



Cubs 2013 preview: A bit better pitching, but rebuilding still grinds along slowly

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Theo Epstein is getting double for his money these days.

First, the former lifelong Bostonian is getting a valuable education in Chicago politics as the three-cornered debate over Wrigley Field renovations shows how Clout City USA really works.

And yet all the arguments over whether the Cubs should get serious with Rosemont and consider moving if they don't get a renovations deal very soon give Epstein and his baseball operations department a big break.



Cubs GM Jed Hoyer (with wife Merrill) and boss Theo Epstein have once again constructed a roster that can be disassembled via mid-season trades.

Off-the-field issues involving Wrigley Field, whether the installation of lights, falling concrete or Arne Harris' hat shots, are always far more than sideshows. They become the main story, relegating the Cubs' on-field fortunes to notebook status. The taffy pull involving Tom Ricketts, Rahm Emanuel, Tom Tunney, the rooftop owners and the vilage of Rosemont absolutely shifted the Cubs' spring-training countdown to Opening Day to secondary news-angle status.

If all focus was on the team itself, the conclusion would be a sub-standard roster with a slew of place-holders that is being intentionally fielded for the second-year in a row. Worse yet, as Epstein vows a rebuilding-from-the-ground-up strategy, there are no pitching phenoms or fresh-faced hot rookies as attention-getters to make the continual losing more palatable.

Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer offer up career journeyman/fourth outfielder Nate Schierholtz as the No. 5 hitter and near-regular right fielder. The brass make no secret about their intention to flip veterans for prospects at the trade deadline again. Meanwhile, the fans are still mandated to pay the third-highest ticket prices in the majors. Thus the Wrigley renovation row is almost a godsend as an unintended misdirection play.

There can be a “Wizard of Oz” metaphor here. “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain,” bellowed the Wizard to Dorothy. The renovation issue is a misdirection from Epstein’s big-league philosophy. But with the Cubs, those handful who really wanted to know the score always peeked behind the curtain – sometimes getting bitten in the process – at the likes of Phil Wrigley, Jim Gallagher, John Holland, Andy MacPhail, Ed Lynch, et. al. When the dynamic duo of William Wrigley, Jr. and William L. Veeck ran the Cubs, the curtain was never closed. They welcomed all comers and questions.

Epstein said he believes in transparency. The curtain is not closed. He’s running in place until he can establish an upward talent flow from the minors while collecting even more prospects from those projected mid-season trades. Yet if the entire focus was on the president of baseball operations, he’d feel some heat and questions on why you can’t contend *and* rebuild at the same time. Epstein tore it down in 2012, but still did not expect 101 losses for his troubles. That’s a tough basement level to achieve with a big-market team possessed of superior financial resources.

So we’ll ignore the two Toms and Rahm in this space, and just focus on the Chicago Cubs pinstriped brigade, class of 2013:

Lineup

Spring training featured sneak previews of top position-player prospects Javier Baez and Jorge Soler, who are likely still a couple of seasons away. There are no hyper-promising rookies breaking in, no Mike Trouts or Bryce Harpers. Anthony Rizzo and Starlin Castro are now beyond their rookie seasons.

What’s left is an under-powered lineup that scarcely provides hope to increase the 3.8 runs per game the Cubs averaged in 2012. And even that figure is problematical in matching. Rizzo must adjust to the pitchers to avoid the dreaded “sophomore jinx.” The other power source, Alfonso Sori-



David DeJesus (center) will hold onto center field – and if – Brett Jackson is ready to come up.

ano, is trying to repeat a 32-homer, 108-RBI season at 37. A 20-homer producer with the Mets in 2012, Naperville native Scott Hairston is relegated to the bench against right-handed hitters while Schierholtz and his six-homer output get the majority of starts in right.

Center fielder/leadoff man David DeJesus, a good on-base percentage type, suggests the Cubs will try to manufacture runs. But DeJesus can't do that all by himself. The lineup is far from Epstein's model of an OBP machine.

West suburban Wheaton resident DeJesus is the first of the place-holders to bat. He's keeping center warm for former top prospect Brett Jackson's long-awaited arrival. Jackson, a greater strikeout machine proportionately than Adam Dunn, is starting in Triple-A to get his swing right. If he doesn't do the fix-it, then there will be a gap until a legit DeJesus successor arrives.

Castro might be a No. 3 hitter someday. Might be. Right now he bats behind DeJesus with a hit-first, hit-second mentality. Fine if he'll get 200 hits as in 2011. Maybe Epstein simply should accept Castro as the aggressive swinger he is and look elsewhere to satisfy his OBP cravings.

Rizzo seems like a good prospect to complement his power with patience at the plate batting third. Early projections aren't outlandish for his long-ball production for a full-season: 25, maybe 28 homers after his 15 in 3/5 of the 2012 campaign. Patience is advised for fans and media following the formerly-hyped Rizzo in his continuing baseball education. The move to slugging stardom – as with pitching – isn't always linear going upward.

Soriano finally found the right lineup spot – cleanup -- after 5 1/2 often-under-productive Cubs seasons. The news would be great if he was 30. But even though he's improved defensively in left field – just in time for chief critic Bob Brenly's departure – Soriano can scarcely be expected to pick up whatever long-ball load Rizzo can't carry as his career end seems in sight.

With the power prospects questionable and the Cubs not having much to lose, the relegating of Hairston to platoon status in his homecoming is odd. Thinking a bit outside the box, a manager and GM might give Hairston the majority of the starts given the lineup's needs. Schierholtz seeking his true level of performance may validate that strategy anyway.

The rest of the order promises more struggles. Ian Stewart's injuries cry "bust" again, so utility guy Luis Valbuena will play third with ol' Sox favorite Brent Lillibridge waiting in the wings. Wellington Castillo has promise yet to be fulfilled as a decent-hitting catcher. Bringing up the rear of the lineup is Gold Glove-winning second baseman Darwin Barney, who would love to break out of the stereotype of a .260 hitter.

The fans have been waiting for two-plus decades for a nice crop of position players to come through the system. The wait will continue for at least another year.

Starting rotation

The rotation had nowhere to go but up after Epstein and Hoyer seemingly pulled players off the street to pitch in the 2012 season's final two months.

This time, the Cubs were serious about starting a team trend of building from the rotation outward. Epstein and team chairman Tom Ricketts pitched a lucrative long-term deal in person to free agent Anabel Sanchez. The right-hander nearly bit, but gave the Detroit Tigers one last chance to sign him. The Tigers upped the ante and reeled Sanchez back in.

The Sanchez money, some \$52 million, instead went to the well-traveled Edwin Jackson, who lists the Sox on his many destination luggage tags. Jackson is no ace, but he's a reliable innings-eater and affable chap in the clubhouse.

Jackson was among a slew of middle-to-back-end rotation types the brass imported. Epstein noted the Cubs came to camp with seven qualified big leaguers for five spots. But that depth was diminished when right-hander Scott Baker, finishing his Tommy John surgery recovery, had recurring elbow soreness. Meanwhile, Matt Garza continued to add to his reputation as an oft-injured pitcher. That leaves the Cubs with Jackson, Carlos Villanueva, lefty Travis Wood, Scott Feldman and Jeff Samardzija as the starting five, with scarcely any kids except for southpaw Chris Rusin in reserve.

Samardzija is the most intriguing of the bunch, and the only arm who would be withheld from mid-season trade consideration. Once a nearly-failed, overpaid and overhyped prospect as a converted Notre Dame football star, the Valparaiso product may be the best self-made pitcher in baseball. "Shark" has worked like a demon in the off-season to get in shape to start and harness his wayward breaking stuff. Earning the Opening Day start, Samardzija is considered by both players and scouts as a potential No. 1, ace-level starter. He'll have to pitch through some inevitable non-support on a shaky team to get there, though.



Jeff Samardzija (center), with "Windy City Live" co-host Ryan Chiaverini, is the de facto Cubs ace this year.

The rotation has improved, but not enough to outpitch the league's best. Expect the Cubs to be on the short end of a lot of 4-3 and 3-1 scores.

Bullpen

The Garza and Baker injuries prevented the bullpen from going a legit five deep, as Villanueva would have been the long guy/swingman. For now, before the Cubs seri-

ously entertain Carlos Marmol trade offers, the seventh-through-ninth innings are decently covered through closer Marmol and setup men James Russell and Shawn Camp.

Japanese import Kyuji Fujikawa is intriguing. He could be Marmol's successor as closer based on his ninth-inning experience back home. But forecasting a Japanese player's prospects in the majors is tricky. It's hit-and-miss. The Cubs, though, have nothing to lose by giving Fujikawa a shot. Interestingly, he'll get his chance sooner if Marmol is effective – that is, if the “good” Marmol attracts a trade partner, clearing the closer's job for Fujikawa.

A pitcher who could move up in class in connection with the above speculative shuffling is Aurora-area product Michael Bowden. A former Epstein top draftee in Boston, Bowden finally found himself in the last few weeks of the 2012 season. He's got the power arm that is well-suited for late relief.

Manager

At least part of the real Dave Sveum already has stood up.

If you feel you can't get a “book” on Sveum because of the talent deficit with which he deals, then just look at the Cubs attitude wire to wire through their 2012 death march. You did not hear a peep about players cashing it in or clubhouse dissension. Almost to a man, the Cubs said Sveum kept the team together through the worst of trying times.

Still up for debate is the on-field identity of a Sveum team. Does it run or slug? Is he Capt. Matchup in the bullpen? Does he give his starters additional rope in the later innings? We won't know until Epstein and Hoyer decide their rebuilding journey is far enough along to ramp up the talent quotient – and if Sveum is given enough time to grow with the program.

Otherwise, the droll-sounding ex-shortstop's top image is the guy with the perpetual four-day growth of facial hair, drawing the criticism of a tradition fan at the Cubs Convention. He told Ricketts his manager look liked he “slept on a park bench.”

One hopes the Cubs don't go off-kilter again to wake Sveum in the middle of the night to seek that same bench for comfort.

Outlook

Epstein and Hoyer have actually suggested contention is possible. Sure it is, given dramatic year-to-year improvements in seven Cubs teams over the past half-century who have lost 90 or more games the previous season.

But these improving clubs all shared a common characteristic: They all had young pitching on the come to help vault upward in the standings.

This year's Cubs staff is modestly improved. Yet there are no Kerry Woods or Mark Priors to lead the way. Samardzija is a young veteran already. Some prime young arms

could get the Cubs within hailing distance of .500. But the before-mentioned group isn't good enough to win most low-scoring duels.

The 2013 Cubs probably won't lose 100 games again. But they are not yet at the turn-around-season point. If patience is a virtue, then Cubs fans are the most virtuous group on the planet as the wait moves well into a second century.