



Two key men in the revival of the Cubs home-grown player pipeline: amateur scouting director Matt Dorey (left) and Jason McLeod, senior vice president of scouting/player development.

## ***Hype machine for Kris Bryant, Javier Baez, other Cubs kids kicks into mid-winter high gear***

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Posted Monday, Jan. 19, 2015

“The best farm system in baseball.”

That tagline applied to the Cubs, concocted by several national publications and clasped to their collective bosoms by a legion of ever-loyal fans, further picked up the decibel level in inundating the recent Cubs Convention in Chicago.



With Cubs baseball president Theo Epstein's thorough rebuilding program kicking into a higher gear, the collective praise of his best prospects is driving the long-forlorn mass of rooters to believing they've nearly reached the promised land of contention, if not a ticket punched to the 2015 postseason. The fever pitch was best exemplified by a Sunday morning farm system session involving much-publicized prospects Kyle Schwarber, Pierce Johnson, Addison Russell and C.J. Edwards. The last two were not original Cubs signees who were instead obtained in trades for veterans.

*Chicago Sun-Times* baseball writer Gordon Wittenmyer described the post-session reaction as “the most imposing stampede of fans” for autographs for the minor leaguers of any convention event.

Somebody, anybody, should have calmed down the fans to inform them we’ve seen this all before, and to tone down their excitement. Prospects are suspects until they’re big-league producers no matter how many Epstein’s organization has stocked in the pipeline.

Only 15 years ago, the likes of *Baseball America* were proclaiming the Cubs farm system No. 1 in the game. Cubs president Andy MacPhail encouraged me to take a close look at a gaggle of promising players at low Class-A Lansing (Mich). The corner supposedly had been turned after nearly a decade of near-barren development after Jim Frey’s ill-advised sacking of much-revered guru Gordon Goldsberry in 1988.

How many position players from that group bubbled to the majors to star for the parent club?

### **Patterson enveloped with raves in minors**

Remember how Corey Patterson, No. 3 pick in the country in 1998, was just 19 when fans called the Lansing Lugnuts’ front office to demand Patterson be promoted directly to the Cubs to motor around center field, no matter that he was a year out of high school? And, except for the first half of an injury-shortened 2003 season, Patterson really didn’t hit for the Cubs, turning into a swift but fundamentally-flawed journeyman outfielder. Dusty Baker was spot-on when he said Patterson was called up too soon.

And how Patterson’s Lansing teammate, Hee Seop Choi, was supposed to be the next great lefty-swinging slugger? Choi’s bat couldn’t catch up with good fastballs. At least he netted Derrek Lee in a trade.

Throw in the likes of third baseman David Kelton and catcher Jeff Goldbach at Lansing. Interestingly, one night when these two, along with Patterson and Choi were in the lineup, the starting pitcher was an unheralded 18-year-old named Carlos Zambrano. “Big Z” turned out as the only one of the bunch to have a lengthy, productive career (in spite of his famed histrionics).



**Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts, greeting fans at Kerry Wood's Winter Warm-Up, constantly counsels his staff to tune out the "noise" of hype.**

Go forward a few years. The Felix Pie watch settled over Wrigley Field after the Dominican outfielder kept hitting well over .300 in Triple-A. But his swing was hardly better than a rusty gate with the Cubs despite personal hitting instruction from master teacher Lou Piniella.

Go backward, too. Shawon Dunston, No. 1 pick in the entire country in 1982, was supposed to be the “next Ernie Banks.” At least he was the first Shawon Dunston with his namesake son now following in his footsteps in the Cubs organization.

Before and after the Lansing hoopla, Kerry Wood and Mark Prior got more than their fair share of advance hosannas before injuries truncated or transformed legitimately great pitching personas.

### **Cubs were late in building farm system**

The problem is Cubs player development has been so spotty since owner Phil Wrigley instituted a farm system late in the game in the 1940s and never really caught up to the most productive organizations. The hype machine totally envelops any promising player in a manner not seen in with the Braves and Twins, and more recently the Cardinals, examples of consistently productive farm systems. There, groups of prospects reach the majors and produce at the same time with the focus never on one supposed “savior.”

Fortunately, Cubs development officials have heeded both Epstein’s and team chairman Tom Ricketts’ admonitions to tune out the hype and tone it down for players.

“All we do is just try to win,” said Ricketts as he attended Kerry Wood’s popular annual Winter Warm-Up event at Harry’s Caray’s 7<sup>th</sup> Inning Stretch at Water Tower Place. Wood and wife Sarah raised contributions for their Chicago school mentoring program.

“All the guys in our organization, from Theo on down, know it’s just noise,” Ricketts added. “It’s all about results. You just go from there. Everybody who plays for the Cubs is in a fishbowl, more or less. The key is, everybody’s got to focus on results, and I think everyone is.”

Both top baseball brass and organization people down to low minor-league instructors know to enhance that stance as inevitable bumps in the road crop up. Much-touted infielder Javier Baez had a strikeout-marred big-league debut in 2014. Outfielder Jorge



**A rare sight of Kerry Wood in tie and sport coat at his event to benefit his and wife Sarah's mentoring program. Wood had hype enveloping him as he advanced as a fireballing pitching prospect from 1995-98.**

Soler's more abbreviated break-in was a bit smoother. Now, the masses will demand glamour-boy slugger Kris Bryant's promotion to the Cubs' lineup out of spring training.

"You can't control the hype because of social media and everything else these days," said Jason McLeod, overseeing both player acquisition and farm-system advancement as the Cubs' senior vice president of scouting/player development. Like Ricketts, he was taking a break from the whirlwind convention schedule to meet and greet fans and colleagues at Wood's event.

"At the same time, from a development standpoint, we do as much as we can to prepare them to be successful major-league players up here both on and off the field, represent themselves, the team and their families in a professional manner," McLeod added.

"Ultimately, every kid is his own person. We definitely talk a lot about the hype machine. The fact is taking them up here to prove yourself, you haven't done anything yet. Don't get me wrong, it's nice to see some of the publications come out and rank our farm system the way they have. We've been around long enough to know rankings are rankings. If they don't help your major-league club win, then it really doesn't mean anything. That's always what keeps our eyes on the prize.

"Our players in the minor leagues understand we're not here to be ranked the No. 1 farm system. We're here to win the World Series. That's what they're focus should be. That's what our focus is. We try to focus our players as much as we can."

### **Expectations expected in Chicago**

Cubs general manager Jed Hoyer hopes his players realize if they're coming up in Chicago, they'll be under the microscope.

"It's hard, but I think if you're coming up as a highly-touted prospect in Chicago, you're going to have expectations," he said. "You're going to have to learn how to deal with it at some point. This is a big market and you're going to have huge media expectations, you're going to have huge fan expectations. It's part of the business."

Having worked in both Chicago and Boston, where the Red Sox might be viewed with a mania not seen elsewhere, Hoyer can draw a comparison to both cities' hype machines.

"The only difference is the teams have been better," he said of Boston. "You have David Ortiz, Dustin Pedroia and Jon Lester and those guys, it makes it easier to break in because you're not *the* guy. Here, because our teams have been as good, I think there's a little more pressure on those guys."

But maybe that status is changing. New Cub Lester is now the biggest name on the roster. Not a rah-rah leader, he'll still set an example for younger players with his mound



**Young-veteran Jake Arrieta is willing to be a leader for the crop of younger Cubs.**

professionalism. And there is the promise of a better clubhouse support group with more young-veteran types on the roster.

Right-hander Jake Arrieta, 29 when the 2015 season starts, is certainly raising his hand to be a part of that group. Arrieta is a people person, having circulated among the fans in the packed general mingling area of Wood's event rather than retiring to the private area reserved for Cubs officials and players.

"Regardless of where I've been at in my career, I've always been interested in helping teammates," he said. "Let's be honest, we spend 7 1/2, eight months together as a unit of guys. If you can't support each other and be there for each other, chances are you're not going to be successful on the field.

"Obviously now for me, I'm more in a leadership role. I embrace that role."

Meanwhile, many big-league teams have instituted "media training" sessions for their minor leaguers to better prepare them for life under glass and the hype machine when they reach the majors. The Cubs have formally followed this trend under Epstein.

"We do a rookie development program," said McLeod. "This year we couldn't do it because of the renovations going on at Wrigley. But spring training, throughout the season, off-seasons, we do as much as we can through our media relations department to help develop them and get them ready for what they'll experience in Chicago."

McLeod believes many members of the Cubs' much publicized prospect groups have a natural talent for dealing with publicity. Schwarber and outfielder Albert Almora have shown that ability in interviews on this site. The personable Bryant also seems mature beyond his years in handling the attention buzzsaw.

### **Cubs kids 'wired differently'**

"First and foremost, they're wired a little differently," he said. "They're wired to handle success. They're all what we would call very strong makeup guys, strong character guys. They don't believe their own hype. They're all driven to be very good. They don't read their own headlines. We wish all players could be like that. Fortunately for us, we feel like our guys will make a splash within the next couple of years. They understand they're not just here to play in Chicago and play in the big leagues, they're going to win."

Hoyer has particular praise for Bryant, whose every move in advancing to Triple-A in 2014 was followed closely from a distance in Chicago.

"He's such a professional. He's mature beyond his years," he said. "It doesn't seem to faze him at all. It's a big part why we loved him in the draft because he seemed unflappable and he seemed not to be distracted by these little things that kind of knock other guys off."

The Cubs also will be helped by the presence of recently retired players brought back into the organization. They have reputations that should resonate with young players who followed them growing up.

The kids didn't get the full measure of Wood's experience in 2014, but should do so going forward. After devoting his summers to baseball his entire life, Wood decided to get away with Sarah and their three children for 3½ months in Wisconsin last year. Wrigley Field's renovations and the latest crop of prospects should pique his interest, though.

### **Dempster, Lilly add brainpower to front office**

Epstein and Hoyer also have hired Ryan Dempster and Ted Lilly, like Wood pitching-staff mainstays of Lou Piniella's 2007-08 playoff teams, as special assistants. In both scouting and instructing players, their recent big-league experience should prove valuable.

"I always liked what scouting was all about, so now I'm getting a chance to learn from guys who have been doing it for as long as I've been pitching," Lilly said. "I've been able to pick their brain over the last year and half or so. I went out and saw some high school and college pitchers, and I got a look at guys we had our eye on, looking at drafting. As much as anything, it was a learning experience of what scouting is all about."

Lilly and Dempster are not the only big-name 2000s Cub getting back into baseball in a formal manner. After one year as an apprentice scout, Prior has been named the San Diego Padres' minor-league pitching coordinator. That news came from ex-Cub Glendon Rusch, a Wood event attendee who in conjunction with Prior's promotion was named a minor-league pitching coach in the Padres' system.

In the end, the hype machine diffuses as some prospects make it, some wash out and some are traded for talent needed elsewhere on the Cubs.

Jaron Madison, McLeod's player development deputy, summed up the entire player-grooming process for Wittenmyer in the *Sun-Times*:

"You definitely build relationships with them, but you have to be honest and step away from that and start to poke holes in the weaknesses of the players. Try to identify those who will take off and reach their potential and those who have a chance to, but maybe you see some things makeup-wise or just with their overall development that might prohibit them from reaching their ceiling.

"Those are the guys you hope to maybe be able to include in a package if you have to lose someone."



**Cubs GM Jed Hoyer (left) speaks with former lefty ace Ted Lilly, now a Cubs' special assistant scouting amateur pitchers.**

Thus the cycle of baseball begins anew with the Cubs. At some point, the odds say that cycle will conclude with the prospects pushing the franchise to a World Series. Given the fates involved, it might not be with this group. Might be the next batch, or the next...