



## ***Free agents dampen wheeling-dealing at 21st Century winter meetings***

*By George Castle, CBM historian  
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Out of age-old habit, we look to the annual baseball winter meetings for an early pick-me-up for next season, the first signs of renewal and hope via sports' largest swap shop.

Unfortunately, the art of trading is less urgent compared to four decades ago, when the after-Thanksgiving gatherings of all teams was must-attend, and must-do, for baseball execs and sportswriters. All the while, fans waited with baited breath for deals all over the country.

Inter-league trading was then largely limited to the off-season. The non-waiver trade deadline was June 15, not July 31. And there were no free agents and their Scott Boras-style agents shopping them around, the latter's presence as big at today's winter meetings as any GM. The elongated trading period and flood of free agents on the market dampen down the necessity to make deals in the four-day-long winter meetings.

In Chicago, we don't have a reprise any more of the 1971 winter meetings, highlighted by White Sox personnel boss Roland Hemond's stunning trade to acquire slugger Dick Allen from the Dodgers for ol' reliable lefty Tommy John. Allen's arrival set up the memorable 1972 season in which the Sox nearly stole the AL West crown from the favored Athletics, thanks to Allen's MVP one-man-gang season.

Bookending the Allen deal was Cubs GM John Holland's stocking of 2/3 of his outfield with deals for center fielder Rick Monday from the Athletics and right fielder Jose Cardenal from the Brewers. Monday and Cardenal injected needed speed into the lineup. Problem is, Holland already had dealt away his fastest man in center fielder Bill North to the Athletics, a frequent trading partner at the time, for elderly reliever (and ex-Sox) Bob Locker a week before the winter meetings. North would go on to win two American League stolen-base titles in upcoming seasons.

### **Free –agent signings dominate**

Just one trade, any deal, by the Sox or Cubs at the 2012 winter meetings in Nashville might have forced the Bears' soap opera to share lead broadcast mention, and print and web site placement. Instead, just a pair of tangible steps forward by either team was re-

corded in the Sox's signing of free-agent third baseman Jeff Keppinger and the Cubs' landing of Japanese reliever Kyuji Fujikawa. The Cubs also picked up free-agent outfielder Nate Schierholtz, who will be no more than a platoon right fielder or fourth outfielder.

Both teams stayed out of the winter meetings' meat market of overpriced starting pitching by acting quickly earlier in the off-season.

New Sox GM Rick Hahn ensured he had a stable starting rotation and thus stayed out of the market for pitching by quickly re-signing Jake Peavy to a team-friendly contract a month before the meetings. Hahn spent his time in Nashville fielding calls from other franchises seeking a starter from his apparent surplus. With six or seven potential starters for five slots – assuming lefty John Danks has no setbacks in recovering from shoulder surgery – Hahn had leverage with suitors. Right-hander Gavin Floyd, whose option was picked up at the same time as Peavy's signing, could be an attractive trading chip with a market-rate salary of \$9.5 million.

Ideally, Hahn wanted to land another left-handed hitter with catcher A.J. Pierzynski seemingly gone via free agency and right-handed hitting Tyler Flowers the designated successor behind the plate. But he had the entire off-season to shop around. And Hahn's stress level was reduced when he inked Keppinger, veteran of six teams, to apparently replace Kevin Youkilis – who later signed with the Yankees – at third base.

### **Keppinger better for No. 2 than Youkilis?**

Keppinger never had Youkilis reputation as the "Greek God of Walks," an on-base percentage guru. But at their points of their careers, Keppinger probably had an edge on Youkilis for what the Sox need at the second spot in the lineup.

A lifetime .288 hitter, Keppinger batted a career-high .325 with a .367 OBP with Tampa Bay last season. He was the most difficult player in the American League to strike out with 31 whiffs in 418 plate appearances. Youkilis struck out 69 times in 344 Sox plate appearances with a .346 OBP, the latter factored into a career- season low of .336 when his Red Sox numbers were added.

Keppinger won't draw the total number of walks like a vintage Youkilis. But with his contact abilities and professed willingness to handle the bat in the small-ball style of a No. 2 hitter, he seems a better performer at this point to be sandwiched in between leadoff man Alejandro De Aza and No. 3 hitter Adam Dunn.



Jeff Keppinger will provide needed contact-hitting talents to the Sox lineup.

Photo credit: [Keith Allison](#)

Like Hahn, Cubs bossmen Theo Epstein and Jed Hoyer stayed out of the hunt for starting pitching by signing free-agent right handers Scott Baker and Scott Feldman before the winter meetings.

Baker had a decent run with the Twins before Tommy John surgery. Feldman was an up-and-comer starting stalwart with the Rangers before being pushed out of regular rotation service in 2012. Epstein/Hoyer figure to get both on the rebound. The Scotts certainly have better career numbers to round out the rotation compared to the numbing collection of journeymen and kids who contributed to 101 Cubs losses in 2012.

But as Hahn has more potential arms than starting slots, Epstein/Hoyer still need to cast around for another rotation arm or two. Pitching-depth issues, with few obvious minor-league options available for 2013, still plague the Cubs.

### **Fujikawa insurance if Marmol departs**

Epstein/Hoyer worked on the depth concerns of the thin bullpen in acquiring right-hander Fujikawa with a \$9.5 million deal. Fujikawa serves as insurance in case the brass can finally peddle incumbent closer Carlos Marmol in the off-season or by the middle of 2013. That won't be easy, given Marmol's history of poor control. The Cubs actually backed out of a deal trading Marmol to the Angels for Dan Haren, who eventually signed with the Nationals as a free agent.

Fujikawa had 220 career saves for the Hanshin Tigers. After Kosuke Fukudome's hot start that turned into a series of cool second halves, Cubs fans will look to their second big-name Japanese import with raised eyebrows until he puts up a season's worth of consistent numbers.

Schierholtz's arrival won't boost sagging ticket sales at Wrigley Field. He's merely an interchangeable part, having amassed as many as 362 plate appearances just once in a career consisting of 5 1/2 seasons with the Giants and the second half of 2012 with the Phillies.

Meanwhile, Alfonso Soriano's career-high 108 RBIs and improved defense in left field ostensibly make him more marketable to a contender seeking a complementary right-handed power bat. At 37, Soriano still would best fit as an American League DH. But the \$38 million remaining for two more years on his albatross still make him tough to move for Epstein/Hoyer. At some point, Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts may have to bite the bullet in eating most of the salary, given the contract is in its home stretch. Moving Soriano frees the last impediment to lineup flexibility in the tear-down-and-build-back



Kyuji Fujikawa likely will take over as Cubs closer if Carlos Marmol is traded.  
Photo credit: [Roger Wang](#)

-up Cubs program.

Given all these Sox-Cubs moves scattered over two months, the winter meetings surely ain't what they used to be to concentrate deals in one place at one time. Patience now becomes the byword. But that quality is always in short supply, for good reason, for Chicago fans.