



Sox 2013 preview: South Siders competitive, but Tigers just too strong

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Posted Tuesday, March 26, 2013*

As 2013 grinds along, the White Sox will privately rue their Big Slip in the final two weeks of 2012.

That was their prime opportunity. A Detroit Tigers team that is constantly re-loading and re-stocking under championship-craving owner Mike Ilitch was coming on down the stretch. But the Tigers still would end the season under-performing all projections. The Sox had a three-game lead, and all they really had to do was at least split their final 15 games to make it hard for the Tigers to complete any comeback.

But a South Side squad eventually crumpled, having stopped hitting with men on base and running out of gas on the mound. A 2-10 collapse negated many of the positives Robin Ventura's rookie year as manager at any level had accomplished. The Sox were on a 90-victory pace going into September. The Tigers ended up with 88 wins. The meat was a-cookin,' but someone else grabbed the Sox place at the table for October.

Some of the kids who hit the wall in September are a year older and thus wiser, and preferably more durable. The good camaraderie and clubhouse cohesiveness that had cracked in Ozzie Guillen's swan song was restored under Ventura's quiet hand. And Ventura himself should benefit from the experience to avoid repeating some first-year



John Danks' slow recovery from shoulder surgery cuts down on the projected depth of the Sox pitching staff. Photo credit [Keith Allison](#).

managerial mistakes.

All and good. But here's the problem. The Tigers are simply that much better. Detroit has replaced two good Sox killers – Delmon Young and Ryan Raburn – with two all-time Chicago bashers. Torii Hunter arrives from an over-populated Angels outfield for more tormenting duty. And he's back – Victor Martinez will return after a one-season injury absence to help Triple Crown winner/MVP Miguel Cabrera and Prince Fielder form a powerful threesome in the middle of the lineup. In all his previous incarnations, Martinez showed no mercy to the Sox.

The Sox front-line pitching is good, but the Tigers is a level better. Justin Verlander needs no introduction. But Max Scherzer developed into Detroit's second ace at mid-summer. Doug Fister proved himself as a reliable third starter. And Anibal Sanchez was so well-regarded the Cubs wanted to make him a long-term rotation mainstay, forcing the Tigers to outbid Tom Ricketts and Theo Epstein to keep the right-hander.

The only logical edge the Sox have over the Tigers is their bullpen depth. In this baseball age, that's an important advantage. But when lefty John Danks' comeback from shoulder surgery was slowed by a pokey return of his velocity, the ability of the Sox to perhaps match the Tigers pitcher-for-pitcher, 1-through-12, faded.

They'll still have to play out the season. Detroit, as manager Jim Leyland will remind his players, can't just throw their gloves on the field to be crowned. The Sox can still make it a race, but only if major injuries and off-seasons are avoided. And possibly breathing down their necks will be a Kansas City Royals team they have had trouble beating, and perhaps even more so with James Shields imported as the new ace.

To be sure, 2013 will be a big test of Ventura's maturation as a manager and his ability to get the most of the talent on hand. Here is a look at the different aspects of the Sox going into the new season:

Lineup

A collection of regulars that were robust in the first half, then faded late have not changed much, other than inserting bat-handling, contact-man Jeff Keppinger in the No. 2 spot. Keppinger was the major off-season acquisition.

If Keppinger plays true to form, the Sox could



Jeff Keppinger's contact-hitting skills should enable Robin Ventura to do more with the speed at the top of the order. Photo credit [Keith Allison](#).

score more runs at the top of the order. Leadoff man Alejandro De Aza has a full year under his belt batting No. 1. And in a move Ventura should have made last August, Alex Rios will bring his blend of power and speed to the three-hole. Ventura should be able to get more movement on the bases with this combination than in 2012, when the slow, strikeout-prone Kevin Youkilis and Adam Dunn followed De Aza.

Dunn is another key. Dropped to cleanup against right-handed pitchers this season, Dunn has been hailed for regaining his power form (41 homers and 94 RBIs), netting him AL Comeback Player of the Year honors. But the plain-speaking, often-hilarious Texan was serious: he wasn't satisfied with his season and felt Rios would have been a better comeback-player winner. Dunn barely hit .200, did not drive in runs in the final two months and was perhaps too patient at the plate. Then-Sox GM Kenny Williams believed Dunn had yet to regain his good opposite-field power stroke. If he does hit to left-center with authority this season, the Sox will dent home plate that much more.

Franchise icon/team leader Paul Konerko, now batting fifth much of the time, is also under the microscope. Konerko would have been a focal point anyway at 37 and in the final year of his contract. He had two different seasons in 2012: his monster start with a .399 average and 33 RBIs on May 27, but a pedestrian finish with 75 RBIs at season's end, a mediocre total for both a hot starter and a cleanup hitter overall. Is Konerko finally slowing up after so many seasons of reliability? If he is, it won't be for slacking off. He's among baseball's most hard-working hitters. Anything resembling a vintage Konerko season will be a boon; anything far less will create a lineup hole.

Dayan Viciedo's continued development will also be watched. The Cuban import could put make for a powerful Big Three in the middle of the order if he learns more plate discipline. He tried to master a leg kick to jump-start his swing in spring training. Even with imperfections, Viciedo had 25 homers in 2012. A repeat of that number is fine, but a boost in his RBI count, especially with runners in scoring position, will be the real measure of progress.

Also in the crosshairs is Tyler Flowers, ceded the catching job when the Sox, probably rightly, bid good-bye to A.J. Pierzynski after eight colorful seasons. Flowers is an improvement on Pierzynski defensively and in handling pitchers. At the plate, he's still an unknown compared to Pierzynski's bat that produced career highs with 27 homers and 77 RBIs in 2012. Those numbers will be hard to replace as will the third left-handed bat in the lineup. The answer for Flowers is somewhere between his own .213 season and Pierzynski's numbers. The Sox will take that middle area given Flowers' defensive portfolio.

The Sox's double-play combo of shortstop Alexei Ramirez and second baseman Gordon Beckham are one of the most underrated defensive tandems in the game. Few games are ever kicked away by this duo. The Sox need a few more won offensively by Ramirez and Beckham. A former Silver Slugger shortstop, Ramirez's 73 RBIs were somewhat misleading. He failed in RISP situations aplenty down the stretch, requiring some make-goods with runners on third and less than two out in 2013. Beckham endured yet another cold start, but a swing change in August got his bat going. He finished with a

career-high 16 homers. If Beckham doesn't fall into the pit again early on, he could keep that late-season momentum going.

The Sox truly would have no soft spots in the order with any kind of competitive seasons from Flowers, Ramirez and Beckham. New general manager Rick Hahn is counting on such improvement from within along with Keppinger's contact-hitting skills. If he doesn't get that upswing, the Sox may struggle offensively.

Starting rotation

Hahn was hesitant to use what he projected as overall pitching depth to land a left-handed bat to replace Pierzynski. Turns out Hahn's decision was correct, as he's needed to tap into his numbers game to plug the shortfall left by John Danks' slow recovery from shoulder surgery.

A Danks at 80 to 90 percent would have filled out an impressive rotation. But the left-hander now has to bide his time building his arm strength back in the minors after his fast-ball topped out in the mid-80s mph range in spring training.

In Danks' place will be Dylan Axelrod, fast developing a "utility pitcher" reputation. Axelrod looked somewhat impressive in several spot starts in 2012, employing a drop pitch and moving the ball around. However, he is what he is – a fill-in guy for several roles, his stuff questionable for a long-term starter. Unless Danks can come back by late spring, Hahn may have to look within his system at the likes of Nestor Molina and Simon Castro – both praised by Flowers off their spring performances -- to fill out the rotation.

The front end of the Sox rotation is in good shape. Chris Sale allayed fears about his durability and the stresses of his funky delivery with a 17-victory season. The string-bean lefty, who claims he gained 15 pounds in the off-season, should be just as good with his arm built up off 2012's workload. Jake Peavy may not have 100 percent of his old velocity from his San Diego days, but he is 100 percent healthy 2 1/2 years out from his groundbreaking surgery on his lat muscle in his upper back. The only thing needing a cure in Peavy's portfolio is his record against the Tigers and Royals. He lost six games against the Sox tormentors' in the second half of 2012.

Gavin Floyd is Gavin Floyd: an innings eater who will give you a .500 record, always



Jake Peavy needs to improve on his record against the Tigers and Royals. Photo credit [Joe Bielawa](#).

tantalizing that he could be better. But all rotations need this kind of pitcher keeping their teams in games. They're prized on the open market, and the Sox got a relative bargain when they picked up Floyd's \$9 million option for this season.

The big upside in the rotation centers around second-year southpaw Jose Quintana. The surprise of the 2012 rotation, the Colombian showed he could pitch mature beyond his years until he simply wore down in August. Like Sale, the buildup of his arm will be a benefit.

Bullpen

Hahn and Ventura did not want to rob Peter to pay Paul by shifting lefty Hector Santiago immediately into the Danks' starting role, despite several impressive late-season outings in 2012. Better to have the extra southpaw in the bullpen who could give Ventura a long-relief performance if needed.

The relief corps is where the Sox seem to have the advantage over Detroit in the post-Jose Valverde era. Their younger pitchers got a year of experience under fire while working among veterans who can take the load off them. No obvious holes exist in the bullpen.

Backup exists for incumbent closer Addison Reed if he does not improve from his occasional inconsistencies of his rookie year. Reed running mate Nate Jones and his 100 mph fastball can be tapped to close if necessary. So can veteran right-hander Matt Lindstrom with his mid-90s fastball. Jesse Crain was slowed by injuries in spring training, but he's a known commodity when healthy. If Reed holds down the closer's job, Ventura will have plenty of setup options to work from the sixth inning on.

Santiago's development lessens the pressure of Matt Thornton, now 36, to be the heavy-duty lefty in the bullpen. Former Cubs prospect Donnie Veal also takes a load off Thornton. Veal was sensational late in the season as a one-batter, situational southpaw, limiting lefty hitters to an .094 average. Prince Fielder can attest to Veal's talents.

Manager

Ventura's greatest impact in his first season as manager was re-establishing a professional, quieter tone to the clubhouse. A former great Sox third baseman, Ventura ensured that he was known to be in charge and all-business. The Sox did not lack for motivation and competitiveness. Hanging on to first place as long as they did was a true team effort partially originated up top.

Lagging somewhat behind was Ventura's in-game management. His reluctance to alter the lineup and move non-producers down or out perhaps hampered the run production down the stretch. Ventura also was sometimes slow to yank veterans like Peavy when they faltered in mid-game. If handling players in the locker room is the lion's share of a manager's job, then Ventura will get a mulligan on the strategy end. He has the inner discipline to learn from his shortcomings, same as in his playing days. How much he has learned will be displayed in going up against savvy veteran managers like Leyland and Terry Francona in Cleveland.

Outlook

The bottom line is just that in baseball. Mike Ilitch will leave no dollar unspent to bring a World Series winner to his Tigers. Jerry Reinsdorf has as much of a will to win himself, but the trained accountant-attorney is the majors' best money manager at the ownership level. He won't hemorrhage cash in the process. If Sox fans are again slow to effect quicker-spinning turnstiles at the gate, Hahn will have to be creative in looking for bargains or counting on improvements from within the organization.

The Tigers once again will need to under-perform while the Sox need to step up en masse. The hopes of 2013 for a redux of 2012 with a happier ending require nothing less.