

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

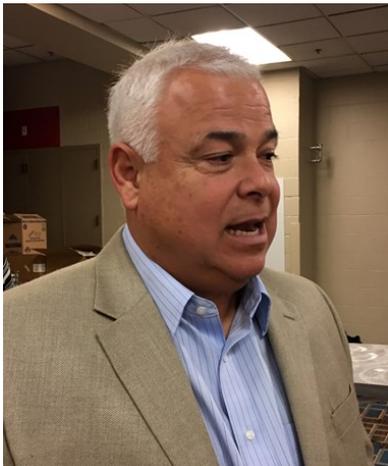
## *Renteria the type to lift Sox, players beyond modest expectations*

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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I have the sneaking suspicion the White Sox will play better than their projected talent level under Rick Renteria.

The new manager, supposedly put into place to oversee the rebuilding program, neatly cleaves the divide between gimmicky humorist Joe Maddon and low-key, laconic Robin Ventura. Renteria's personality is perfectly suited for the task at hand, including several individual revival projects.

Only the second man in history after Johnny Evers to manage both the Sox and Cubs, Renteria's bi-lingual talent and cultural familiarity with Latin players should pay off from the get-go. He proved with the Cubs he's a people person, and he's simply three years older and wiser on the South Side.



**Rick Renteria is the type who can get stalled careers going. Photo credit: Chicago Baseball Museum & Dr. David Fletcher.**

Chicago Baseball Museum President Dr. David J. Fletcher believes the promotion of Renteria, after serving as Ventura's bench coach last year, was the best off-season move by either Chicago team.

Fletcher got the measure of Renteria in a Chicago conversation in late January. Informed of his status as a dual-Chicago team manager, he said, "I am probably very fortunate to go from one side of town as a big-league manager to the other side of town as a big league manager. I am looking forward to the opportunity on the South Side and bring whatever I can to move (the Sox) forward."

Ventura was the right man for his time. The Sox needed to dial down the clubhouse currents after the negative end of the Ozzie Guillen era. Ventura had a somewhat-flawed Sox roster in first place in the American League Central well into September in 2012. But after the team collapsed down the stretch to a superior Tigers club, Ventura did not have the intensity, or whatever, to re-ignite the Sox in subsequent years as patchwork talent acquisition was the flavor of the day.

Take Avisail Garcia, for instance. The big right fielder has had a failure to launch with the Sox for three-plus seasons under Ventura. But I can recall the promise of the summer of 2013, when he came off as an apprentice to Miguel Cabrera, who confirmed he worked with Garcia. The Sox initially marketed Garcia as a center-field prospect despite his size. They touted his athleticism.

Perhaps injuries and Ventura's low-decibel style were not suited to lighting a fire under Garcia and keeping it stoked through the years. If Renteria cannot get something out of Garcia, then the Sox should move on.

I would also give Renteria props for handling a forthcoming Peter Bourjos/Charlie Tilson playoff in center field. Veteran Bourjos, from Chicago roots, was the likely starter on Opening Day, given Wilmette native Tilson's disablement due to a compression fracture. Eventually youth will be served, but Renteria will find a way to keep Bourjos in the fold mentally if he has to yield time to Tilson.

Bourjos and Renteria certainly can relate. Bourjos looked like an Angels staple in center field with a decent rookie season at the plate and sensational, wall-climbing defense. But then Mike Trout followed him up from the farm system a year later. "The Natural" could not be denied, and thus Bourjos was forced into fourth-outfielder status. His career as a 140-game-a-year regular has been sidetracked ever since.

### **After Cubs gig, Renteria can relate to tough situations**

We all know the Renteria story. Hired by Theo Epstein to further shepherd his rebuilding program, Renteria actually had the Cubs on a moderate upswing in competitiveness as 2014 ended. Then a fluky set of circumstances made Maddon available. Against all baseball etiquette, Epstein dumped Renteria with two contract years to go in favor of Maddon with his small-market playoff pedigree. Just like the sensational Trout pushing the competent Bourjos aside. Renteria could relate to Bourjos' situation better than any other manager.

Still another important Renteria task will be keeping the clubhouse together, and motivated, as likeable veteran players are traded for more rebuilding parts. Until those deals happen – the Sox should not be rushed until they get commensurate value in return – speculation will envelop the clubhouse daily. Renteria will need to keep the targeted veterans in an upbeat mood and not have anyone sulking, risking infecting the kids already in the organization with questionable attitudes.



**Rick Renteria ranks with Johnny Evers as the only two men to manage both the Cubs and Sox. Here, Renteria (left) talks to Comcast SportsNet Chicago's David Kaplan when he assumed the Cubs job for 2014. Photo credit: Chicago Baseball Museum & Dr. David Fletcher.**

Renteria believes a player's mental discipline and concentration is the uplifting factor between consignment to Triple-A or lower, and a spot on a big-league roster. The player who has this prerequisite will have plenty of support from the manager.

"The difference between big league and minor leagues in terms of performance comes between the ears is the ability to control emotion and slow the game down," said Renteria. The man is very warm and engaging, will often put his arm around you when you speak to him, said Fletcher.

Back in Jan. 2014, Fletcher had interviewed Renteria in his first media appearance in Chicago as a big manager after he was appointed to the Cubs job. After undergoing hip-replacement surgery, Renteria could not immediately travel back to Chicago after being hired in late 2013. The 2014 Cubs Convention was his first taste of Chicago media.

"Rick was very appreciative when I asked him in Jan. 2017 how he was doing with his hip replacement three years later," Fletcher said. "He just exudes class — as a baseball lifer — who really wants to make a difference in young men's lives.

"I told him how classy he was to take the high road after the Cubs let him go to bring on the quirky Joe Maddon. I really believe that Rick is great fit for the White Sox with his positive personality and bi-lingual language skills."

The best thing about the Renteria hiring is Sox GM Rick Hahn envisions him and his staff as still being in charge when, and if, the Sox return to contender's status. Dale Sveum, and then presumably Renteria, were perceived as placeholders in the Cubs job until they achieved prime-time status.

Without the crazy-quilt Maddon defection from Tampa Bay, Renteria was projected overseeing perhaps a .500 team in 2015. Epstein and Co. did not expect contender's status 'til 2016. The process obviously advanced faster than anyone expected. No five-year rebuilding plan indeed at Wrigley Field.

### **Manager comfortable with young talent**

On either side of town, Renteria was comfortable managing young talent. "We have seen a lot of video on these young men, extremely talented, skill set is very high," he said. "The difference from having a younger group is that you try to take advance to opportunity—to take a situation and learn from those moments so that the next time they go out and have a same situation occur, they are more well-equipped."

Young players whom Renteria managed swear by him. Marcus Neddles, a product of Chicago's Beverly neighborhood, played baseball at the University of Miami and spent time in the Padres farm system under Renteria. He absolutely adores Renteria.



**Peter Bourjos' own story of being pushed aside by Mike Trout is similar to Rick Renteria yielding to Joe Maddon.**

“He had a lot of positive influence in my life,” said Neddles. Though he never rose above the high minors, Renteria was still interested in what kind of young man Neddles had become. He was delighted to hear that after Neddles’ baseball career ended, he became an Illinois State Police officer.

If the Sox are lucky, they won’t just be bubbling up into the mid-80s win range in 2022 as part of that five-year rebuilding program. Rare is the manager who keeps his job for a half decade. However long it takes, though, the baseball gods owe Renteria from his quick departure from the Cubs. May he collect, with compounded interest, on the South Side.