



## ***Cubs catch possible leader of 'Click Six' in Schwarber***



**Kyle Schwarber began hitting in his pro debut in Boise and didn't stop when he joined the Kane County Cougars soon afterward. Photo credit Kane County Cougars.**

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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Kyle Schwarber finds himself in an enviable situation that not all pundits forecasting the future recognize just yet.

The Cubs' "Core Four," now perhaps expanded to a "Live Five" with the trade for Athletics wunderkind shortstop Addison Russell, are all right-handed hitters. Of all their young impact players, only Anthony Rizzo is a left-handed batter. And didn't the predominantly right-handed-hitting Cubs lineup that won 97 games in the regular season in 2008 utterly fail in a three-game playoff sweep by the Dodgers?

Schwarber is a left-handed hitter.

Check.

Russell, Javier Baez, Starlin Castro and Kris Bryant seem to create a logjam on the left side of the infield. Bryant could be moved to a corner outfield position. Albert Almora and Jorge Soler are outfielders. Not a catcher in the bunch. And didn't Hawk Harrelson and Steve Stone recently opine on a Sox broadcast that catching prospects in the minors are prized "if you can find them?"

Schwarber is a catcher. A left-handed hitting catcher. "I love catching," he said.

Check.

Out of a group of young players should come a leader. Andre Dawson said key veterans should be imported to lead the kids when they come. Theo Epstein agrees. Yet the kids themselves need to have someone mature a bit beyond his years as a standout. See the Jonathan Toews story.

"The thing that stands out most about Kyle is leadership ability. I have great respect for him," said University of Illinois baseball coach Dan Hartleb, who had to defend against the Indiana University star during his Big Ten career. Added Kane County Cougars manager Mark Johnson: "His aptitude is off the charts."

Check.

All the analysis about the 21-year-old Schwarber, an Ohioan tabbed as the Cubs' No. 1 draft choice this year, features scouts' projections that the sturdy 6-foot, 235-pound player might be converted to the outfield. But in all the raves about the up-and-coming Cubs farm system, nothing is mentioned about catching depth to push big-league incumbent Wellington Castillo.

Let alone a left-handed hitting catcher with plate discipline who craves the tools of the trade and the chance to be a leader.

### **Good cop/tough cop in handling pitchers**

"You just got to know your staff," said Schwarber in a quiet moment at Fifth Third Bank Stadium before he played in a recent Kane County Cougars Midwest League game, the first full-season minor-league level in his projected ascent through the farm system.

"Know what gets them going. Know what makes them click. If kicking them in the butt makes them click or you just go out there smooth-talking makes them click. Just telling them mechanically what's wrong."



**University of Illinois baseball coach Dan Hartleb is one longtime Kyle Schwarber opponent who was impressed with his leadership abilities. Photo credit University of Illinois.**

Why Epstein, Cubs GM Jed Hoyer or player development chief Jason McLeod would even think of moving Schwarber out from behind the plate is puzzling. In Cubs history, sometimes it takes more than a half dozen guys to develop just one enduring big-league catcher. Nothing is assured, and player-development officials must try to nurture a catcher when they have one.

Remember how the Dallas Green-Gordon Goldsberry farm system of the 1980s was loaded with catchers? Start with switch-hitter Damon Berryhill. Then Joe Girardi and Rick Wrona. Husky Hector Villanueva. Lefty-hitting Rick Wilkins, who slugged 30 homers in Brigadoon fashion – production that vanished almost as suddenly as it appeared – for the Cubs in 1993. And Matt Walbeck, another switch-hitter bringing up the rear.

Out of that crop, just Girardi had a lengthy career, and now he's better known as the Yankees' manager.

Recall catcher Jeff Goldbach, who was among a prized group of position players – an earlier *Baseball America*-endorsed “Core Four” that also included Corey Patterson, Hee-Seop Choi and David Kelton – at Class A Lansing (Mich.) in the same Midwest League in 1999? Goldbach eventually played all of 32 games at Double-A before washing out of the farm system and bouncing about independent ball.

Go all the way to 2008 before a Cubs catcher, Geovany Soto, earned NL rookie of the year honors. And Soto never returned to that level of play before drifting off to the Texas Rangers as a backup four years later.

The top brass ought to talk to Schwarber again. They'll see he feels he is home behind the plate. He's all ears.

“I have a lot of to improve on,” he said. “I've been working with (Cubs catching coordinator Tim) Cousins, teaching me a lot of things. It's kind of a drastic change in what I've been doing in college and what I've been doing here. More of a functional thing with your body. Good hand placements. It's all been great things. I've put them in my game and it's a big change.”

### **‘Great feeling’ nailing base thieves**

Shifting between catcher and left field, with some designated-hitter duty thrown in, Schwarber desired to show his defensive skills behind the plate from the moment he played his first pro game at short-season Boise. He threw out four of the first nine base-stealers at Boise and Kane County.

“That's a great feeling,” he said of gunning down a runner.

“Sometimes you're not going to have that luxury (of a perfect pitch on which to throw). You got to have trust in the pitcher of they're going to holding the runner and they have the trust of you making a good throw. It's practice, practice, practice, practice. But when it comes to the game, you can't think about mechanical things, you just got to let it go. Teach yourself good habits, teach yourself closing off your shoulder, not being open and those things you practice on, they come much naturally in the game.”

Even with the imperfections of youth, Schwarber showed he belonged behind the plate in college.

“Your job is to control the pitching staff and have rapport, and be a good communicator,” Hartleb said. “Receiving and throwing, there may be some guys who look better. He may not get style points. He was very consistent behind the plate. I don’t see that (defense) being a problem. From what I saw he was a very, very hard worker. He had that work ethic. He’ll make his adjustments to make things successful.”

Schwarber came to the right place to smooth out his catching. Cousins, termed by Johnson “the best catching guy in baseball,” visits the Cougars periodically. But on a daily basis, he has the advantage of being managed by Johnson, a former White Sox catcher who craves teaching the craft.



**Kyle Schwarber shows off his catcher's mitt in the Kane County Cougars' clubhouse.**

“That’s a lot of fun to me,” Johnson said. “That’s what I really enjoy doing. Catching is my long-lost love. I always enjoy being around it. Doesn’t matter what I do, I always watch the catchers more than anything.”

Thus Schwarber will be a prime project.

“He can squat,” Johnson said. “He can use his left hand well. He has the mental capacity and aptitude. He has the feel.

He has the physical things to be able to do it. He can throw, he can catch. It’s a matter of getting after it, doing some work, working on his flexibility.

“It just starts with his setup. Get his feet on the ground and his body in the right position.”

There’s little failure to communicate.

“You tell him one thing, and it’s like he’s got it,” Johnson said. “He does it and he can take it into the game. You don’t find that very often. It’s a pleasure to coach and a pleasure to be around him.”

Said Schwarber, “I want to learn a ton of things while I’ve had a chance. I’m soaking it all in and trying to learn.”

## Laying off bad pitches

Put a more polished defensive portfolio with Schwarber's well-developed hitting philosophy. Schwarber would force himself into the hyped Cubs kids to expand to a "Click Six."

"In the short time I've seen him – we preach all the time you have to hit a fastball – he's shown that," said Cougars hitting coach Tom Beyers. "Other times teams are trying to go off-speed and he's recognized it, and he's laid off of it."

"What I like so far, when kids see off-speed (pitches), they want to prove they can hit it and they start swinging at everything. I think he's very well advanced (in pitch identification). He's drawn his walks. The confusion is (on-base percentage advocate Epstein's organization is) trying to promote walks, and that's not the case. We're trying to get these guys to find the zone in which they're really good at hitting. And if the pitch is not in that zone, then be able to lay off."

Schwarber came into pro ball with some hitting techniques.

"I didn't think Kyle had a lot of holes," Hartleb said. "He was very aggressive in the zone early in count. Tried to attack him but we also tried to use our heads. He's a competent hitter, but not a swing-and-miss guy."

Beyers projects Schwarber will have the best of both worlds – power in any ballpark and gap-to-gap hitting ability.

"I like to pride myself on just hitting the ball hard, putting balls in play and not striking out so much," Schwarber said. "I know home runs are going to happen, and I'll have my fair share of 'oh-fer' days, too. The good thing is you have another day to come out and play. I've had two straight 'oh-fer; days. You just got to keep grinding out at-bats, each pitch."

"I like to pride myself on my approach. I like to think I have an advanced approach at the plate. I don't like to chase things. I like to pride myself on getting my pitch. You only get one or two pitches each at-bat, and you have to take advantage of it. I like to pride myself in getting into counts I can take advantage of."



**Kyle Schwarber hustling around the bases as an Indiana University star. Photo courtesy Indiana University.**

The most studious hitters believe they can change from pitch to pitch, based on their mound opponent and situation. Schwarber believes he's in that group.

"I feel like I'm a good-enough hitter to make adjustments during at-bats," he said. "That's a good thing about being a catcher. You get a feeling of what pitchers are trying to do to you. You got to know situations, a lot of situational stuff. You might get breaking balls or changeups or fastballs out of the zone. You're going to have to take advantage of those situations and drive in a run sometime."

Feeding off a winning atmosphere at every level as he advances will also help Schwarber. He came into a turnaround situation in Kane County. The Cougars were just 55-80 in 2013. They won their 55<sup>th</sup> game of the 2014 season on July 3.

The "Core Four" or "Click Six" or whatever they'll be called will need to sweep in some positive mental attitude into a Wrigley Field that has experienced five consecutive seasons of prodigious losing.

"All the guys here are great, have great attitudes," Schwarber said. "I'm the new guy and I'm glad they took me as one of their own. They haven't treated me differently."

But they should. Left-handed-hitting catchers who enthusiastically run pitching staffs and lay off bad pitches are singular in their presence. They need to kind of stay put behind the plate and not wander off to other positions that are better manned.