

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Home-grown players key in past Sox successes

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Three for the price of one:

- All the hand-wringing over a potential White Sox rebuilding program should cease.

The effort is best spent looking over what worked in the past to develop position players who were keys on winning Sox teams, and trying to duplicate strategies that eventually were put aside.

Larry Himes, of course, was famed for striking gold on four consecutive No. 1 draft picks from 1987 to 1990: Jack McDowell, Robin Ventura, Frank Thomas and Alex Fernandez. Third baseman Ventura and first baseman Thomas, of course, were the cornerstones of the 1993 AL West champion team. Left out in the Himes record was picking second baseman Ray Durham in the fifth round in 1990. Durham was a sparkplug on the 2000 AL Central titlists.

Remember Ron Karkovice? The gritty catcher who slugged 20 homers for the '93 team was the Sox's No. 1 pick in 1982.

International signees Carlos Lee of Panama and Maggs Ordonez out of Venezuela were the run-producing outfield corners for the 2000 team. Thomas, of course, should have been the AL MVP in 2000, but somehow lost out to the PED-inflated Jason Giambi. And the Big Hurt had a minor role on the 2005 world champions. He would have been the primary DH if not for injury.

Third baseman Joe Crede and center fielder Aaron Rowand, both original Sox signees, were also 2005 lineup mainstays. Crede's career, in fact, was in its ascendency in 2005, but was cut short three years later by recurring back problems.

Common thread among many of these home-grown players was longtime scouting director Duane Shaffer. Few complained about Shaffer's department's production through the 1990s and into the early 2000s. Eventually Shaffer was ousted, taking some blame.

But by the mid-2000s, top management refused to play the game of overpaying on No. 1 picks as the draft system allowed at the time. Sox baseball operation revenues were



Ray Durham was among home-grown position players who were key for the 2000 Sox.

directed toward the big-league club. The Latin scouting system was compromised by the Dave Wilder scandal. So what was likely an upper middle-of-the-pack scouting and development system withered. Years of savvy drafting and astute trades will be required for re-stocking to where the Sox can populate the lineup with their own players.

In effecting his quick Cubs turnaround, Theo Epstein and posse emphasized position players. Now he has a seeming surplus. The pitching has lagged behind. It's a numbers game. You have eight position players and one pitcher. Short-change the former in development, and it doesn't matter how adept you are at producing the latter.

- Dusty Baker is bound to face some old ghosts from his Cubs days if his Washington Nats face the Cubs in the postseason.

And I'll have a personal reminder of Baker's Wrigley Field tenure with a likely upcoming Mark Prior chapter in my next book project.

The inaccuracies about Baker's handling of Prior and Kerry Wood will be resurrected. Baker figuratively was nailed to the cross when the two pitching wunderkinds broke down starting in 2004, and closed the window on Baker nailing down the proverbial last five outs to the World Series after the 2003 near-miss.

Little-known and never publicized, except by this writer, was ex-hitter Baker's formula for pulling starters. Baker looked at "stress situations" – how many times a starting pitcher had to work out of big jams with multiple runners in scoring position. The rule of thumb was once a pitcher experienced three such situations in a game, it was time to consider pulling the starter.

Baker did not keep such philosophies a secret. But to find out, media members had to pull him aside one on one and not just settle for group interviews pre- and post-game.

To really baby Prior and Wood the way the pundits desired, Baker would have needed a 15- or 16-man pitching staff. Both right-handers were often past 100 pitches in the sixth inning. Constantly pulling starters that early would kill any pitching staff.

I think the one example of handling Prior best exemplifies Baker. On June 26, 2003 at Wrigley Field, Prior gave up two runs in the sixth as the Brewers cut a 3-0 Cubs lead to one. But in the seventh and eighth, Prior fanned all six Milwaukee hitters, five of them swinging. He had 16 strikeouts. Prior would have had a share of the all-time Cubs single-game record if not for Wood's 20-strikeout performance in 1998.

After eight innings and 127 pitches, a count no doubt inflated by six consecutive whiffs, Prior was dismissed with the lead, turning the game over to closer Joe Borowski to start the ninth. But Jersey Joe served up a three-run homer to Geoff Jenkins onto Sheffield Avenue. The Cubs went on to lose 5-3. Was Baker supposed do the old-school Leo



Dusty Baker actually had a formula for determining how much stress a starting pitcher should endure.

Durocher act to leave in Prior to go over 130 pitches amid his strikeout spree? At the other extreme, should Baker have pulled a “dealing” Prior after seven?

Sometimes pitchers simply get hurt. They cannot be handled like brittle porcelain. And if they come up lame, someone inevitably serves as scapegoat. Mother Nature and the strains overhand pitching put on the human body are not handy targets.

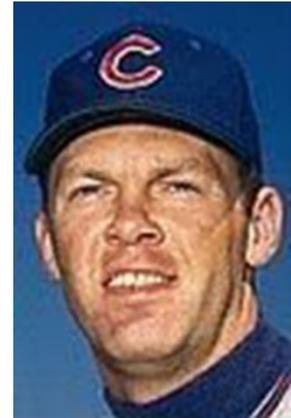
- Richard Dozer, the late Chicago Tribune baseball beat writer, never got the credit colleague Jerome Holtzman traditionally received for scoops and inside-baseball perspective.

But it was at this juncture 46 years ago, during the hoopla of an 11-game homestand to wrap up August for the first-place 1969 Cubs, that Dozer sensed something was wrong. He proved to be the canary in the coal mine.

After one loss, Dozer asked a shaving Leo Durocher if the Cubs seemed tired. Leo The Lip put down his razor, marched Dozer and the other beat writers into the main clubhouse down the left-field line, and ordered every Cubs player into the room. Durocher then asked Dozer to repeat his question. Of course, no Cub admitted publicly he was tired.

The Cubs looked kind of ragged, going 4-7 on the homestand. Counting a victory in the final game against the Reds, the team then won six in a row before their fatal collapse as the Miracle Mets zoomed by them. A few weeks later, the recriminations began about Durocher running his players into the ground through lack of rest. That issue has a relationship to today with a careful Joe Maddon making sure his regulars are not burned out going into the postseason.

Dozer thus proved to be an adept baseball observer. Among the scoops for which he never got proper credit was reporting the Cubs were fixed on trading Lou Brock to the Cardinals for a pitcher three weeks before the actual June 15, 1964 deal that changed history for both franchises.



Randy Hundley was one of the 1969 Cubs Richard Dozer noticed was tiring when he first posed the question to Leo Durocher.