



Grudzielanek's longest-lasting Chicago-baseball impact slated at Charlotte

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As the new manager of Triple-A Charlotte, Mark Grudzielanek has made the circuit of all major-league affiliated organizations in Chicago.

He was a productive second baseman for the Cubs in 2003-04. In his rookie year as a pro manager, he guided the the Diamondbacks' Midwest League affiliate Kane County Cougars in 2015. And now he draws a check from the White Sox, moving up the ladder for an eventual goal of managing in the majors.



Well-traveled in his career, Mark Grudzielanek will wear yet another new cap and uniform as manager of the Triple-A Charlotte Knights.

Grudzielanek, though, may never have as long-lasting an impact as in his latest gig.

He'll be the man putting the finishing touches on the Sox's just-launched rebuilding program just before the expected wave of prospects acquired in off-season deals are promoted to the South Side.

Yoan Moncada, baseball's No. 1 prospect snared in the Chris Sale monster trade with Boston, is projected to start 2017 at Charlotte by Sox GM Rick Hahn. If pitchers Lucas Giolito and Reynaldo Lopez, acquired in the Adam Eaton deal, need more seasoning, Grudzielanek will let the front office know when they're ready.

Eventually, fireballer Michael Kopech, another product of the Sale trade, will pass through Charlotte. And as-yet acquired players for other marketable Sox veterans are bound to come under Grudzielanek's purview.

But they won't have a cakewalk at Charlotte. Grudzielanek was a quietly tough, disciplined middle infielder, starting 13 consecutive seasons for the Montreal Expos, Dodgers, Cubs, Cardinals and Royals. Actions spoke louder than words, including the day when, without comment, he turned up the Cubs clubhouse stereo to play classic rock, thus overcoming the decibel-output from Sammy Sosa's infamous boom box. Chicago-bound players must first adhere to Grudzielanek's competitive standards, backed up of course by the front office.

Room for improvement for Moncada, others

"I haven't met the kid yet," Grudzielanek, speaking from his San Diego-area home, said the other day of second baseman Moncada. Obviously Moncada will have a manager who can especially relate to his archetype up the middle.

"I know there's always upside, always things that you learn into your 30s. (Moncada's) so young. There's always room for improvement. If he has that kind of mindset, the sky's the limit. I look forward to opportunity to work with such player."

Both Chicago teams have had a long list of players who have been productive in Triple-A, but busted out at the next level. They either had a "4-A bat" or they did not have enough command and control, or whatever. The gap between Charlotte and Chicago is wider than you think. Grudzielanek is tasked with making that distance shorter.

"I think as a position player, it's consistency, being willing to change and make adjustments," he said. "It's a tough transition from Triple-A to the big leagues. You can't simulate that kind of talent level. You don't see the top half of the game in Triple-A. Pitchers throw off-speed stuff for strikes, 3-1 curveballs. The top three starters with every organization can do that. If you can't correct that and make adjustments, you're not up there too long."

Extending his player personality to his second year as a manager, Grudzielanek believes you get more with sugar than vinegar – "70 to 30 percent," he figured as a percentage. He thus holds the tough-cop way of dealing with players in reserve. They will know that lash is always in storage, to be broken out if necessary.

"There are times you need to chew somebody out," he said. "If they keep making a mistake, it's time. You have to pick and choose those times. As a manager, you can't keep yelling. I think I had two outbursts (at Kane County). It was needed."

"On the flip side, you try to communicate individually. You walk around in batting practice. My door is always open. It's a work agreement. You got to have that relationship. I will do what I need to do. There's a fine line, you can't get too close to a player."



Mark Grudzielanek was a productive second baseman with the Cubs in 2003-04.



Mark Grudzielanek wore a vintage Kane County Cougars logo (left) during his 2015 season as manager. Grudzielanek (top row, second from left in right photo) with his staff of Cougars coaches and clubhouse personnel.

La Russa a key counselor

Grudzielanek had a double-shot on the receiving end of Tony La Russa imprinting some of his ideas – first as a Cardinals player in 2005, then the last two seasons in the Diamondbacks organization. La Russa was chief baseball officer in Grudzielanek’s D’Backs organizational time, first as a manager, then as assistant minor-league coordinator.

“He is one of the game’s brightest minds,” said Grudzielanek. “He wasn’t afraid to change things. I learned a lot of things from Tony, like handling situations.”

A postseason shakeup in Phoenix stripped La Russa of much of his supervisory authority, but not before Grudzielanek derived the full benefit of the Hall of Famer’s perspective starting out his own management career.

He’ll also have a double-dose of input from another old baseball hand. Buddy Bell was Grudzielanek’s manager his first two seasons as a Royal in 2006-07. Now Bell is Sox assistant GM with an emphasis on player development. Bell’s son, D’Backs farm-system chief Mike Bell, whom Grudzielanek regards as a friend, was instrumental in recommending him to the Sox.

“Chris Getz (new Sox minor-league director) interviewed me,” he said. “A great, great interview. A few days later, I got hired. It’s great to be back with Buddy, too. Buddy is someone you can reach out to and ask questions to.”

Grudzielanek said he also learned from managers like Dusty Baker with the Cubs and Davey Johnson with the Dodgers. Certainly, he learned about handling frustration and baseball politics at Wrigley Field. He manned second base the moment a certain foul

ball was deflected and all hell broke loose just when a World Series was within the Cubs' grasp in 2003. The following year, Grudzielanek no doubt shook his head at a clubhouse meltdown that had Sosa at the center of many conflicts.

Consistency was Grudzielanek's trademark. He never had a truly poor season as a starter, only once batting less than .271. With the Cubs, he batted .314 and .307, losing playing time to left-hitting Todd Walker in 2004. He finished with 2,040 career hits.

After a few years out of baseball, he moved into the management side at 44 in Kane County. Like a player's progression, Grudzielanek believed he learned as a manager as he went along in 2015.

"It was a great experience," he said. "I kind of got a feel for it. It was a tough first month. It was a little tricky in the beginning. Then the team took off in the second half. It took some time and then they understood (expectations)."

Prime prospects will have plenty of expectations when they arrive in the Sox system going forward. They will still have a lot to prove – especially to their Triple-A manager.