



## ***Kyle Schwarber projects his own Cubs future as great baseball minds confirm his self-confidence***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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If Kyle Schwarber can't be even more successful than he already has been in his sensational break-in month as a Cub, something's seriously wrong.

The stocky catcher-outfielder-natural hitter drips motivation and student of baseball from every pore, and wizened baseball men can spot those qualities at 40 paces or closer.

"I've seen a guy make adjustments pitch to pitch," Cubs Hall of Famer Billy Williams said of Schwarber. "He's just a baseball player knowing what he can do to be successful. He has work to do (to improve) behind the plate. I sat in a meeting the other day with the catching coach, and (Schwarber) talked like a veteran getting out the hitters. He's an individual who wants to learn. Those who have an ear and open mind to learn do well in the game."

Cincinnati Reds third-base coach Jim Riggleman, the last man to manage five full seasons for the Cubs, senses an elite hitter after Schwarber fast-tracked through the minor leagues since his June 2014 selection as the Cubs' No. 1 pick.

"The really impact guys get there quickly," he said. "Go back through the history of the game. The greatest hitters didn't get to big leagues at 25, 26. For most part, the great ones were there early, like (Mickey) Mantle, (Hank) Aaron, (Ted) Williams, (Albert) Pujols. In the old days, you had B leagues and C leagues. But good players skipped those leagues. The bottom line is results, is he's too good to be held down in minors? (Schwarber) was like Albert, who was in the Midwest League tearing it up. They just can't be held down. They're too good."

"I don't care how it works, the ball jumps off his bat. He pulled the ball against us against a lot. He got big hits, drove in runs. He's just an advanced hitter."



**Kyle Schwarber booked an express ticket to Wrigley Field after the equivalent of one minor-league sea-**

## A ‘pretty disciplined hitter’

From the scout’s eye, Marty Miller saw a fast comer and polished ball-player as far back as Schwarber’s Indiana University days. Lifelong Chicago North Sider Miller, a 35-year scouting veteran now with the Detroit Tigers, eyed all a team would want in drafting and developing an impact left-handed hitter in Schwarber.

“He is a pretty disciplined hitter,” Miller said. “First thing I saw was how strong he was, the bat control he has and quickness. Those things stick out at you right away. He had a really good eye. If you got a guy who has a really quick bat, he has chance of being a good hitter being longer on the ball. It all goes back to the quick stroke. He appears to be pretty mentally tough and stays in there against a left-handed pitcher.

And, “he appears to be such a determined kid to do whatever it takes to get in the lineup”.

Schwarber suddenly is drawing the hype that was missing in his entrance to pro ball as other members of the original “Core Four” of prospects hogged the headlines. Now he forced manager Joe Maddon into big lineup changes as the hottest Cubs hitter at the hottest time of the year. Schwarber’s clutch hitting and versatility to stay in the lineup both behind the plate and in left field enabled the Cubs to separate themselves from a pack of contenders. They jumped in the lead for the second wild-card berth while keeping the wild-card pacing Pittsburgh Pirates in their sights.

But Schwarber also triggered another race. He powered his way into consideration for NL Rookie of the Year, gaining fast on pre-season favorite Kris Bryant. His sudden emergence as an irresistible offensive force is reminiscent of Hall of Famer Willie McCovey’s express ticket to the rookie honors in just two months in 1959. McCovey went 4-for-4 with two triples against fellow future Cooperstown enshrine Robin Roberts on July 30, 1959, hit .354 the rest of the season and finished with 521 homers 22 seasons later.

Schwarber had 95 at-bats on Aug. 12, 2015. He needed 130 at-bats to be eligible for Rookie of the Year. *USA Today* baseball columnist Bob Nightengale was one of the first national writers to suggest Schwarber will win the award hands-down if he hits .300 or better while carrying the Cubs to a playoff spot.



**Kyle Schwarber showed his enthusiasm and willingness to learn quickly during a 23-game stint as a Kane County Cougar in 2014.**

Schwarber was not dropped from a tree. He did not materialize out of a cornfield. He had a great pedigree at Indiana University. And when he had a 23-game tenure within easy commuting distance of Chicago at Kane County in July 2014, he painted a personal picture of a consummate baseball player disciplined and educated at the plate, and eager to learn behind it.

### **CBM first to profile Schwarber's hitting style, desire to catch**

"Cubs catch possible leader of 'Click Six' in Schwarber" was the story this writer authored here on July 8, 2014, after profiling Schwarber's second professional stop in the Class A Midwest League a month after his drafting. The CBM's style is to go away from the madding crowd -- in this case the mass hype over Kris Bryant -- and report on players and management actions that don't get as much attention, but will have just as important an impact on the timeline of Chicago baseball.

In a wide-ranging interview with the CBM at the time, Schwarber in essence forecast his 2015 performance that has thrilled Cubdom and helped accelerate Theo Epstein's rebuilding program.

"I like to pride myself on just hitting the ball hard, putting balls in play and not striking out so much," he said at the time. "I know home runs are going to happen, and I'll have my fair share of 'oh-fer' days, too. The good thing is you have another day to come out and play... You just got to keep grinding out at-bats, each pitch.

"I like to pride myself on my approach. I like to think I have an advanced approach at the plate. I don't like to chase things. I like to pride myself on getting my pitch. You only get one or two pitches each at-bat, and you have to take advantage of it. I like to pride myself in getting into counts I can take advantage of."

Williams was spot-on in analyzing how Schwarber could adjust his approach from pitch to pitch. That was his stated philosophy in his second month as a pro.

"I feel like I'm a good-enough hitter to make adjustments during at-bats," he said. "That's a good thing about being a catcher. You get a feeling of what pitchers are trying to do to you. You got to know situations, a lot of situational stuff. You might get breaking balls or changeups or fastballs out of the zone. You're going to have to take advantage of those situations and drive in a run sometime."

Schwarber's hitting style was no secret in the Big Ten. University of Illinois coach Dan Hartleb faced a huge challenge slowing down Schwarber when he played the Hoosiers.



**Hall of Famer Billy Williams noted the disciplined Schwarber could adjust from pitch to pitch -- as the wise-beyond-his-years player vowed to do in his first pro season. Photo credit Chris Evans via [Wikimedia Commons](#).**

“I didn’t think Kyle had a lot of holes,” Hartleb said in 2014. “He was very aggressive in the zone early in the count. We tried to attack him but we also tried to use our heads. He’s a competent hitter, but not a swing-and-miss guy.”

Williams had heard about Schwarber early on. He made the short trip with his grandchildren from his longtime west-suburban Glen Ellyn home to watch Schwarber at Kane County. No doubt he had flashbacks to his own sweet left-handed swing in the mature way Schwarber handled the pitchers.

“He got an inside pitch, and hit to right field hard,” Williams said. “Then the pitcher worked him on the outside of the plate, and he went to left field.”

The majority of scouts and baseball pundits predicted the Cubs would make Schwarber an outfielder in the long-term. Such projections took a bit of the edge off Schwarber as a can’t-miss prospect.

### **‘Cubs made a great draft’**

“He was catching in a competitive conference in college baseball,” Riggles said of the Big Ten. “The Cubs made a great draft. Some teams stayed away from him, due to the catching thing. But when you can swing the bat, they’ve got to find a place for you.”

Schwarber told of his firm desire to become a defensively skilled catcher in the 2014 chat. Then-Cougars manager Mark Johnson, a former White Sox and Cubs catcher, took part in the defensive instruction. He reported Schwarber was a quick learner who needed to be told something just once. Now he has to practice this discipline to learn on the job in the majors as Maddon entrusts him with part-time catching duties.

“I have a lot to improve on,” Schwarber said in 2014. “I’ve been working with (Cubs catching coordinator Tim) Cousins, teaching me a lot of things. It’s kind of a drastic change in what I’ve been doing in college and what I’ve been doing here. More of a functional thing with your body.”

He told of experiencing a “great feeling” gunning down a baserunner.

“Sometimes you’re not going to have that luxury (of perfect pitch on which to throw),” Schwarber said. “You got to have trust in the pitcher if they’re going to holding the runner and they have the trust of you making a good throw. It’s practice, practice, practice, practice. But when it comes to the game, you can’t think about mechanical things, you just got to let it go. Teach yourself good habits, teach yourself closing off your shoulder, not being open and those things you practice on, they come much naturally in the game.”

Schwarber had yet another important quality – good character. The top player development systems put a premium on character as much as raw talent. The Atlanta Braves were renowned for decades in taking a “character guy” over simply a “tools” guy, then trying to develop his baseball skills. Apparently, Schwarber has the best of both worlds.

“The thing that stands out most about Kyle is leadership ability. I have great respect for him,” Hartleb said in 2014.

Such an in-depth narrative was not commonly reported in Chicago at the time. Most of the 2014 hype centered on Bryant, in the middle of a 43-homer season split between Double-A and Triple-A. Bryant was joined in the Core Four by Javier Baez and Jorge Soler, who would make their Cubs debuts in the second half of 2014. Outfielder Albert Almora, the Theo Epstein posse's first No. 1 pick in 2012, was on the steady track in his climb through the farm system.

But Schwarber's obvious offensive potential in his first pro season and the arrival of shortstop Addison Russell in the Jeff Samardzija trade led this site to expand the group's title to the "Click Six." Interestingly, Schwarber and Russell are now Cubs regulars.

### **Too much pressure on one good farm product?**

Schwarber may have been helped by the focus away from him and on the established quartet of top prospects. Hype cuts both ways. If it's focused on one individual as a "savior," nothing good can come of the hoopla.

Riggleman had just such an example with home-grown third baseman Kevin Orie in 1997. The Cubs had searched for a successor to Ron Santo for a generation. They had that man, but foolishly, and with some prejudice, traded Bill Madlock after two straight batting championships amid a salary dispute early in 1977. The tall, rangy Orie, not unlike Bryant in physical stature, had to bear all the attention by himself without other top position-player prospects to share the production and publicity load.

Making matters worse was the 0-14 start, a franchise worst, for the '97 Cubs. Orie finished that season with a modest 8 homers and 44 RBIs, going downhill quickly in 1998 and leaving the organization the following year. Orie's only historical marker was having the only Houston Astros hit in Kerry Wood's 20-strikeout game glance off his glove.

In contrast, Schwarber broke in on a Cubs team that had reversed five consecutive losing seasons by contending from Day One in 2015.

"Now there's a whole bunch of (young) stars," said Riggleman. "All eyes were on Kevin (Orie) in 1997. Schwarber happens to struggle a little bit, someone else will pick up the slack in 2015."

Schwarber generated his own hype, handling it with aplomb, on the late night of July 21. The game at Great American Ballpark might as well been a McCovey-like debut even though Schwarber's first game was five weeks previously in Cleveland followed by a short demotion to Triple-A. With a big gathering of family and friends from his nearby hometown of Middletown, Ohio, in the house and Riggleman helpless to stop him from his vantage point in the Reds dugout, No. 2 hitter Schwarber slugged a two-run homer in the ninth to tie the game, then won it with a solo shot in the 13<sup>th</sup>. He also caught the entire game.



**Willie McCovey, a fellow Mobile-area baseball product like Billy Williams, seized the 1959 NL Rookie of the Year Award with a sensational two-month performance.**

That's hitting unconsciously. Williams knows a young hitter in that zone does not need too much information. He's doing it instinctively. Been there, and done that in his own journey to Cooperstown. So "Whistler" has chosen not to give hitting tips to Schwarber, allowing Cubs hitting coach John Mallee, a Schererville, Ind., resident, to be the one voice getting into his head.

### **McCovey, Williams part of baseball's Mobile connection**

There will be time enough to share stories with Schwarber. The kid's the type of baseball junkie to soak it up at the right moment. As a fellow raw rookie in the final two months of 1959, Williams witnessed McCovey's rampage. In the same week as his own initial call-up, he saw McCovey's first two Wrigley Field homers on August 14 and 15, 1959. During that four-game weekend series, McCovey was already a Giants mainstay, teaming with Willie Mays and Orlando Cepeda as the heart of the lineup. Williams was fortunate to get one pinch-hit at-bat during the four-game weekend series.

Interestingly, outfielder George Altman and catcher Cal Neeman slugged walk-off homers in the ninth and 10<sup>th</sup> innings, respectively, on Sept. 22-23, 1959 at Wrigley Field to help knock out the Giants and McCovey from an NL pennant race eventually won by the arch-rival Dodgers. Altman's two-run clout off former Cubs no-hit pitcher Sam Jones took place hours before the White Sox clinched the AL pennant in Cleveland.

Even though McCovey did damage against the Cubs wire-to-wire in his career, Williams was proud of a fellow product of the baseball-rich Mobile, Ala., area.

"(Henry) Aaron set a precedent from Mobile," Williams said. "Willie could drive the ball, hit the ball a long way, a good low-ball hitter. He could run pretty good as a big man. McCovey and my brother Franklin (an outfielder) knew each other in the Georgia State League."

After McCovey's award-winning season, he got together with Williams during the winter. The two left-handed swatters bowled and played basketball. Two years later, after a season-long demotion to Triple-A Houston, Williams followed in McCovey's steps with his own Rookie of the Year season. They would be friendly competitors for the next 13 seasons.



**Kyle Schwarber got good exposure in a distinctive uniform at the Futures Games. Photo credit [Arturo Pardavila III](#).**

Now Schwarber takes his whacks at the prospect of following Williams, Kenny Hubbs, Jerome Walton, Kerry Wood and Geovany Soto as a Cubs Rookie of the Year. That would be gravy atop the main desired course. The smart kid who would be a catcher has the Cubs dreaming of the ultimate hardware – the Commissioner’s Trophy for the World Series winner.

Bad news for NL Central foes is that best possible outcome won’t be the end-all to these kids’ careers. Riggelman knows his Reds will see Schwarber and Co. for a long time.

“When you’re in a division where they (Cubs) are developing talent in big leagues, you’re going to be competing against these guys the next eight years,” he said.

Schwarber truly was the story behind the story. He was relatively under the radar – but a year ago, the CBM first profiled his coming stardom.