998: Mark Buehrle. The crafty lefty, a near-afterthought middle-inning reliever in his first half-season with the Sox in 2000, won 19 games two years later as one of baseball's most durable starters. At the same time, all the Sox's top-five pitching draft choices either moved on to become journeymen or washouts.

The 2005 World Series staff was populated mostly by imports from other organizations. Fortunately, the Sox got tremendous mileage in '05 by two home-grown position players: third baseman Joe Crede and center fielder Aaron Rowand.

Moral of the story centers around Buehrle. The player who does not receive the buildup is the one who can succeed without the outside pressure descending on him or the potential disappointment felt by fans and media.

That's why both the Cubs and Sox are mandated to develop top farm systems. That way, the focus is not on just one or two players trying to make the huge jump from Double- or Triple-A to big-league success. The Buehrles of the world are great stories. But a bountiful Braves-like crop, where the focus is not on savior-hood by a singular talent, is the only way to go.



Unheralded kids, like 38th-round pick Mark Buehrle, have less pressure and hype coming up. Photo credit Sliver7 on Wikimedia Commons.