

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Take a right(field) turn to take measure of Cubs, Sox

By George Castle, CBM Historian

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Take two, and hit to right.

And there you'll find keys to success for the Cubs and White Sox in 2017 – Jason Heyward for the former, Avisail Garcia for the latter.

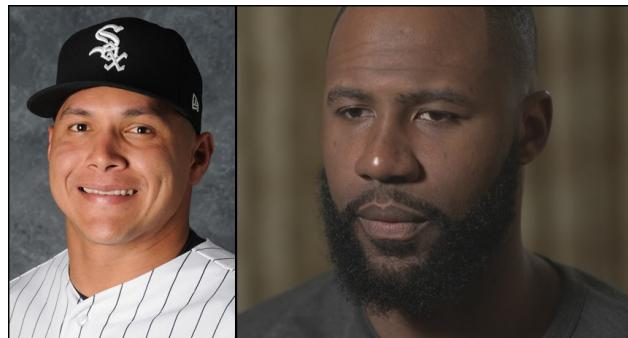
The pair of right fielders are crucial to bigger and better things. With the Cubs, the only thing bigger than winning a World Series is doing it again, for the first time for any team since the 1998-99 and 2000 New York Yankees. With the White Sox, better would be a semi-competitive, even fringe-of-contention effort in a year dedicated to a long-delayed rebuilding process.

Heyward's effort has been Herculean to prevent himself from becoming the position player equivalent of Steve Blass. The history refresher course sums up the Pirates' Blass as a 19-game-winner who suddenly lost all control and command in the snap of the fingers in his early 1970s prime. Pitching yips, if you will.

Heyward showed too many signs of a hitter's repeat of the Blass saga in 2016. Upstanding in character, a Gold Glove right fielder and superb baserunner, Heyward could not hit his weight and could barely get the ball out of the infield. If the Cubs weren't covered at so many other positions, he'd have been the most disastrous free-agent signee in Cubs history.

But if Heyward even stages a moderate comeback, Cubs fans won't believe their embarrassment of riches. Heyward would give the team three left-handed run producer types to go along with Anthony Rizzo and Kyle (Babe) Schwarber. The Cubs could scarcely assemble two southpaw swingers of such ilk for one or two years in a row – a Billy Williams-George Altman here, a Mark Grace-Henry Rodriguez there.

Factoring in a Heyward playing regularly, the Cubs have more qualified position players than they have lineup spots. With a robust spring training, Albert Almora, Jr. has bid for the lion's share of center-field duty. With a Heyward comeback, Joe Maddon would not feel pressured to get another left-handed bat in the mix via veteran Jon Jay in center.



Avisail Garcia (left) and Jason Heyward will be keys for the White Sox's and Cubs' narratives in 2017.

The franchise has come a long, long way from nine different center fielders in 1969 and eight in 1970. If Maddon moves people around, it's due to matchups and the need to give the Jays and the Javy Baez's enough playing time to keep them in the physical and emotional mix.

Meanwhile, eight miles south of Wrigley Field, the supposedly five-tool Garcia faces a make-or-break season. Once considered Miguel Cabrera's protégé and swift enough to play center field, the huge Venezuelan' stock has steadily dropped in the past two seasons. However, he's still young enough to be considered a piece of the rebuilding process. After all, he was a rebuilding piece when GM Rich Hahn cashed out several veterans at the trade deadline of the trail-of-tears 2013 season.

Garcia emergence could lengthen Sox lineup

Garcia fulfilling at least some of his potential would give the Sox a competitive middle of the lineup, given that Jose Abreu and Todd Frazier seem fated to stay throughout 2017. If Garcia gets going, and then is joined later in the spring by top-prospect Yoan Moncada at second base, then the Sox will be truly interesting. And for those impatient to see the Sox produce their own signed position players beyond Tim Anderson, there's Jacob May in center, forcing a trade of Peter Bourjos to the Rays.

The Sox narrative expands to a waiting game for the arrival of young pitchers Lucas Giolito and Michael Kopech. And also forbearance by fans anxious for more trades of veterans to further stock the organization with younger players. Here's the rub: that's the strategy of the majority of other organizations. Most teams would rather keep their own cost-controlled young players. The lineup of big-market teams trading half their farm systems for, say, a Chris Sale is shrinking. So the advice is patience until Hahn gets commensurate value for his chips. You'd rather get it right than get it quick.

Predictions are a risky business in the most unpredictable game, and a game of failure at that. I hesitate to proclaim the Cubs will repeat, or do this or that specifically. What will be cautioned is the postseason minefield, given the likelihood the Cubs will win the NL Central and not have to risk the one-game wild-card play-in.

The five-game Division Series is traditionally a 100-win team killer. The League Championship Series is the true endurance, talent test, more intense than most World Series. And if a team survives both, they must win four more games for the Commissioner's Trophy after almost all mental and physical reserves have been exhausted in a season that began in mid-February and ends the first week of November.

Most Cubs fans with whom I've spoken predict a repeat. I'm not sure they're taking the playoff minefield totally into account. With a bit of whimsy, our old friend Bruce Levine of AM 670 The Score projects a playoff scenario for the Cubs come late October:

"To repeat or not? That is the question. Nothing tougher in baseball. No National league team has done it since the' Big



Bruce Levine predicts the Cubs will meet their match in the NLCS.

Red Machine' (1975-76). The Chicago Cubs win 94 games and their division. They lose in seven games to the San Francisco Giants during a memorable NLCS. Jeff Samardzia out of the bullpen wins the finale with a shutout tenth inning. Javier Baez strikes out with the tying and winning runs at second and third base."

Perhaps the end won't be in such Casey-At-The-Bat style. But even though they're loaded like few other teams in modern times, the Cubs won't encounter the same exact series of events that blessed them in 2016. Something won't go right as the weather gets chillier, and 2016 will remain as their singular achievement to date.

Meanwhile, the Sox will be on the golf course at this juncture. But they might be feeling a sense of satisfaction. Could Rick Renteria mean the difference between fourth and third place? This could be one instance where a manager uplifts a team. Figure a more entertaining Sox story than the past couple of distasteful seasons.

In the end, predictions, to paraphrase the late Vice President John Nance Garner, aren't worth a pitcher of warm spit.