



Ruggiano's time with Dawson shows Cubs should bring back the Hawk to Wrigley Field

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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The hope is in how much time personable outfielder Justin Ruggiano is allotted to draw a Cubs paycheck before he's flipped for a younger player or two, he might recount his own experience with Hall of Famer Andre Dawson to his bosses

Amid the chaos that has been the Florida Marlins the past three years – through the Ozzie Guillen and payroll expansion debacles, through wrenching management upheaval – a one constant has been the steady presence of ex-Cub Dawson. Working alongside fellow Hall of Famer Tony Perez and Jeff “Mr. Marlin” Conine as special assistants to Marlins president David Samson, Dawson provided a commanding presence as a senior mentor to young and veteran players alike.



One of new Cub Justin Ruggiano's best Miami memories was working with Andre Dawson on outfield play.

Ruggiano, who had one decent and one fair season in 2012-13 in Miami, came away from his tenure in the sub-tropics wiser for the time after working with Dawson.

“No question,” Ruggiano asked if he got enough perspective on baseball from Dawson. “‘Hawk’ and I probably worked the most together, especially in the outfield. I picked his brain non-stop. He probably got tired of me.”

“He was an incredible player and I remember watching in awe about the things he could do in the field. To compare myself or any part of my game to what he did, it’s not even a fair comparison. But I always wanted to try to learn from him and his techniques. The biggest thing was how he threw the ball from the outfield. That’s one thing I really worked on tirelessly during last season and the year before.”

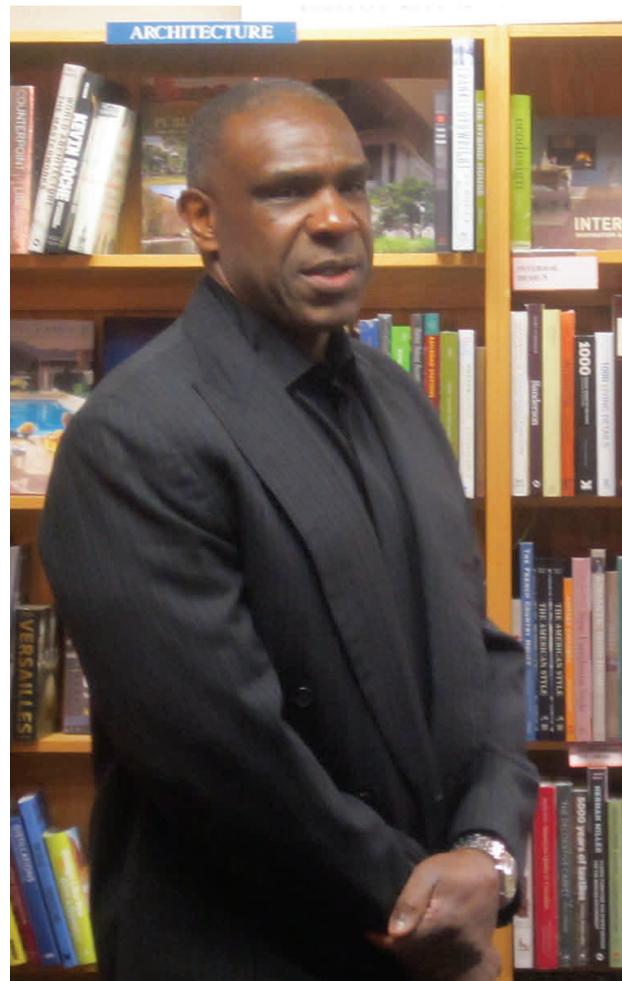
'91 WGN tape shows Dawson's 'cannon'

The best instructional video on Dawson's outfield work can be found in WGN-TV's archives. On Thursday, June 13, 1991, I took daughter Laura and a few of the neighborhood children to Wrigley Field on the day school let out for the summer (the kids were dismissed before noon). They got the ultimate treat. The Giants' Tony Perezchica was sent in to pinch-run for Will Clark as the potential tying run in the ninth inning. With one out, Mike Kingery flied to Dawson in medium right. Leading off third, Perezchica obviously hadn't paid a lot of attention to Dawson tape. He took off for home. Dawson gunned down Perezchica at the plate to complete the 4-3 Cubs victory.

Although he's never previously lived in Chicago, Ruggiano quickly picked up on what made Dawson so well-respected in his six memorable Cubs seasons that helped pave his way to Hall of Fame induction in 2010. There were the eight Gold Glove awards that formed the basis for Ruggiano listening to every word from the dignified Dawson. He knows all about Dawson's 49-homer, 137-RBI Most Valuable Player season for the Cubs in 1987, amassed after Dawson signed a blank contract just to hook on with his team of choice.

"It's too bad he had to play on the (Montreal artificial) turf so long, and probably banged up his knees," Ruggiano said. "He could have extended his career longer. I got nothing but respect for him and his career. It's a little surreal for me to be able to play in Wrigley Field as my home park due to all the greats who have played here, (Dawson) included."

Given such a glowing endorsement of Dawson's instructional and motivational work, Theo Epstein and his Cubs front-office posse ought to finally look into ways to hire Dawson away from the Marlins. The feeling would be more than mutual. When Dawson visited The Book Stall bookstore in Winnetka in the spring of 2012 to promote his new book, he revealed he'd be enthused about a chance to work for the Cubs again.



Andre Dawson when he visited Winnetka's Book Stall bookstore in 2012 and expressed a desire to work for the Cubs again.

Working for the Marlins post-career for Dawson was a no-brainer. He's a lifelong Miami resident. He finished his career with the Marlins in 1995-96, a tour of duty that included an emotional sendoff at Wrigley Field in his final visit as a player in Aug. '96.

But Dawson has always regarded Chicago as his second, adopted home. He rigged his schedule so he'd always make the road trip back to Chicago – and that included the Marlins' trips to U.S. Cellular Field.

Dawson in Wrigley, Daytona, Kane Co.?



Cubs owner Laura Ricketts, who watched Dawson in his prime from the Wrigley Field bleachers.

If the Cubs came calling for his services, Dawson certainly could provide his instructional services on homestands (please, not in April!), on the team's annual visit to Miami and at several other road stops. Since the minor leagues are so critical to the Epstein program, Dawson could duplicate his Marlins' farm-club instructional assignments. High-A affiliate Daytona of the Florida State League is a few hours' drive north of Miami. While he's in Chicago, he could swing by Geneva, home of the Kane County Cougars, the Cubs' Midwest League affiliate.

Dawson's loyalty to the Cubs and acknowledgement of the franchise's role in preserving his career and boosting him to Cooperstown is unquestioned. He had to accept the Hall of Fame's mandate that since he spent more years in Montreal (10 full seasons compared to the six at Wrigley Field), he'd be depicted in his Expos cap on his Cooperstown plaque.

Yet when Dawson promoted the book *If You Love This Game...An MVP's Life in Baseball* at The Book Stall, he revealed his firm loyalties by using a photo of himself as a Cub on the book jacket.

"I didn't have a final say on the Cubs hat," he said. "But I had a choice on the cover of this book."

Long-range plans by the Chicago Baseball Museum call for honoring Dawson as a Cub in his own exhibit when the museum's brick-and-mortar home is built.

Dawson turns 60 this season. That's as good of a connection to a personal milestone to bring him back to Wrigley Field. Epstein has just started high school in Brookline, Mass., rooting for the Red Sox, when Dawson's won the 1987 MVP award. He was still

in Harvard during Dawson's 1993-94 tenure with the Red Sox when he was nearing the end of his career. So the emotional impression of watching Dawson's heroics and his impact on his fellow Cubs is obviously dampened.

The push to corral the Hawk thus ought to come from the Ricketts family. All four Ricketts siblings watched Dawson's prime from the Wrigley Field bleachers during and after their college days in Chicago. They "salaamed" to Dawson like thousands of other grateful fans.

Throughout the Ricketts ownership tenure, the likes of Hall of Famer Fergie Jenkins, Rick Sutcliffe, Kerry Wood and Mark Prior have been tapped to instruct Cubs players and talk to younger prospects. Hall of Famer Billy Williams, still retaining the title of special assistant, is frequently in attendance at Wrigley Field.

Yet Dawson working in a regular role would top all of the above in impact.

The ultimate endorsement came from legendary Cubs clubhouse boss Yosh Kawano. Shy and often tight-lipped, reluctant to pose for photos, Kawano readily agreed to pose with Dawson on the Marlins' annual Wrigley Field visit on Sept. 10, 2004. There was a good reason.

To Yosh, the Hawk was the best man he ever had in the clubhouse in a half century.

So if Ricketts and Epstein want to follow up on Ruggiano's report, they have a simple title to bestow on Dawson: attitude coach. There's no better expert to teach baseball the right way than ol' No. 8.



Andre Dawson always smiles when he returns to Wrigley Field. Longtime Cubs clubhouse boss Yosh Kawano, at left, shared that happiness in meeting Dawson and posing for a rare photo on Sept. 10, 2004.