

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## *Savvy scout can claim credit for some of Cubs' position-player success*

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D.J. LeMahieu was leading the National League with an average above .340.

Defending American League MVP Josh Donaldson had a shot at another 40-homer season.

Josh Harrison was in his third season as a lineup sparkplug.

Willson Contreras, Javy Baez and Matt Szczur are indispensable men for the 2016 Cubs.



**During the tenure of (from left) Cubs scouting director Tim Wilken, the likes of Javier Baez, Willson Contreras and Matt Szczur came into the organization.**

Who said the pre-Theo Epstein Cubs couldn't sign young position players?

Much of the praise heaped on Epstein for the astounding Cubs revival centers on rapid position-player development, in contrast to the perceived lack thereof in previous years, if not decades. A mega-star like Kris Bryant can certainly feed into that image. So could the top-of-video board power from the now-sidelined Kyle Schwarber, the maturity and fundamental skills of Albert Almora, and the raw potential of Jorge Soler.

But let's direct some credit backward here. A pretty savvy Cubs scouting director named Tim Wilken was kicked upstairs as an Epstein advisor in favor of Jason McLeod in 2012. While he was on the job, though, Wilken found just as many attractive position players as Epstein-McLeod. The trick was they weren't given a chance to develop as Cubs compared to the quartet of fine young players mentioned in the previous paragraph.

I had numerous philosophical discussions about scouting and player development with Wilken in his six seasons running talent procurement on the North Side. He always said you could no longer depend on good hitters slipping in the draft so you could concentrate on acquiring pitching in the top couple of rounds. There would be no more Mike Piazas dropping to the last round (62<sup>nd</sup> in Piazza's case).

With the passage of time, Wilken's administration and ideas have been vindicated. His acquisition of young hitters is benefiting Epstein and posse as we write.

While his swing still needs to be tweaked, Baez's offensive potential is still ahead of him while his hustle is on display whenever he plays. The natural shortstop is one of the top defensive infielders in baseball at second and third. Baez was Wilken's No. 1 pick in his final Cubs draft in 2011.

Contreras was an international signee out of Venezuela in 2009. Meanwhile, the heady Szczur, a former versatile Villanova football player, showed he picked the right post-collegiate sport by signing as a 2010 fifth-round draftee to play outfield for the Cubs.

Three other products of Wilken's system certainly have nothing to be ashamed of being compared to the glamorous Cubs kids acquired by Epstein and McLeod.

LeMahieu was a versatile infielder out of LSU taken in the second round in 2009. He made his Cubs debut two years later. Dispatched to the Rockies with former No. 1 Wilken pick Tyler Colvin soon after Epstein took over, LeMahieu was a Colorado regular by 2013. He has really blossomed as an impact offensive player the past two years. Considering the Cubs received head-case third baseman Ian Stewart in exchange for LeMahieu, his departure certainly ranks with free-agent bust Edwin Jackson as Epstein's worst deal yet.



**Tim Wilken drafted (from left) Josh Donaldson, D.J. LeMahieu and Josh Harrison into the Cubs organization.**

Donaldson and Harrison were very young prospects caught up in the pressure by then-GM Jim Hendry to acquire veterans to contend.

The No. 48 pick in the 2007 draft, Donaldson hardly had time to identify as a Cubs prospect when Hendry traded him a year later in a mid-season transaction with Oakland to obtain Rich Harden. You can identify two goats in Donaldson's path to the MVP award last year as a Blue Jay. Even after he had developed into an uncommon commodity – a power-hitting third baseman – Donaldson somehow got on the bad side of Oakland maven Billy Beane. The supposed hero of "Moneyball" is now badly tarnished after giving away the entire middle of a powerful lineup in Donaldson, Yoenis Céspedes and Addison Russell.

Meanwhile, Harrison – showing Baez-style infield versatility – displayed high on-base percentage skills in the low Cubs minors after being taken by Wilken in the sixth round out of the University of Cincinnati in 2008. He's now a Pirates stalwart after being traded in a deal for journeymen lefties John Grabow and Tom Gorzelanny in mid-season 2009.

Spotty Cubs scouting and player development, of course, was the major reason for the championship drought without parallel in sports history.

The Cubs were slow to develop a farm system, then under-funded and under-managed it under the Wrigley family regime, after Branch Rickey established the minor-league high ground with the Cardinals and Dodgers. The team would literally go decades with-

out developing a regular player for the lineup, most notably the gap between Don Kessinger in 1965 and Shawon Dunston in 1985.

The Tribune Co.-era GM tenures of Jim Frey and Larry Himes reversed a farm-system revival under predecessor Dallas Green. Team president Andy MacPhail believed in drafting pitching en masse, with extra hurlers being traded for other needs. But the pitching surplus never developed due to injuries and flameouts, while the system was left short of position players.

Wilken aimed to correct MacPhail's off-kilter strategy. History proved that he was pretty successful. But as with many other baseball organizations, the top brass often had different ideas about how to handle the kids he brought in.

Wilken's talents are well-appreciated throughout the game. He left his advisory role with the Cubs after the 2015 season. He's now working as a special assistant to Arizona Diamondbacks GM Dave Stewart. Last month, Wilken was inducted into the Professional Baseball Scouts Hall of Fame in a ceremony in Ft. Myers, Fla.

We can only hope if the Cubs win the World Series with Contreras, Baez and Szczur playing roles, Wilken is not forgotten when the accolades are passed out.