



## ***Cubs, Sox have reasonable chance to both play into October***

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Could we have another rare season in which both the Cubs and White Sox make the postseason?

Don't bet your mortgage payment on it. Sports gambling is just plain foolish. But the teams do possess the best chance of playing into October together since they did it for the only time since 1906, in 2008, a postseason that produced just one Chicago win in seven games.

Above all, cool your jets in booking a sure World Series berth, if not the outright prize, for the Cubs. The team will need optimum performance from the roster, some surprises we cannot foresee at the moment and a reasonable amount of good fortune, if not outright luck. And that's just to qualify for the postseason.

The Sox start out with a stronger roster and a refreshed clubhouse attitude compared to the somnolent byplay of the past few seasons. The perception is the world-champion Royals, a Sox tormentor even in their bottom-feeding seasons, are slightly vulnerable and didn't add on much in the off-season gives hope to their AL Central competitors.

The combination of under-managed baseball operations departments, combined with bad fortune, has prevented more than the once-a-century dual trips in October. Come to think of it, the Cubs and Sox have fielded the league Most Valuable Players at the same time just once in history – in 1959 with Ernie Banks and Nellie Fox, respectively. A memorable photo of the dynamic duo with Jack Brickhouse is reprinted in the Television chapter of the new book *Baseball Game Changers*.

What's different about 2016? Both teams have made all the right moves in bolstering their lineups.



**Joe Maddon (left) will need to repeat his strategy to give the Cubs extra rest, while 16 or 17 wins will be a fine season for Jake Arrieta (right).**

## **Depth finally protects the Cubs**

The Cubs have booked insurance against any of their prized young hitters suffering through backsliding with Jason Heyward and Ben Zobrist. Meanwhile, the Sox have been nearly impotent in recent years in taking advantage of the home-run-friendly U.S. Cellular Field. Thirty-five-home-run man Todd Frazier's arrival to provide protection for Jose Abreu promises to change the lineup for the better. New second baseman Brett Lawrie has a good chance to reach the 20-homer mark while boosting the edgy attitude quotient.

Due to Wrigley Field's legislated playing conditions, each Cubs season is a greater endurance test than any other big-league team experiences. City of Chicago ordinance prevents the team from playing a majority of games at night, matching the schedule and working hours of all opponents. Major leaguers are night-shift workers like most other entertainers .

Manager Joe Maddon is renowned for his bread and circuses that lighten up the daily grind. But Maddon's most underrated move in 2015 was canceling batting practice in the majority of second-half games, allowing players more rest and not forcing them to show up too early for afternoon home games during the dog days. Even with a new 30,000-square foot underground clubhouse opening this season, enabling players to zone out and avoid the media like never before, Maddon will need to adopt a similar tactic come mid-summer.

Concurrently, successful Cubs teams must possess better depth than opponents. Extra starting-quality players are needed in the wings, not the likes of Nate (Pee Wee) Oliver, Rob Sperring or Junior Kennedy. This year's team has just such an advantage.

Javier Baez can play three infield positions at a defensively top level. Zobrist can shift to any number of other positions besides second base if a slump or injury necessitates the move. Heyward's arrival and the re-signing of center fielder Dexter Fowler have forced Kyle Schwarber and Jorge Soler into a left-field platoon. That's a lot better than over-exposing the two kids. And the depth gives Maddon the opportunity to further give Schwarber catching experience without putting the talented young hitter under the gun behind the plate.

Depth also protects the starting rotation. Theo Epstein and Jed Hoyer have a platoon of former starters in the bullpen to fill in for any broken-down rotation member. Trevor Cahill once was an 18-game winner in Oakland. Yankees émigré Adam Warren likely could start and thrive right now. Travis Wood and Clayton Richard are experienced left-handed options.

## **Arrieta winning 16 a good expectation**

No one should expect Jake Arrieta to repeat his other-worldly Cy Young Award season. In the five-man rotation with extensive bullpen use of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, another 22- or even 20-win season is extremely unlikely. The logical goal for Arrieta is simple consistency. If he wins 16 or 17, he's just fine given a number of starts' decisions will inevitably be awarded to the bullpen.

The biggest expectation is an upgrade in performance in Jon Lester. He did not pitch poorly at all in 2015, but he did not maintain his old standards. If Lester can approach the 14- or 15-win level, he's earning his free-agent bucks. Lester buddy John Lackey merely has to show consistency and stave off creeping ageism at 37.

Bullpens rarely display even performance from season to season, so a surprise is needed to emerge for the Cubs. There is just not the slam-dunk confidence in the likes of Hector Rondon and Pedro Strop to lock things down from the eighth inning on, despite their numbers. The team that avoids a shaky bullpen is the one that maintains its attitude and survives into October.

The Cubs should take advantage of the talent drain away from the arch-rival Cardinals. Mike Matheny needs to replace Heyward's all-around talents and Lackey's veteran savvy. The early line is the Cardinals don't have what it takes to cruise in the mid- and upper-90-win range. But the 'Birds won't be grounded by any means. The Pirates have always played tough, but they have not added to a competitive roster in the same manner as the Cubs. The status of their chief competitors puts a premium on the Cubs winning the division to avoid the anything-can-happen wild-card play-in game.

On the South Side, the surest way to keep the Royals in sight will be a revival of prodigious power production to protect a solid front of the rotation. So many good performances, particularly by southpaw Jose Quintana, have gone to waste due to the laggard Sox lineup.

### **Garcia improvement top Sox need**

The book here is the key Sox everyday player is not Abreu, Frazier or Lawrie. Avy Garcia was the mainstay Sox acquisition as part of the start of re-tooling in mid-2013. Injuries and underperformance have prevented a final judgment on the husky Venezuelan. Garcia performed no better than a platoon player with defensive liabilities in 2015. If he plays up to the earlier scouting evaluations, he plugs a big hole in the lineup. If not, the Sox have a problem.

Melky Cabrera, either in the outfield or at DH, also needs to perform up to par. Subtracting a needed left-handed bat in Adam La Roche, first through his worst season and then his abrupt retirement, makes a good season from the left-handed-hitting Cabrera a must. At the same time, Frazier must avoid the league-adjustment woes that apparently plagued La Roche and Adam Dunn before him.

The Sox should gain offensively at catcher no matter who plays. Good-character and quality pitcher-handler Tyler Flowers just could not make consistent contact. The combination of Alex Avila and Dioner Navarro will be a composite improvement on Flowers.



**Avisail Garcia (left) is key to filling out the Sox lineup, while David Robertson (right) will be motivated to improve as closer.**

Austin Jackson's arrival to anchor the outfield is welcome. He was a longtime Sox killer with the Tigers. Jackson could have helped the Cubs, for whom he played at the end of last season. But Epstein's preference to bring back Fowler ends up the Sox's gain. Jackson can hit competitively, but his main contribution is speed and the kind of defense sorely lacking in recent Sox seasons.

The Sox's pitching staff overall is good enough to contend. David Robertson will be motivated to smooth over some blown saves from 2015, and he has a decent setup crew. The only caution lights are the end of the rotation in John Danks and Mat Latos. Lefty Danks has never truly become a Mark Buehrle-style craftsman in the years after shoulder surgery took away his prime fastball. Latos had a poor spring training. The Sox obviously aren't satisfied with former top prospect Erik Johnson, so they'd likely look elsewhere if a hole opens up in the rotation.

Should the Royals drift back to the pack a bit and the incomplete aspects of the Tigers, Indians and Twins create a scramble in the AL Central, the Sox should have a chance. Again, the strong preference is a first-place finish. If ever a whole bunch of Sox players needed career seasons, 2016 is the time. The Cell is much more lively when a string of 30,000 crowds and their enthusiasm is recorded, and lagging attendance is not an annual storyline.

A formal call is not forthcoming here. Suffice to say, the Cubs have a good chance to finish first. Anything after that is up to the baseball gods, and beyond the comprehension of mortal men (and women). The Sox should be squarely in the mix. This season will be a lot more interesting than your typical Chicago summer.