

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Analyst Jackson sees confidence as key Sox bullpen issue

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A prominent big-league broadcaster once told me I should have pursued play-by-play work.

Problem was, that ship long had sailed. Plus, I likely wasn't good enough, despite an enunciating-ready voice. I am where I'm supposed to be.



Darrin Jackson.

But, say, I had become a baseball broadcaster. I don't know how I could have kept my cool during three consecutive season-crushing late-inning defeats of the kind the White Sox suffered the Memorial Day weekend in Kansas City.

The hapless 1962 Mets with pitchers seemingly pulled off the streets likely would have held one of the three leads the Sox had carefully nurtured into the eighth inning. A '62 Met moment surely took place when the since-demoted Tommy Kahnle threw a wild pitch on an intentional walk during the May 28 ninth-inning meltdown, a seven-run ninth that was the Royals' greatest last-inning comeback ever.

Obviously, Darrin Jackson has a much stronger mental constitution. When I spoke to him in a quiet moment before he left for CitiField in New York the other day, he revealed that the professional and personal must be separated even in the worst of circumstances. As Sox radio radio color commentator, he is charged with analyzing, not ranting. "DJ" cannot take the opposite tact of Hawk Harrelson, whose silences are telling when the Sox go off the rails.

“At this time, my friend, you have to separate emotional and personal feelings, and just report,” said Jackson. “In the end it’s easy to become emotional that things are very good (such as in the Sox’s 23-10 start). When things are going bad, you can’t go in that direction, either. I can’t be brought down when things are doing differently. And you don’t make it personal.”

I wanted to get the take of “DJ” on a truly epic collapse. No. 1, he’s a nearly-three-decade friend. No. 2, he could not leave the booth in disgust during any of the Royals series’ bullpen fiascos. No. 3, he made his big-league debut as an outfielder during a 13-game losing streak that broke the back of the Cubs’ 1985 season just when it seemed a repeat of the 1984 breakthrough season was at hand.

Out of the heat of the moment, Jackson knows about the value of confidence. By the time the Sox charter winged its way to New York after the last blown lead, the confidence level of the bullpen likely was at an all-time low.

“You look out there that a guy is not confident,” he said. “Right now there are guys with low confidence. That’s what’s frustrating, the bullpen had best ERA in baseball in April. They’re not pitching with confidence, it’s ball 1, ball 2, and now I really have to throw a strike.”

Foes can smell a wavering bullpen at 60 paces.

“When an opponent looks across the field, they know if you are confident,” Jackson said. “As a batter, you can look at the pitcher, there’s a look between the two about whether he’s confident, or you’re confident.

Maddux tested confidence of all

He cited his own experience against the most confidence-busting pitcher of modern times. Greg Maddux, DJ’s early-career Cubs teammate, was the smartest man in baseball and a slam-dunk mentalist, overpowering hitters with his cerebral approach to pitching.

Normally, Jackson repeated the mantra of too many hitters facing Maddux: “Is he reading my mind?” Mad Dog thus had most of the battle won against mentally-distracted hitters. Even Tony Gwynn suggested the typical Maddux moving fastball that headed toward lefty hitters, only to break over the inside corner, was best taken in favor of a later-sequenced pitch over the plate.

But one time Jackson, on the positive end of confidence, was truly smoking when he moved on from the Cubs to the San Diego Padres. No one could beat him in that streak – not even The Master.

“I was swinging the bat so well, I got a rocket past his head,” he said of Maddux. “I got two hits off him. My timing and everything, it didn’t matter who was pitching.”

Also based on DJ's playing experiences, teammates can take it upon themselves to bolster sagging confidences. He cited an example of a minor-league starter who was "busting his ass" amid a team slump. DJ told him he would not let him down.

"As an individual, I would go up to the pitcher and tell him, *'I will get you a run today!'*" he recalled. "You get a walk, steal second, steal third. I was always a guy when things are hitting rock bottom, I'd try to figure it out."

The critical challenge of the Sox is to prevent three days in Kansas City from undoing all the good of a 23-10 start that promised to bring back often-absent South Side fans. Unfortunately, on both sides of Chicago, mega-slumps have ruined seasons. Teams simply could not get their early mojo back.



Closer David Robertson (left) and since-demoted Tommy Kahnle could not have been brimming with confidence blowing a six-run ninth-inning Sox lead on May 28.

We mentioned the bakers' dozen loss streak of 1985. A 12-game, out-of-nowhere losing streak in June 1970 wrecked a 35-25 Cubs start. Looking to improve, the 1975 Cubs started 20-10. They basically packed it in during June and finished with just 75 victories. And so on in Cubs annals...

Sox sent '99 Cubs reeling

Including 1999, when the Sox themselves played the part of the Royals. A rebuilding team under Jerry Manuel charged into Wrigley Field and swept the Cubs three in a row in mid-June. The momentum was thus thrown totally in reverse. The 32-25 Cubs start quickly melted away. The team was under .500 by July 1 and eventually sank all the way to 95 losses.

The 1976 Sox were an underrated nosediver in team history. Acquitting themselves seemingly well at 27-22 in early June in Bill Veeck's return to Chicago, the Paul Richards-managed club then lost 10 in a row to fall under .500...and kept falling all the way to 97 losses.

Baseball's indeed a cruel game. But failure can also be counterbalanced by sudden success. Jackson is by no means giving up. The AL Central continues to be eminently winnable with the Royals banged up and the Indians' offense a bit questionable supporting stellar starting pitching.

Jackson said embattled manger Robin Ventura did not throw any of the errant pitches for the combustible bullpen nor pop up with runners in scoring position. That said, "Managing is really managing individuals, and getting them corrected as soon as possible."

Can the Sox defy history and not let a downslide wreck a season with four months to go? The answer to that question will make it worth listening to Jackson's analysis as the weather heats up.