



A little bit of the Cubs will stay with lifetime-secure Dodger Rich Hill

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Rich Hill finally possesses lifetime security as a Los Angeles Dodger, some 3,000 miles away from his home in Boston. A ballplayer likely will go to the ends of the Earth to get \$48 million guaranteed for the next three years.

Hill will make \$18 million at age 39 in 2019. Such is the price of pitching in the 2010s. Yet imagine if the Cubs were paying him.

The stylish lefty signed for considerably less as a fourth-round Cubs draft choice out of the University of Michigan in 2002. Fighting through doubters, namely Ozzie Guillen, to a spot in the Cubs playoff rotation in 2007, Hill found himself spun out of the organization by early 2009. That trade to the Orioles for essentially nothing started him on a seven-year-long stop-and-start journey, testing his own philosophy of “delayed gratification,” until he finally found stability and a contract jackpot in 2016.

He has found that if you have come up in Chicago, sport any kind of middling profile in Wrigley Field, you are branded for life with a Cubs connection. And that identification in the Hill household is exemplified in Hill’s son Brice, whom dad says “swings the hell out of the bat” in backyard father-son duels. “He’s got a really good swing. He’s already better than me.

“We were naturally pulling for the Indians, because we had just lost to the Cubs,” Hill said of loyalties of most of his family, including wife Caitlin, during the World Series. “But our son was pulling for the Cubs. He’s 5 years old, he wants the Cubs to win. So every time the Cubs would score, he was so excited. It was so funny, though.”

Hill lost Game 3 of the Division Series against the Diamondbacks in Wrigley Field in 2007, part of a two-year postseason flop that stained Lou Piniella’s Cubs managerial record. After beating the Cubs in Dodger Stadium in Game 3 of the NLCS last October, he looked forward to a triumphant playoff return to Wrigley Field to clinch a World Series berth for Los Angeles.



Rich Hill now has lifetime security with \$18 million due at age 39.

“I had us winning Game 7,” he said with a laugh. That contest was scheduled as Hill’s start if Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw had pitched to form in Game 6. Instead, the Cubs roughed up Kershaw to book their own date with destiny.

A part of Hill will always have a Cubs identification beyond the preferences of Brice.

“Coming up with the Cubs, there always was a lot of goodwill,” Hill said. “I was excited to get the opportunity against the Cubs. I came up with that team through pro baseball. You learned the game of pro baseball in the organization. For good or for bad, it was the ups and the downs you learned. I learned a lot of valuable lessons.”

Patience is prudence

The most prominent lesson had to be patience. He’s fortunate – lefties with good stuff, in Hill’s case a crackling curveball, have nine lives. Hill has used up about seven. He has survived Tommy John surgery, labrum (shoulder) surgery, three separate stints with his childhood favorite Red Sox without a long-term commitment, service on seven other big-league teams and burying his ego to pitch briefly with an independent team in 2015.

Hill got the reward with a startling career revival last season on the Oakland Athletics after the Red Sox declined to re-sign him off an impressive September 2015. The top starter on the market at mid-season, he was traded to the Dodgers, whom he helped pitch into the postseason.

“It was being patient to stick with the process and getting my body overall healthy and strong to get back to starting,” Hill said. “It was making that commitment on a daily basis to becoming an elite starting in the major leagues.

“Anybody who does anything of substance, if you want to continue to do something great, you have to stick with it. It just doesn’t happen overnight. Look at me – (succeeding) a decade later. If you’re passionate about it and bring a certain amount of intensity on a daily basis, things will work out. And you have a love for whatever you do. Sometimes you go through these creative ruts, right, even when you’re writing there’s times it’s not as creatively plentiful as you want.



Rich Hill was a rare left-hander coming all the way through the Cubs organization.

“As much as you inevitably prepare, you’re going to have disappointments. It’s staying in a good routine and persevering through those tough times. There is light at the end of the tunnel. You’re not the first and you’re not the last to fail.”

Hill actually succeeded coming up with the Cubs. But his long, meandering trip through the majors began in a wrong-place, wrong-time situation in Wrigley.

Nearing big-league delivery in 2005-06, Hill had a reputation as a strikeout pitcher with his developing curve.

He was a rare left-hander developed out of the Cubs organization. The team had gone multiple seasons consecutively without a regular southpaw in the rotation.

But to first stick around, Hill had to survive controversy not of his doing as a rookie. He was the Cubs pitcher on the mound when batterymate Michael Barrett and A.J. Pierzynski engaged in their famous brawl at the plate at then-U.S. Cellular Field on May 20, 2006.

Hill incurred Guillen's wrath

Hill called Pierzynski's role in the brawl "gutless." In the middle of some infamous mouth-running that netted Ozzie Guillen mandated sensitivity training from then-commissioner Bud Selig, the Sox manager fired back at Hill.

"Tell that Triple-A (bleep) to shut the (bleep) up," Guillen said. "Tell him to start throwing some strikes or he's going to get Dusty (Baker) fired."

Guillen's verbal attack helped teach Hill to let criticism roll off his back.

"Your performance silences everybody," he said. "You cannot sit there and have malice toward numbers. If I was ever in coaching, how can I make that (criticized) player the best that I can make him? They can't sway their focus outside the task at hand and what we're trying to accomplish as a unit. You have nay-sayers, you're going to have doubters. They'll always be there.

"Your ability to pitch and perform silences everybody. There's no argument to that. You go out there, perform well, nobody can argue about that. What are you trying to accomplish (other than) win the World Series?"

The 7-0 loss to the Sox dropped Hill's record to 0-4, but he recovered to finish 6-7 amid the wreck of the Cubs' '06 season. Baker departed, replaced by Piniella, who would keep Hill on a somewhat short leash due to sporadic control lapses. The quickest way to change Sweet Lou's disposition to sour was not throwing consistent strikes.

Hill improved enough to become the Cubs' third starter in 2007. Sometimes he threw too-good strikes with 27 homers yielded in 195 innings. But he held his walks to 63 while striking out 183, ending up 11-8 in 32 starts.

But his control broke down along with his physical condition starting out 2008 in the rotation. He walked 18 in his 19 2/3 innings over five starts, including four of the first six batters in a May 2 outing against the Cardinals. Piniella was supremely aggravated. Optioned to Iowa, he was soon shelved due a stiff back. Continued muscle problems limited him to 13 starts.

Quick hook from Hendry

In the panicked front-office atmosphere after the infamous three-game Division Series sweep by the Dodgers in 2008, Cubs GM Jim Hendry, obviously with Piniella's input, made some ill-advised moves.

Worst was signing recalcitrant free agent Milton Bradley. But Hendry pulled a quick hook on Hill, trading him to the Orioles for a player to be named later just before spring training in 2009. Despite his ailments, a lefty with his stuff should have commanded a certifiable big-league player or a prime prospect. The Cubs started an organizational slide that culminated in Theo Epstein's hiring after the 2011 season.

Hill knows the best organizations do not make panicked moves like those that were too common in Cubs annals.

"I love the way (Bill) Belichick goes about his coaching style," he said. "Some people don't like his style. But they've been successful for over a decade and a half for a reason. When you look at the Patriots and the San Antonio Spurs, they don't panic. When (Tom) Brady is out for the first four games, they don't panic. The Spurs didn't panic when Tim Duncan went down. Those great organizations say a lot about what consistency is really is. Look at Gregg Popovich. He's brilliant at what he does."

Hill would go on to bounce among the Orioles, Yankees, Angels and Indians, converting to a sidearm delivery for his mostly bullpen duties. He also was in the Cardinals and Nationals organizations, but did not make big-league appearances for those teams. He spent two weeks with the independent Atlantic League's Long Island Ducks, making two starts in mid-summer 2015.

Just as strange as the enforced fast departure from the Cubs was his trio of stints with the Red Sox, for whom he rooted from the Fenway Park bleachers in the 1990s. Hill was signed by three different Boston baseball bosses – Epstein, Ben Cherington and Dave Dombrowski. In 2012, he had a 1.83 ERA in 19 2/3 relief innings (over 25 games) with 21 strikeouts. In September 2015, he was 2-1 with one shutout in four Red Sox starts, allowing just five walks and 14 hits while striking out 36 in 29 innings. Dombrowski made just as big of an error as Hendry in allowing Hill to get away again.

Red Sox supportive amid tragedy

Hill has no hard feelings toward the Red Sox repeatedly thwarting his desire to pitch long-term in his hometown. Just the opposite. He is grateful to the team's support after his second son, Brooks, died of "multiple health issues" nearly three months after his December 26, 2013 birth. The Red Sox allowed Hill to report late to spring training in 2014 due to the tragedy.

With Dombrowski passing on Hill (and later trading away a mint for Chris Sale), Oakland's Billy Beane eagerly snapped up the well-traveled lefty to start 2016. He was rewarded with a 9-3 record and 2.25 before flipping Hill and outfielder Josh Reddick to the Dodgers at the trade deadline.



Three stints with his hometown Red Sox did not produce a long-term deal for Rich Hill.
Photo Credit: [Keith Allison](#)

Hill always desired a return to starting. To ensure that role, he further perfected his trademark curveball and increasing the frequency of his use. Asked when he mastered the curve, Hill joked, “It’s taken 10 years (since his major-league debut).”

Actually, the tinkering with Uncle Charlie goes back to Hill’s youth pitching days. He learned from his brother, Lloyd Hill, “a really good pitcher” who went to college in Maine.

“I developed the ability to spin the ball,” he said. “It was a fortunate gift I was given. Some have a 100 mph fastball, I had the gift to spin the baseball. I don’t know if it’s hit its peak.”

The Hill curveball breaks so many ways, almost like making the sign of the cross, that he has developed a nickname – “The Bishop.”

“I have much more creativity with my curveball now than at any time in my career,” he said. “It comes down to feel. Being able to have an extremely good feel for the pitch, I’m able to change the shape of it. I’m able to throw multiple curveballs off of one grip.

“My whole idea is you have a really good pitch, it’s above average and other guys haven’t really seen that pitch, why not use it more creatively? Why not change the shape of it? Why not mix speeds with it? It enhances everything else.”

Always a thinking man’s pitcher, Hill might make a good pitching coach in the 2020s. He is not bound to stereotyped ways.



Rich Hill fine-tuned his curveball as an Oakland starter in 2016.
Photo Credit: [Keith Allison](#)

Pitching backward – or upward?

“One thing we’re always taught is pitch down in the zone, right?” he asked. “But if we have the top of the strike one and it’s used the way it should be used, for strike calling, we can use high curveballs with high fastballs.

“When you use a high fastball and get a guy to swing at it, the next time around, they’re thinking I’m going to lay off that high fastball. You throw a curve that’s up in the zone, they see fastball, they lay off of it, and it drops in for a strike. Or they see fastball up and they can’t distinguish it. So they say, it could be curveball and I got to swing. So they’re late on the fastball or they’re taking an emergency hack on the curveball. The thinking of pitching has to be three-dimensional at the plate.

“He doesn’t get the ball down,” Hill said, repeating the statement for emphasis, “but you’re looking at it one-dimensionally? That’s the way I think about it. Great sinker-slider guys can pitch down in the zone – but they can also pitch up in the zone.”

As a Dodger, Hill now can talk pitching with Hall of Famer Sandy Koufax, turning 81 and the franchise's elder statesman. Asked decades ago what was his best pitch, Koufax replied, "Strike one."

Hill agreed.

"I had a bullpen coach once," he said. "One of his rules was if you go 1-0, go 1-1 and you're done. Don't panic, you're never out of it. Stick with the process, things will work out. I really believe it. You know if you're giving the best effort every time you go out there, nobody can judge that. Nobody can put a monitor on you that you can dog it."

Hill's standards are exacting. He is no fan of the "quality start" – three runs or fewer allowed in six innings.

Not backer of quality-start concept

"I remember games I pitched in Wrigley," he said. "You pitched five or six innings, give up three runs and sit there, everyone says that was a good game, you get the W. But only I knew that wasn't a good game. I could have pitched better, I could have done more. That was something you learn over time. There is no tomorrow when you're pitching."

Speaking of tomorrows, Hill won't project to yet another contract at age 40. He firmly believed he has his hands full with living, and working, in the moment.

"I can't put a time frame on it," he said. "Say, I want to pitch till I'm 45. But I can only tell you what I'm doing today. Most advantageous you can be is staying in the moment. Trying to be as successful as you can with the time we have."

"The people who are most successful understand that concept of time and understand time is fleeting. If you focus on what you want to be successful at, and take something and put it in motion, you want to make the most of it. The only thing I can do is look forward to spring training. And when the season comes around, look at it one day at a time. Use good or bad things that have happened in that (pitching) motion. The future, you can't predict."

"The pitch that is going to happen, you have no control over it. The pitch that already happened, you have no control over it. And even after you let that pitch leave your hand, you have no control. You've got to be ready to play defense."

Hill's career indeed threw a lot of curveballs at him. But if this is his last contract, you can safely say he's finishing well.