



## ***Sox's Abreu on pace for Chicago's greatest rookie power season***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
Posted Friday, May 2nd, 2014*

Like a runner barreling way ahead of the pack and breaking the tape, Jose Abreu knocked down all the rookie run production records for the start of the season with ease.

April still had the better part of a week to go when the White Sox' stellar slugger swept aside the first-year home-run and RBI major-league records for April set in 2001 by Albert Pujols, who counseled Abreu in spring training. He went into May Day with an MLB-leading 10 homers and 32 RBIs.

He was drenched in history in other ways. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, Abreu was tied with Joe DiMaggio (1936), Ted Williams (1939) and Pujols for the third-highest RBI total for a player in his first 29 career games. That trailed only Mandy Brooks (1925) and Jim Greengrass (1952-53). Abreu also tied Smead Jolley (July 1930) for the Sox rookie monthly record while tying for the third-highest monthly total in franchise history.

Abreu's homer total tied Zeke Bonura for the Sox record for a player's first 29 games, and was the most in franchise history for a rookie in any month. Only Paul Konerko had more homers (11) in April than any other player in Sox annals.

But there are still five months to go. Abreu appears to be the real deal, praised for his plate coverage from always-skeptical scouts to an ace like Justin Verlander. The Cuban



**Jose Abreu is on a pace to easily reach Ron Kittle's all-time Chicago rookie power numbers, achieved in 1983. Photo Credit: "Ron Vesely© 2013 Chicago White Sox."**

first baseman has in his sights on all the top rookie power records in Chicago baseball history, ranging from the likes of Beltin' Bill Melton to Geovany Soto to Billy Williams and, finally, champion Ron Kittle.

"Kitty's" 35 homers that garnered him American League rookie of the year award for the 1983 Sox are the most of any Chicago rookie on either side of town in one season. The pride of Wirt High School in Gary added an even 100 RBIs to his line for the "Winning Ugly" AL West champs skippered by Tony La Russa. After his 10-homer, 32-RBI start in April, Abreu is far ahead of Kittle's pace.



**Ron Kittle is far out in front of all players in Chicago history in rookie power production. But he has Jose Abreu in his rear-view mirror. Photo credit: Chicago White Sox.**

Kittle hopes his rookie feats are eclipsed by Abreu.

"Oh, yeah, he's more mature (than most rookies)," he said. "He's 27 years old. He's got a good eye at the plate. I like his swing. I like watching him hit. It's a good scenario for him and White Sox. I said I hope he handles the bad as well as he does the good."

Melton, now the Sox's pre- and post-game TV analyst on Comcast SportsNet Chicago, topped out at an AL-leading 33 homers in 1971 after belting 23 as a rookie in 1969. He has a good feeling Abreu will take a run at Kittle...and maybe more.

"His average will go up when they start walking him," Melton said. "I got a feeling he'll be in the 30s (homer totals)."

### **Hall of Famers called up in middle of first seasons**

Interestingly, considering all the Hall of Fame hitters who have passed through Chicago, few have had monster rookie seasons. The likes of Frank Thomas and Ron Santo were first called up during the summers of their rookie seasons, had home runs in single-digit totals and thus lost out on rookie of the year status when they amassed excellent initial full seasons. Ernie Banks had 19 homers and 79 RBIs in his first full year in 1954, before zooming to elite status with 44 homers in his second season.

Winners of rookies of the year awards like the Sox's Luis Aparicio (1956) and the Cubs' Ken Hubbs (1962) were singles and doubles hitters. Aparicio and Hubbs also garnered the honors partially due to their incomparable middle-infield defensive work.

Perhaps the greatest all-around offensive performance by a Chicago rookie was Minnie Minoso in his 1951 Sox season that broke the city's baseball color line. The Cuban Comet justly earned his nickname with 34 doubles, an AL-leading 14 triples and 31 stolen

bases, and a .326 average. But his 20-homer, 100-RBI seasons were off in the future. Minoso had 10 homers and 76 RBIs.

And, considering his teen-age status, Phil Cavarretta, who played the longest of any 20th century Cub, had a sensational rookie season in 1935, when he turned 19 in July. In 146 games, Cavvy had 8 homers (of his 162 hits) and 82 RBIs to go with a .275 mark. But, again, these were not power numbers.

Spacious old Comiskey Park had a dampening effect on power numbers for the most cagey veterans, let alone wet-behind-the-year kids. The Cubs had trouble producing quality position players through the majority of the post-1920 power era.

Kittle almost came out of nowhere to star for the Sox. So did his numbers. Injuries prevented a repeat. But it was a fun ride while it lasted.

And Kittle had to adjust while paying the price for his sudden emergence.

“I got hit all the time,” he said. “Back then it was a little more easy to go inside. Now they’re not going to pitch anyone inside.”

But comparing Kittle and Abreu is difficult, Melton said.

“Kittle was a different hitter, a strikeout hitter with power,” he said. “This kid is much more advanced at plate. Abreu is a hitter, Kittle was a threat at the plate.”

---

### **Sophomore sensations one year too late for rookie memories**

Some of Chicago’s most prominent hitters either were called up in mid-season as rookies or had seasons that were just below the sensational level.

A look at their rookie and sophomore seasons:

	Games	HR	RBI	Avg.
Bill Nicholson, Cubs				
1939	58	5	38	.295
1940	135	25	98	.297
Ernie Banks, Cubs				
1954	154	19	79	.275
1955	154	44	117	.295
Ron Santo, Cubs				
1960	95	9	44	.251
1961	154	23	83	.284
Frank Thomas, Sox				
1990	60	7	31	.330
1991	158	32	138	.318

---

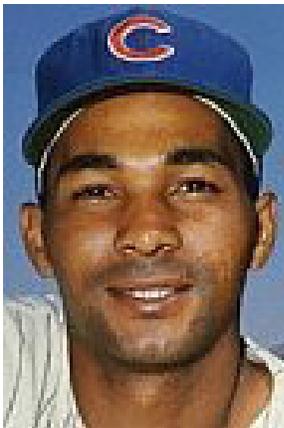
## Top NL rookie amid College of Coaches chaos

Earning NL rookie of the year honors in 1961, the Cubs' Williams had the second-best power season of any Chicago first-year player with 25 homers, 86 RBIs and a .278 average. Given the instability provided by the zany College of Coaches' system instituted that season, Williams' production is even more laudatory.

"The biggest thing is you're excited about being in the big leagues for this first year," Williams said. "Every city you go to, you explore the town. You've got to preserve the strength for the season. It's up to the manager to give the rookie some rest. Got to get out of lineup once in a while, not only for the physical (demands) of body, but also the mental part."

Abreu's ability to cover the plate and hit with authority to the opposite field, a la Williams and Thomas, will hold him in good stead long-term. The adjustment should be a challenge for pitchers when they try to institute new pitching patterns.

"From my point of view, I hit the ball the other way, I hit the ball up the middle," Williams said. "I always look middle of the plate and away. I had to adjust inside."



**Billy Williams has the Cubs' rookie home-run record with 25, achieved amid the chaos of the College of Coaches scheme.**



**Bill Melton, denied possible rookie of the year honors due to technicalities in the rules in 1969, believes Jose Abreu should reach the "30s" in homers. Photo credit: Chicago White Sox.**

Williams' production was nearly matched by Melton (23 homers and 87 RBIs in 1969) and Soto (23 homers and 86 RBIs in 2008). But while Soto was named NL rookie of the year, Melton was disqualified for the honor and the Royals' Lou Piniella won. Melton played in 34 games with 109 at-bats in 1968, and was told those numbers were too much to be classified as a rookie in '69. Had he qualified, he should have beaten out Piniella for the honor.

The latest qualification as a rookie, according to MLB.com, is: "A player shall be considered a rookie unless, during a previous season or seasons, he has (a) exceeded 130 at-bats or 50 innings pitched in the Major Leagues; or (b) accumulated more than 45 days on the active roster of a Major League club or clubs during the period of 25-player limit (excluding time in the military service and time on the disabled list)."

Apparently, the standards were slightly different 45 years ago.

Abreu has no such worries. Adjusting to the long grind of 162 games will be his biggest challenge. So will handling the media onslaught, even tougher for a first-player player who does not speak English. But on and off the field so far, the gentlemanly Abreu seems to have passed all the tests.

The Sox's most amazing hitter since Thomas has more numbers to reach, barriers to break through and awards to win.