



Serving as face of Sox's rebuilding program is never easy

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Serving as a poster boy ain't easy for a young baseball player, especially if you're a Texan, possess long blond locks that suggest Noah Syndergaard, and throw even harder than the fellow Lone Star state product who heads the Mets' rotation.

Then the pressure can get downright daunting if you, Michael Kopech, have been traded for White Sox ace of aces Chris Sale in the kickoff to the team's announced rebuilding program.

Bring it on, said Kopech, whose top fast-ball can match that of Aroldis Chapman's.

"I'm very honored to be one of the faces of the rebuilding (program)," Kopech said in a conference call on Dec. 7. "If nothing else, it makes me want to prove the White Sox right."

Years will need to transpire if the Sox are perceived as correct in finally going young after too many years of patchwork trades and middle-level free-agents consigning the South Siders to mediocrity. Kopech and whiz-bang infielder Yeon Moncada, also culled from the Red Sox for Sale, aren't even projected by GM Rick Hahn to start 2017 with the Sox.

The true payoff may not even be until the third decade of this strife-torn 21st century. Not everyone's rebuilding program can click in three years like the Cubs' fortunate timeline.

Sometimes rebuilding does not work at all. Like making the postseason through the endless 162-game season, then advancing through as many as three rounds of playoffs to reach the World Series, the greatest game of failure can be a true crapshoot.



Michael Kopech (left) would love to share production with long blond locks with Noah Syndergaard.

Both sides of Chicago baseball have seen the good and bad of rebuilding. Nothing ever was assured. The only certainty is if a franchise is going stale, its braintrust has to try. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Sale represented the biggest-name Chicago pitcher dealt in or near his prime since Cubs Hall of Famer Fergie Jenkins in late 1973. A flurry of trades to get younger then was not called rebuilding. An old fashioned word – “housecleaning” – was used instead.

Cubs held onto core too long

Jenkins was part of a rebuild that never stuck at Wrigley Field. Owner Phil Wrigley and acolyte GM John Holland hung on to their late 1960s contending core two years too long. Holland assistant Blake Cullen recalled how he and his boss kept evaluating the core as still the best at their positions in the National League even as their personal calendars progressed into their 30s.

When the Cubs turned a 46-31 first-place record at the end of June 1973 into a 56-64 full-scale collapse six weeks later, Wrigley ordered a clean sweep of veterans.

Out went Jenkins, one season after amassing six consecutive 20-victory campaigns, along with fellow Hall of Famer Ron Santo, second baseman Glenn Beckert, catcher Randy Hundley, pitcher Milt Pappas and outfielder Jim Hickman. A year later Hall of Famer Billy Williams was dispatched to Oakland. Back came the likes of two-time batting champ Bill Madlock, second baseman Manny Trillo, outfielder Jerry Morales, pitchers Steve Stone and Ken Frailing, and catchers Steve Swisher and George Mitterwald.

Trillo and Morales joined Madlock as productive Cubs. But the rebuild took four seasons to kick in to any degree as the Cubs lost 270 games between 1974 and 1976. Thoroughly lousy pitching sabotaged the lineup's best efforts -- the 1975 Cubs actually were a quality on-base percentage team. The '77 team famously began 47-22 with an eight-game lead, but steadily lost steam like a punctured balloon and finished at 81-81, 20 games out. That was that for the Wrigley-Holland rebuild. The brass made matters far worse by trading Madlock in a salary dispute that had behind-the-scenes racial overtones after the '76 season. Madlock went on to win two more batting titles in his productive career.

On the South Side, the most famous (or infamous) rebuild was the “White Flag Trade” on July 31, 1997. Owner Jerry Reinsdorf concluded the Sox could not catch the first-place Cleveland Indians despite being just 3 1/2 games back. So rotation stalwarts Wilson Alvarez and Danny Darwin and closer Roberto Hernandez were shipped to the Giants for six young players.

The Sox were fortunate to get good big-league service out of just 1/3 of the haul – relievers Keith Foulke and Bob Howry. Shortstop Mike Caruso had a couple of good moments, especially against the Cubs in Wrigley Field, but was just a short-termer. Teams need to corral prospects in bulk, as only a minority develop into decent big leaguers.

If pitcher is Braves farmhand, he must be good

Teams sometimes can get outright fleeced when they are dealing veterans for prospects. Caruso's game-winning homer in a rain-delayed Wrigley Field contest helped send the Cubs in a spectacular tailspin at mid-season 1999. Throwing in the towel at the trade deadline, Cubs GM Ed Lynch dealt lefty Terry Mulholland and infielder Jose Hernandez to the Braves for young pitchers Micah Bowie and Ruben Quevedo. Three weeks later the Braves sent pitcher Joey Nation to the Cubs to complete the deal. All three hurlers proved bustouts. Lefty Bowie sported a 9.96 ERA.



Micah Bowie (left), who had a 9.96 ERA as a Cub, and Ruben Quevedo showed prospects are more likely suspects.

No wonder John Schuerholz was just voted into the Hall of Fame. Apparently possessing a silver tongue, then-Atlanta boss Schuerholz convinced more than one GM that if a pitcher was from the productive Braves farm system, he must be a comer. He kept the legitimately good home-grown pitchers for himself.

A rebuilding-in-reverse – trading kids for veterans – dearly cost the Sox at least two pennants in the 1960s. Thirsting for a second straight AL pennant, owner Bill Veeck allowed GM Hank Greenberg to deal away young first basemen Norm Cash and Don Mincher, catchers Earl Battey and John Romano, and outfielder Johnny Callison after the 1959 season for veteran bats like Minnie Minoso, Roy Sievers and Gene Freese. All the dispatched youth became lineup mainstays, if not outright stars, throughout baseball in the ensuing decade.

The pitching-rich Sox of the era lacked run producers that could have put them over the top in, say, 1964 and 1967. Any two of the traded players would have served as pennant insurance had they stayed.

Sox fans have been crying for a true rebuild for years. Now they've got one.

They can hope the likes of Kopech can develop into the semblance of pitchers to which he is compared.

Syndergaard is the immediate doppelganger.

"I've heard that before," Kopech said. "I'm a fan of him. He's a hard worker. It's hard to not compare two long blond-haired hard-throwing pitchers. There's not many of us. But I want my own (identity)."

Other hard-throwers came from Texas. Nolan Ryan. Roger Clemens. Kerry Wood. More comparisons.

“I’ve looked at those guys and idolized those guys,” Kopech said. “I want to be mentioned with those guys one day.”

Just don’t expect Kopech to always throw 105 mph, his top speed in the minors last year.

“It was not that much different than some guys throwing 95,” he said. “It just happened to work out that way. I was still pretty fresh. I was kind of settling in and kind of letting loose. I hadn’t pitched in four months. I wouldn’t say it feels different than throwing 95.”

His success will come all in good time. Or maybe it won’t come at all. A desired rebuilding process must be seen through to its logical conclusion.