

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

CSN Chicago's point man gets advance scouting report on Sox building blocks Moncada, pitchers

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One does not need the pedigree of a pro baseball playing stint or even training in front-office sabermetrics to judge talent and character in the game.

I'd always vouch for longtime inhabitants of the cheap seats at Wrigley Field and old Comiskey Park-turned-new Comiskey Park-turned-New Comiskey Park-turned-The Cell-turned-G-Rate Field. If they watched hundreds and hundreds of games over the decade, they know what comprised a quality player.



Ryan McGuffey interviews Yoan Moncada (center) in Charlotte. Moncada was glib despite speaking only Spanish.

Same for three-time Emmy award winning producer Ryan McGuffey, who often teams with Sarah Lauch for all-time memorable specials along with the slog of daily coverage at CSN Chicago. McGuffey has covered enough big events – the latest being the celebrating clubhouse of the 2016 champion Cubs – while interviewing enough people to separate the wheat from the chaff. A Northwest Indiana native, McGuffey also was an accomplished high school athlete himself while rooting for the Sox.

So in these spaces, we'll take "Guff's" word on what he saw down on a recent junket to see the White Sox future at farm clubs in Charlotte, Birmingham and Winston-Salem. The end result of his labors were a pair of half-hour specials, "White Sox Cornerstones," now posted on CSNChicago.com and repeated at various times in and around Sox telecasts on the regional sports network.

Despite manager Rick Renteria's positivism that has impressed all observers, the parent Sox are sinking to the level forecast, putting the focus on the increasing large cache of prospects in the minors. The signing of Cuban star Luis Robert is another reason to look southeast and the prospects' development. Even more should arrive with expected trade-deadline deals of Sox veterans.

McGuffey spent a week watching the three teams. He confirms the rebuilding program is for real.

“Everything the Sox have gotten in terms of praise is well-deserved,” McGuffey said. “They’ve got talent, but the makeup of these guys is what impressed me the most. They’re all so well-spoken, so articulate. One of my biggest takeaways is they’re rooting for each other, no matter at what level they’re playing.”

With all the millions at stake in bonuses and future salaries, a premium is put on character in new signees. No bad apples are wanted, and teams do not want to wait until off-kilter players are washed out by no-nonsense managers like Bobby Cox at the big-league level. “White Sox Cornerstones” goes out of its way to portray the top Sox prospects’ personalities. Huge egos seem to be in check.

“I flat-out asked Rick (Hahn) -- is character as important as talent in 2017?” McGuffey said. “He said no doubt you’ve got to have talent. But character is almost as important as talent. They need the makeup to know and the wherewithal how to act when they struggle, if they go 0-for-20. Baseball is such a mental grind, they have to know how to ride the waves. I think all of them are doing that in the minor leagues. All of them are willing to put in the work and the time.

“They understand, too, they’re not expecting the phone (for a callup to the Sox) to ring tomorrow. I thought that was very impressive. A lot of these kids, you could see them being almost selfish and wanting to get to the major leagues as fast as possible. But while they do want to do that, they understand they have to put their time in so when they get to the big-league club, they stay there.”

McGuffey booked quality time with No. 1 prospect Yoan Moncada, whom the Sox are not rushing to the South Side just to get an instant jolt. Moncada will not be promoted one day too soon.

Moncada ‘the goods’

“He’s the real deal. The goods,” McGuffey said. “He just looks like a baseball player. What I mean by that is the makeup of his body, the way he carries himself. He’s one of the first guys to get to the ballpark (in Charlotte), one of the first guys out on the field to get his work in. He’s got a presence about him. All of that exudes confidence as well. I saw a lot of guys who probably won’t make the big leagues all the way up to Moncada. You could see how some guys carry themselves whether they’ll make it.

“He knows he’s on the cusp. But he also knows they want him to get the work in, they want him to have at-bats. He didn’t have more than 200 at-bats above Double-A going into the year. Everybody was talking about May 15 for him to come up. Why rush him?”

McGuffey said he likes Moncada defensively at second base, the only position he has really played. But the Sox have an interesting dilemma. Home-grown Yolmer Sanchez, who had previous good ratings as a prospect a few years back, is throwing leather at second while batting around .290. McGuffey figures the Sox see their long-term and “formidable” double-play combination as Tim Anderson and Moncada. Perhaps Sanchez, still just 25, has joined older players as attractive trade bait.

Following Moncada, McGuffey believed the Sox hired the right guy to polish his second-base play. He witnessed Charlotte manager Mark Grudzielanek, a former Cub, working intensely with the prospect. Supplementing the instruction was Vance Law, another familiar face from both sides of town, in his visits as roving infield instructor. They drilled Moncada on grounders to his left and right, and turning double plays.

“A lot of guys sometimes get a chip on their shoulder when people think they can’t play defensively,” McGuffey said. “That’s what impressed me about Moncada – this is a guy who has a lot of pride in the whole package.”

McGuffey also spent time with the well-spoken Lucas Giolito, a product of an entertainment-industry family. But the near-future Sox pitcher at Charlotte who impressed him the most was right-hander Reynaldo Lopez.



Ryan McGuffey and Lucas Giolito talk about the latter’s Triple-A development.

“I like his personality,” he said. “He’s a guy who smiles all the time and has a lot of fun. He looks effortless when he’s pitching. He can hit 100 mph on his fastball. A lot of people think he’s a back-end-of-the-bullpen guy. Every organization has in its best interest to have a failed starter before they realize they have a stud bullpen guy. You’ll see Lopez, Giolito, (Carson) Fulmer come up as starters.

“I was impressed with Fulmer, too. From the time the Sox sent him down last year, he really figured it out. I love his competitiveness. He’s got a lot of fire on the mound.”

McGuffey figures Giolito simply needs to harness his fastball command. His secondary pitches are in place, including a curveball that “falls off a shelf.”

Since the future seems to be more interesting than the present – trade deadline deals excepted – CSN Chicago is televising a series of Charlotte games for fans to do their own scouting. On the schedule were 6 p.m. June 15 against Louisville and back-to-back games against Indianapolis at 6 p.m. June 17 and 7 p.m. (same-day delay) June 18.

So when the prospects, one by one or in a small group, arrive in Chicago, one reporter will have a special insight into their makeup. Given the awards on his mantle, you’d expect nothing less from “Guff.”