



Cubs' Mallee confident his crop of young hitters will adjust in new season

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John Mallee's dream-come-true is not quite finished.

The only native of the Chicago area sporting a Cubs uniform was counselor to baseball's most acclaimed group of young hitters in 2015. Now comes the hard part for both career-long hitting coach Mallee and the likes of Kris Bryant, Kyle Schwarber, Addison Russell and Jorge Soler.

Pitchers now have a decent "book" on the kids, and have adjusted. The job of Mallee and his pupils is to adjust in kind. The dreaded "sophomore jinx" takes place when the hitters' adjustment is not good enough, or someone got too fat and sassy off his initial success. See the cautionary tale of Jerome Walton after his NL Rookie of the Year season for the Cubs in 1989.

To Mt. Carmel High School product Mallee, the shaky attitude issue is off the table.

"It's hard to believe," he said of the hitters' en masse emergence last season. "But when you know the person, it's easier to believe. The quality of these people [is great]. The Cubs have drafted amazing people with the right aptitude and the right drive and the ability to make adjustments and the right makeup."

While serving as hitting coach of the Astros, in similar rebuilding mode to the Cubs, in 2013-14, Mallee heard about the Cubs' talent-acquisition process.

"I knew that from some people who were in the organization already," he said. "And after meeting Theo [Epstein] and Jed [Hoyer] a couple of years back, I knew exactly what they're about."

"The success they young guys had are twofold. One, it's their makeup and their abilities. Two, it's their experience. Addison Russell got way better as the season went on because



His young hitters enduring a sophomore jinx is not a concern for Cubs hitting coach John Mallee.

he got more comfortable and got more experience. A lot of it goes to batter-pitcher matchups. They never faced these guys before. Now they get some at-bats off these guys. They know how they're trying to get them out. They're talented enough so they're able to make adjustments."

The classic thought process is to bring kids along slowly and not simply throw them to the sharks. But Mallee believes his young hitters could handle the quick immersion into the deep end of the big leagues.

"It depends on the personality and human being," he said. "Guys like Schwarber and Kris Bryant, those guys don't have fear of anything. They believe in their abilities and they're able to make adjustments. They're very, very talented."

Mallee then broke down his hitters:

- Schwarber: "His personality is second to none. He can control the strike zone. He went through a stretch where he was really struggling. But you would never know he was struggling. He fought through it and kept plugging away and he knew it's only 0-for-1, not 0-for-5 or 0-for-20. Having guys like Anthony Rizzo and David Ross, those are guys that have handled this. Coming from a coach is one thing, but when your peers tell you they've all been through this is helpful. Now it's nice to have guys like [Ben] Zobrist and [Jason] Heyward who are successful to help the kids along.

- Rizzo's advancement in hitting left handers: "He made an adjustment off left-handers. Anthony and Eric Hinske [assistant hitting coach] made an adjustment the year before, getting him closer to the plate and taking away the inside corner on the pitcher. The ball had to be on the plate or off the plate for a ball. I give Eric all the credit. Anthony had no fear. He got hit 30-some times, and he's not moving. So he's standing close to the plate. You want to come inside? You're going to miss off the plate or you're going to hit him. So either way he's going to get on base in his mind."

- Bryant becoming a more complete hitter: "Just experience is going to do that. He's going to pick his spots in the game where he'll try to put the ball in play, and other times where he'll turn it loose."

- Russell as a power hitter or gap-to-gap man: "The way the ball comes off the bat the way it does for him, I can see him hitting 15 to 20 home runs. And he doesn't chase out of the strike zone. He swings at strikes. I don't know about middle-of-the-order. He's only 22. He's a very, very special talent."



(From left) Kyle Schwarber, Kris Bryant and Addison Russell all are expected to show even more maturity as hitters in 2016.

Mallee is often spotted standing next to mental maestro Joe Maddon in the dugout during games. The public Maddon is colorful enough. But to a member of his staff, he is an open-minded boss who delegates properly.

“He lets us do our job,” Mallee said. “He trusts us. He’s a very intelligent man on all facets of the game. But he doesn’t micromanage. When the game starts, he really takes over and does a great job. I guarantee he makes a difference. I watch him during the game. You wonder what he’s doing, and all of a sudden he works out. He’s so far ahead of us [in anticipation of moves].”

Mallee’s own profile in his hometown will increase by his Cubs employment and year-round presence.

Formerly, he had to wander the minor leagues as the Marlins’ roving hitting instructor, or live in Houston during the season. He was busy with baseball almost year-round. Growing up in the Hegewisch neighborhood on Chicago’s far Southeast Side, then moving across the Indiana state line to Schererville, Mallee established himself as a go-to guy for off-season youth instruction with a hitting school.

He still maintains the Indiana Shockers non-for-profit organization (IndianaShockers.com) to raise money for youths who otherwise could not afford to play travel baseball. These players are trained in the off-season by Mallee and assistants.

As a lifelong Cubs fan, Mallee has achieved one goal working at Wrigley Field. Another goal, playing at the end of October, still remains. Patience will be a virtue, and he believes his hitters possess that quality in abundance.