



Sox stand to outshine champion Cubs at winter meetings

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Finally...the White Sox will steal some thunder from the world-champion Cubs.

That is, if team brass is serious about remaking the team starting at the winter meetings in Washington, D.C. starting Sunday, Dec. 4.

There is work to be done and big names to dangle for comprehensive player packages for the tag team of baseball boss Kenny Williams and GM Rick Hahn. The Sox need to re-stock the major-league roster with young position players after too many years of trade/free-agent patchwork and non-productive talent flow from the farm system.

The Cubs already tinkered with their makeup by signing free-agent center fielder Jon Jay, ostensibly to replace likely departing incumbent Dexter Fowler and platoon with second-year Albert Almora. Theo Epstein and Jed Hoyer will generate headlines simply because they run the champs, but they cannot possibly outshine the Sox in the sheer magnitude of a deal as they attempt to improve the Cubs around the fringes in DC.

With quality free-agent starting pitchers in short supply, Williams and Hahn will have no shortage of tire-kickers if they dangle Chris Sale and Jose Quintana. Sale is one of the Top 10, sometimes Top 5, starters in the game. Quintana is a strong No. 2 starter, good enough to be most teams' top left-hander. Perennial contenders like the Red Sox, Dodgers and Rangers need another impact starter and have bountiful farm systems from which to draw talent.

The question will be how much the Sox can command for Sale, Quintana and position players like Todd Frazier, Melky Cabrera and even Jose Abreu, if the Sox are really committed to turning over a new leaf.



The Sox have to balance the marketability of Chris Sale (left) and Jose Quintana with not demanding too much in return to keep good relations with other teams.

The Sox cannot come off as being greedy, holding out for one more blue chipper in a package of MLB-ready players and prospects coming back to Chicago. Williams and Hahn have to maintain good diplomatic relations with their counterparts with other teams to either complete their desired deals or to dicker in future transactions.

Although contending teams crave for ace-quality lefties like Sale and rotation stalwarts such as Quintana, they also want to filter home-grown position players to jobs with the parent club to freshen the roster and keep costs under control. The bloom was officially off the rose in stocking teams with high-priced free agents after the Yankees crafted a mid-season rebuild for the first time in team annals last July, as Aroldis Chapman and Andrew Miller both departed.

Sale is particularly attractive with just \$38.5 million owed over the final three years of his contract, a bargain by 2010s starting pitching compensation standards. But he cannot turn around the Sox pitching every fifth day. He'll end up like Quintana with a slew of no-decisions and low-run losses if the Sox offense continues its laggard ways.

Three or four young position players to join home-grown shortstop Tim Anderson in the lineup, with more stationed in the pipeline for consideration in upcoming years, will change the tenor of the Sox. More importantly, the refreshing of the roster will win the loyalty of disgruntled fans. Attendance at Guaranteed Rate Field may not rise while the kids learn on the job.. But increased interest and hope among the faithful will generate future ticket sales when the new mix finally wins.

Third baseman Frazier will draw interest for a team desiring to plug a hole at third with a power threat perfect for the No. 5 or 6 lineup slot. Cabrera provides a complementary left-handed outfield bat. And if the Sox want to go all the way in trading Abreu, a host of contending teams can use a first baseman with 30-homer, 100-RBI, .300 potential.

Soler Cubs' odd man out

With Jay on board, the Cubs' main winter-meetings task will be to gauge the market for Jorge Soler, who really has no position if Kyle Schwarber is projected as the full-time starting left fielder. Although Soler has shown some holes in both his swing, defensive prowess and attitude, he still has youth, strength and affordability in his corner.

An intriguing possibility was put forth by our good friend Bruce Levine: pitching Soler to the Tampa Bay Rays for possibly Chris Archer, whom the Cubs had dispatched five years ago for Matt Garza. The low-budget Rays could always use a bat like Soler's while dealing Archer before he gets more expensive. Epstein and Hoyer are casting about for a solid rotation producer after rightly letting Jason Hammel walk, and looking ahead to a 2018 without Jake Arrieta and John Lackey. In fact, a No. 4 pitcher type might be needed immediately if Lackey continues to show his apparent age in the coming season.



Chris Archer is a logical trade target for the Cubs.

Pundits throw out Almora and Javy Baez's names as additional trade bait. But the logical thinking is Epstein and Hoyer will hang onto their prime young position players, especially with the defensive skills of Almora and Baez.

If a young player like either of these two is traded, then Ben Zobrist is a 145-games-a-year starter at 35, going on 36 next May. Although Zobrist is tight with manager Joe Maddon, he's best deployed as a kind of ninth regular position player, shifting between the infield and outfield, and playing five out of seven games.

Bottom line is both the Sox and Cubs will keep your interest in DC. Better than worrying about who will be the next backup Bears receiver to drop a pass in the end zone.