



Eloy Jimenez shows his hitting form in his first game in the Sox organization, for the Winston-Salem Dash (Photo by Larry Kave/Myrtle Beach Pelicans).

Baseball played second fiddle to basketball in Jimenez's athletic start

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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For a kid who loved basketball first in the Dominican Republic, Eloy Jimenez has turned into a pretty good baseball player.

Enough to be the centerpiece in the White Sox's desired return package from the Cubs for lefty Jose Quintana.

"I started playing at 9 years old," said the strapping 6-foot-4 outfielder, now 20, in his first interview – through translator Billy Russo – with Chicago media since the July 13 blockbuster crosstown trade.

"It was my father who introduced me to baseball. I used to play basketball, my favorite sport. My father said I needed to play another sport. It wasn't as fun as it is now."

"Fun" meant status as the top Cubs position player prospect not yet in the majors. Sox general manager Rick Hahn started with Jimenez in his talks with counterpart Theo Epstein of the Cubs. He expanded the deal with top-rated pitching prospect Dylan Cease, first baseman Matt Rose and infielder Bryan Flete.

Hahn rated Jimenez, the No. 1-ranked international signing in the summer of 2013 by MLB.com, as a “middle-of-the order impact bat. ‘Plus’ bat speed...feel for the barrel and uses the whole field. ‘Plus’ defender on the corner.”

Jimenez won't go into that specific detail when asked to give a self-description of himself.

“I am a happy player, a hard-working player....I just like to work hard,” he said.

Jimenez showed how hard he worked, impressing the Sox right off the bat, literally. In his first game for high-Class-A Winston-Salem of the Carolina League on the same day he was traded, Jimenez drove in two runs in the third to give the Dash a 2-1 lead over his previous Cubs team. He later scored the winning run in the Dash's 3-2 victory.

Jimenez impressed so much in his first three Cubs seasons he earned a full biographical entry in the team's 2017 media guide.

Jiménez is a career .293 hitter with 64 doubles, 32 home runs, 173 RBIs, 137 runs scored and a .841 OPS in 252 games over his pro career.

A native of Santo Domingo, he was named the Cubs' minor league player of the year and Midwest League Most Valuable Player in 2016 after hitting .329 with 40 doubles, 14 homers, 81 RBIs, 65 runs scored and a .532 slugging percentage in 112 games with Midwest League low-Class A South Bend. He also was a Northwest League All-Star with Class A Eugene in 2015.

Through the trade this season, Jimenez batted .271 with eight home runs, 32 RBIs and 23 runs scored over 42 games this season with high-Class A Myrtle Beach in the Carolina League. He missed the first six weeks of the season with a right shoulder injury, but rebounded to earn a spot on the World Team at the All-Star Futures Game for the second consecutive season.

“It hasn't been as difficult as I could have expected,” Jimenez said of his injury recovery. “It's taken me time where I get to the point where I feel comfortable.”

The Cubs touted him all along. But that did not mean he was immune from being moved on to another organization. Whenever he makes the majors, Jimenez can trade stories with John Smoltz, now a Fox baseball analyst. Smoltz was a Detroit Tigers minor-leaguer when traded to the Atlanta Braves in 1987 for pitcher Doyle Alexander. The latter fellow is a trivia footnote while Smoltz is in the Hall of Fame.

Good education in baseball as a business

Jimenez thus got a good education in the business of baseball, and its thick politics.

“I was surprised at the beginning,” he said of the trade. “You never know where you're going to find happiness.”

Jimenez will always credit the Cubs for his positive start in pro baseball.

“I want to thank all of them in the Cubs organization,” he said. “They treated me as part of their family, as a son to them. I’m thankful for all the good things they did for me. This is just another step forward to me.”

Jimenez now has to get used to an entirely new set of teammates and coaches. Yoan Moncada is the only one of the other top Sox products gathered from other organizations about which Jimenez has some decent familiarity. Moncada and Jimenez played together in the Futures Game.

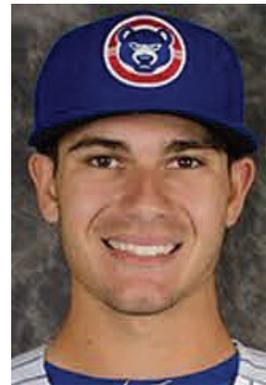
“He’s a quiet guy, a bashful guy,” Jimenez said of Moncada. “He didn’t say too much. But he has a hard work ethic. All business. You can see him focus on the game. At the same time, he’s a nice guy. It’s fun to be around him.”

While Jimenez’s progress now will be charted alongside that of Moncada and recent Cuban signee Luis Robert, the arrival of the 21-year-old Cease, the Cubs’ No. 6 prospect going into the season, will also be measured against the likes of 100 mph-throwing Michael Kopech and other forthcoming young Sox pitchers.

Hahn’s staff liked Cease coming out of high school in Georgia in the 2014 draft.

“The Cubs beat us to the punch in getting him done for I believe a million-five in the sixth round,” Hahn said. He rated the right-hander as a “potential front-end-of-the-rotation starter....three ‘plus’ pitches.”

Cease was 1-2 with a 2.79 ERA, 74 strikeouts and a .214 opponents average over 13 starts this season with Class A South Bend. He has allowed one or no runs eight times and three hits or less 10 times while averaging 12.9 strikeouts per nine innings. Cease threw six hitless innings on April 19 at Great Lakes and struck out 10 batters over 4 2/3 innings on April 29 at Fort Worth.



GM Rick Hahn was interested in Dylan Cease in the 2014 draft, but the Cubs beat the Sox to the right-hander.