

March 31st, 2014

# THE IVY DRIP

A Much Needed Call To The Pen

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Player-by-Player Previews

- page 4 -

Ricky Looks For The Cubs  
Lucy

- page 12 -

The Ombudsman:  
I See The Light

- page 15 -

## WAITING ON A FRIEND(S)

We once again embark on another season of Cubs baseball, knowing full well that it won't be too long before the ship has crashed upon the rocks and been left in tatters. It could be like last year where it was foul-smelling and turning odd colors by May 1st. Or it may last until the trade deadline when whatever parts are still shiny are auctioned off for scrap.

Of course, once the excitement (or mere acceptance) of the start of the season dies down (probably

about Edwin Jackson's first two-walk inning, which is approaching Wednesday) the only real excitement of this season will revolve around when Javier Baez will be called up. He's the next real piece, to join Anthony Rizzo and... Anthony Rizzo. We don't know for sure about anyone else. In fact, Baez may go a long way himself to determining if Starlin Castro is part of the core going forward.

So when will Baez be here? You hear all sorts of

things. One is it will be as soon as he starts dominating Triple-A, which honestly could be no later than April 10th. Others will tell you that Baez won't be up before September, as there would be no point and he actually does need the development (and if you saw him whiff on a lot of breaking balls in spring training, you might agree with this). And the most likely one is that he'll be up after the date that would start his contract clock and bring arbitration and free agency a year forward in his career.

The answer is probably somewhere in between. Likely, the Cubs will be aware of that contract clock date (usually somewhere around July 1) and it's true there would be little point in burning a year of club control over Baez simply to get him here quicker.

But the Theo Epstein/Jed Hoyer axis of genius has made it clear his development comes first, and if there comes a point where Baez is simply having his way with the competition in Iowa and there's little use in keeping him there, he'll be up here.

Which makes you think no later than July. Baez only needed 54 games to dismissively swat aside Double-A with the back of his hand, and the jump from that to Iowa is considered easier than the one from High-A to Double-A. It feels like it would be no more than 75 games in Des Moines before Baez is turning into the God Of Thunder there, and it will be time to get a look. And only then will the season have meaning.

Of course, Baez could be joined by one Kris Bryant, perhaps in August or more likely September. Bryant will be one level below Baez but there's no reason to think he won't be putting a hole in the world in Tennessee either. He would need to zoom through two levels to get to Wrigley, but he already did that last year. At least when things wrap up in September you'll likely have two harbingers of hope firmly entrenched with the big league club. It's been worse. It'll get a whole lot better.

But that doesn't mean this *continued on page 14*



"Getting ready for the season, honey?"



## From the Editor

Another season in the muck. At least we're all pretty sure this will be the last one for a while. At least that's the hope. Four is enough, don't you think? Then again, if you're a Cubs fan my age you've dealt with many more.

The change for me this year is that this will be my first one as a partial season ticket holder. A reader of my hockey publication was kind enough to offer me a piece, and I took it. It felt strange to pay full price for tickets that I know come July I could get off Stubhub for a bag of chips, half an Italian beef, and service charges.

But I felt this was the time to get in on the ground floor. I feel that once Baez and Bryant are here by September and the start the 2015 season, the Cubs aren't going to be something that you'd find stuck in the drain any more. And as we all know, the Cubs only have to be decent for their tickets to get sucked up and suddenly those wonderful \$5 tickets are going to be a thing of the past.

Most of all, I'm just excited to watch a lot of baseball live again.

It's the main driver of the rhythm of the summer. I don't know what else you do without it. It's why my friends in England are always so confused why I won't come visit them in the summer. First, there's no soccer to watch. Second, there's no baseball, so what the fuck do you do? Sure, you grill up steaks pretty regularly and drink a lot of canned beer outside, either at a streetfest or in someone's yard/balcony. But baseball is the epicenter, at least for me and I'm sure for you. I'm just not going to spend that much time at Ravinia (i.e. any).

And for me, all those games will be worth it when Baez comes up. I'm not one of those who think the Cubs "owe it" to their fans to bring Baez up whether he's ready or not. Nor do I think they should care about such a thing. But I want to be there to watch his struggles and his overcoming them. I want to see a couple weapons of mass destruction head onto Waveland and peer into the future and see when they will truly matter. For a fan this can be one of the most fun moments, where you picture how it will all look one day when these homers mean first place or not. I want to see Rizzo and Baez go back-to-back and dream about them doing it in the playoffs. And then down the line, I want to see it in the playoffs. It's off in the distance, it feels like it might never come. But you know it's there and approaching.

Then again, maybe I'm just thinking about when it

might be warm again. That feels like it may never come again.

-It was a rough winter for some Cubs fans. They wanted a signing, or more to the point they wanted Masahiro Tanaka. I did too. It's been so long since the Cubs were able to warm our hearts and feet with something in the dead of winter by looking forward to the summer.

But I felt like it sent a lot of Cubs fans over the edge. It hasn't been an easy transition in the two years of the Epstein regime. We get that. While most of us get "the plan" despite what the most vocal and uninformed say, it's been harder to watch and endure than maybe we thought it would be. Watching the Cubs get their brains beaten in since the Oughts is certainly a test. It's not one I'm eager to go through again.

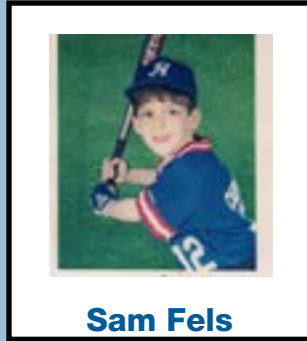
I've said it before, but for most of us this is the first time the Cubs have tried this in earnest. We've been through the drunken spending binges of '07-'08, and to a lesser

extend the ones at the beginning of the century. We watched those teams get old and stale in a hurry. We know the pitfalls, we just forget them when there are memories of moments of joy preceding them. We've been through the bungled attempts at success through free agency and trades in the 90's. But never a full-out rebuild.

It's obviously not pretty. But we know it's the right way, especially with how the system has changed and just how many teams have so much money to drive the price of any middling free agent into space. But not having done it, we didn't know how long it could take and how many bumps and bruises there are on the way. It's not football where you can sign or draft a quarterback and suddenly you're basically a contender year in and year out.

It hurts because the team we hate so much will be great again. It hurts because there's no guarantee it will all work out the way we want it to. It sucks because the baseball on display can be so horrific to watch. It sucks because any player that is having a good year is shipped off and the Cubs end up worse than when they started.

It's going to be worth it. I know it, and you know it. I guess at times we just don't feel it. But I'm pulling up my chair now. I'm as close as can be. And mostly I'm just excited. Play ball, assholes.



**Sam Fels**

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# 2014 MLB STANDINGS

## National League

EAST	W	L	W-L%	GB	R	RA	Rdiff	SOS	SRS	pythWL	Luck
WSN	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
ATL	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
PHI	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
NYM	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
MIA	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CENTRAL	W	L	W-L%	GB	R	RA	Rdiff	SOS	SRS	pythWL	Luck
CIN	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
STL	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
MIL	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
PIT	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>CUBS</b>	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
HOU	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
WEST	W	L	W-L%	GB	R	RA	Rdiff	SOS	SRS	pythWL	Luck
SFG	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
LAD	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
ARI	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SDP	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
COL	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

## American League

EAST	W	L	W-L%	GB	R	RA	Rdiff	SOS	SRS	pythWL	Luck
NYN	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
BAL	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TBR	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOR	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
BOS	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CENTRAL	W	L	W-L%	GB	R	RA	Rdiff	SOS	SRS	pythWL	Luck
DET	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CHW	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
KCR	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CLE	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
MIN	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
WEST	W	L	W-L%	GB	R	RA	Rdiff	SOS	SRS	pythWL	Luck
OAK	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TEX	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
LAA	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SEA	0	0	.000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

## FORKLIFT'S TOP 10 LIST

### Top 10 Reactions To Clark The Cub

10. Hey! He's not as pervy as Tommy Hawk!
9. How many people will google "Clark + Bear" and wind up on the website of a bar in Boys Town?
8. Staying upwind of somebody in a bear suit on a 95-degree day would be wise.
7. Man, Dick Tidrow has really let himself go.
6. Why is Clark being stalked by the guy with the bologna sandwich?
5. Pantsless mascots are never a good idea.
4. This bear will get pelted with beer cups early and often.
3. They get a guy in a bear suit but they can't sign any free agents?
2. When do Clark and Staley have a fight to the death?
1. Clark the Cub has been banned from Bleed Cubbie Blue.



# Chicago Cubs Player Previews

## The Pitchers

Stats Key: GS - Games Started, W - Wins, L - Losses, IP - Innings Pitched, K/9 - Strikeouts per 9 innings pitched, BB/9 - Walks issues per nine innings pitched, HR/9 - home runs surrendered per nine innings pitched, BABIP - batting average against on balls put in play, GB/FB - ground-ball to fly-ball ratio, HR/FB - home run to fly-ball ratio, WHIP - walks+hits per innings pitched, ERA - earned run average, FIP - fielding independent pitching ERA, WAR - wins above replacement

### Starting Rotation

#### #49 Jake Arrieta

2013

GS	IP	W	L	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
9	51.2	4	2	6.45	4.18	1.22

BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.190	1.26	14.0 %	1.12	3.66	4.94	0.0

Arrieta will start the year on the DL, but will move into the rotation as soon as he's ready in May or so. Arrieta is another jump ball the Cubs received in return for a reclamation project pitcher, in this case Scott Feldman. He joins Mike Old and Arodys Vinzaino as hot prospects that either through injury or performance had been given up on by their first organization. Although Arrieta can no longer be considered a prospect as he's 28. So the expectation that he'll suddenly "get it" probably should be tempered. If he were going to get it, he probably already would have. Instead, what you'll get is a seven inning, two-hit shutout of the Pirates one start and then he'll be sweating up a storm in the 4th of his next start after throwing 101 pitches and walking six guys.

Arrieta simply has never shown the consistency in control that his dynamite stuff needs. He's had three cracks at being a starter in the majors and only once did he keep his walks under three per nine innings. Maybe Chris Bosio is a miracle worker and can rope him in. He doesn't have to be Maddux out there, but he can't be the avalanche of balls outside the zone that he's been. The fastball is electric and he's got good offspeed stuff, if the chest can ever be unlocked. Just don't hold your breath.

#### #39 Jason Hammel

2013

GS	IP	W	L	K/9	BB/9	HR/9	BABIP
9	4	2	51.2	6.45	4.18	1.22	.190

GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR	WAR
1.26	14.0 %	21.5 %	1.12	3.66	4.94	0.0

Following in the hallowed footsteps of Scott Feldman and Paul Maholm, Jason Hammel will bring the car into the Chris Bosio garage and get a tune-up, some parts replaced, and an oil change in the hopes that he can be dealt to a cotender that needs rotation filler for prospects (in the Cubs' eyes) and then cash in over the

winter in free agency (in Hammel's eyes). Perhaps Feldman told him personally in Baltimore what a great way it can be to go about life. In Baltimore the past two years, Hammel has also had issues with walking too many guys, over three per nine innings. But unlike Arrieta, he doesn't strike many out to make up for it. He doesn't throw all that hard but does have a pretty good curve that he uses to keep the ball on the ground at a decent if not great clip. Switching from the hellfire of the A.L. East to the relatively comfortable environs of the National League will certainly see a boost in his numbers. There's probably just as much to work with here as there was with Malholm and Feldman, and they became Vinzaino, Arrieta, and Pedro Strop. No reason to think Bosio, Epstein and Hoyer can't do similar with this. Don't get too attached, obviously. He won't be around long if everything goes to plan.

#### Kyle Hendricks

No later than when Hammel and possibly Jeff Samardzija are dealt in July, and possibly much earlier if injuries or incompetence invades the rotation, the Cubs minor league pitcher of the year in 2013 will enter the fray. Hendricks absolutely had his way with Double-A last year and was almost as good in six starts at Iowa. He's not going to blow anyone away. He's a control and location guy, which means he



doesn't project to be anything more than a #3 starter. But he walked under two batters per nine innings at both levels, and he only gave up five homers all season. He gets the ball over the plate and he keeps it in the park, which is a pretty healthy recipe for success. Sure, there's going to be some rough patches in the majors where the margin for error shrinks. But considering the amount of walks

Samardzija, Jackson, and Arrieta will cough up it will be refreshing to see someone who throws strikes consistently. If Hendricks can translate his success in the minors to the majors and Travis Wood can maintain his upward trajectory from last year, the Cubs will at least have the back half of the rotation nailed down for years. It's not optimum, but necessary. He'll at least be something to watch and get excited about on the mound in terms of projecting this team in a few years, and the Cubs haven't had that yet in the Thed Hoystein era.

#### #36 Edwin Jackson

2013

GS	IP	W	L	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
31	175.1	8	18	6.93	3.03	0.82

BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.322	1.81	9.9 %	1.46	4.98	3.79	2.0

We didn't like the Jackson signing when it was made. It felt like the Cubs tossed all this money at Anibal Sanchez, and when he went back to Detroit they figured, "Well, we've bagged up all this money anyway. We might as well throw it at someone." The way Jackson pitched didn't really help our attitude much either. Yeah, he took the ball, which was the main feature the Cubs advertised about Jackson. It's nice that you get out there every time bud, but it would be better if you did something when you do. Jackson was actually able to keep the ball in the park more than he had in the previous two years, dropping his HR/9 and home runs per fly-ball ratio. But he couldn't keep it from getting between outfielders and infielders.

# Chicago Cubs Player Previews

## The Pitchers

More worrying is that his strikeouts per nine innings dropped, as did his velocity for the second straight year. For a guy who only throws hard stuff, that's not exactly encouraging. His velocity doesn't figure to bounce back at the age of 30. Jackson has tried to feature a change-up in spring training to left-handed hitters, which he's going to need to do because lefties crushed him last year to the tune of a .292 batting average. Jackson will continue to run out there every start, but to expect excellence is wide of the mark. Considering he only throws a fastball and a slider for the most part, we think Jackson will make a great closer one day. But obviously the Cubs aren't going to try that out any time soon. The hope is that he can get a little lucky and a little hot in the season's first half to entice someone to take him off the Cubs' hands, because \$11 million per year for a guy who can throw 180+ innings is actually pretty cheap. That's probably the best gift he can give the Cubs this year.

### #18 Chris Rusin

2013

GS	IP	W	L	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
13	66.1	2	6	4.88	3.26	1.09
BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.275	1.66	12.9%	1.36	3.93	4.75	0.1

Rusin lost out on the #5 starting role this year to Carlos Villanueva, but you can be sure he'll come up for air for at least spot-start duty and probably will be fully in the rotation when the trades strip the Cubs of parts. Rusin had a nice streak when he came up, but rarely could go any farther than the 5th inning. In his first 10 starts last year beginning at the end of July, Rusin only gave up more than two earned runs once. But for a soft-tossing lefty he walks too many guys. There are plenty of left-handed pitchers whose fastball couldn't break a sheet of paper but found success in throwing strikes and changing speeds. Rusin in 27 and still has room to improve, but rotation fill-in is probably his ceiling. He'll get his starts, most of them will qualify as "o.k.," and then he'll go back to whence he came. He doesn't have a big breaking ball to be a LOOGY one day, so he's just going to have to ground out successful starts by staying away from hitters and picking off the corners. And he won't have the same sweet mustache that Villanueva does. Maybe that's what cost him his spot on the roster.

### #29 Jeff Samardzija

2013

GS	IP	W	L	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
33	213.2	8	13	9.01	3.29	1.05
BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.314	1.53	13.3%	1.35	4.34	3.77	2.8

Well, you know where all the drama and media attention will be for Cubs pitchers, at least for the season's first few months. Samardzija will start facing questions about whether this is his last start in blue pinstripes probably starting in May. Shark is in the last year of his deal, was on the block over the winter, and will be so again. Samardzija has not showed any inclination to sign an extension, or at least a reasonable one.



There are a couple reasons for that. One, Shark hasn't seemed to be enamored with being part of a rebuild and wants to win. He may not want to wait another year or two. Second, Shark's agents know that even a middle of the rotation starter like him can break the bank in free agency with almost every team drowning in TV cash and the premium on pitching. He's unlikely to sign before July, which means he'll be subletting his apartment at some point.

That still doesn't answer what kind of pitcher Samardzija is. By default, he's been the top starter here. And some days, he looks like a genuine #2 or even #1 on a contending team. And then some days he's trying to overthrow everything to get out of trouble and watching the walks and gappers pile up when it all flattens out. Shark's walks rose slightly in 2013 and his strikeouts dropped slightly, which sends off minor alarm bells for a pitcher that is 29. Of course, the debate with Samardzija is just how many miles that 29-year-old arm actually has on it due to his football and relief pitching days cutting down on the amount of baseballs he's hurled previously. What you can safely conclude is that even if there's more tread on the tires than would normally be on a pitcher this age, he's not likely to get too much better than he already is. That's a pitcher who can strikeout a lot of guys, and he did produce more ground-balls last year than the previous one. You'd think that should continue to go up with that splitter and slider. Shark started featuring a cut-fastball more last year and that will probably continue this year. He uses his splitter at times as an offspeed pitch, but doesn't control it well enough to do that consistently. He certainly has the competitor's heart, and you can believe teams in the playoff race will look at that and drool over what he might do in the postseason where guts counts for a lot.

In a perfect world, you think if only the Cubs could add a true ace via trade or free agency to slot ahead of Samardzija, Wood, and Hendricks that suddenly the rotation looks kind of tasty. And that might just be what happens if the Cubs don't get a trade offer they like. But that seems unlikely, especially with a big start from Samardzija and a couple injuries to key pitchers on other teams. There will be no time to sell any higher.

### #37 Travis Wood

2013

GS	IP	W	L	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
32	200.0	9	12	6.48	2.97	0.81
BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.248	0.75	6.9%	1.15	3.11	3.89	2.8

Wood had a bounce-back year in 2013, and it can almost be completely attributed to not having to watch a lot of fly-balls float out into the ether beyond the walls. Wood watched his HR/9 and HR/FB% drop in half last year from 2012, and far more in line with his career numbers (surprisingly low, considering his two home parks have been Cincinnati and Wrigley). Almost every other stat from 2013 was pretty much in line from 2012. So that's either good luck or a correction of bad luck.

That's not to say Wood didn't change things in his approach. He utilized a cutter far more to right-handed hitters, as well as a slider to lefties. This allowed him to get in on hitters' hands from the right side, which might help explain how he gave up less homers. That has to continue.

Wood's probably going to give up a few more homers this year but not as many as 2012. His walk-rate has dropped the past three years and that figures to continue which is good. Solo homers can get pitched around, after all. There is some fear about recovering from last year, as he threw 200 innings which is 44 more than he has in any previous season. But at 27 he should be entering his prime so that shouldn't have too much of an effect. Wood isn't spectacular, but he is solid. He only had four starts last year where he gave up more than three earned runs, and three of those came in one stretch in July where the arm went a little dead. You





# Chicago Cubs Player Previews

## The Pitchers

know what he gives you, and that's more than you can say for a lot of pitchers.

### The Bullpen

#### #11 Kyuji Fujikawa

2013

G	IP	SV	BS	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
12	12.0	2	1	10.50	1.50	0.75

BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.323	1.60	10.0 %	1.08	5.25	2.80	0.2



Fujikawa will start the year on the DL but might come up midseason as he recovers from the ol' Tommy John surgery. While we can't prove it, we certainly wouldn't be surprised if Fuji's elbow ligaments went "poof!" because he was trying to overthrow everything. Fujikawa's first couple of appearances in 2013 saw him get knocked around pretty solidly. It looked like his splitter didn't have a lot of bite and his fastball merely elicited a "meh" response. So he kept trying to throw it all harder and harder until it all went to pot. Wouldn't expect much, as even if he does make it back it's not like that stuff is going to be any better coming off surgery.

#### #52 Justin Grimm

2013

G	IP	SV	BS	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
10	9.0	0	0	8.00	3.00	0.00

BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.167	0.64	0.0 %	0.78	2.00	2.60	0.2

The Cubs are the second organization to hint at making Grimm a starter but then never really give him a chance to do so. Grimm got a fair few starts with Texas before his trade in Texas where he had to fill in for the busload of starters they had injured, but they did not go well. He moved to the pen for the Cubs and in 10 appearances out of the pen looked pretty decent. He throws hard, which is a good thing to do when you're a reliever. When coming out of the pen Grimm doesn't have to use a change-up which really isn't ready for primetime yet. He can restrict himself to his plus-fastball and curve for an inning or two. Grimm is only 25 so there's still room to grow. He might get a chance to start when the trade winds blow, but likely he's just going to be restricted to middle relief with a chance to be promoted to set-up man if Veras is dealt or either he or Strop falters.

#### #56 Hector Rondon

2013

G	IP	SV	BS	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
45	54.2	0	1	7.24	4.12	0.99

BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.280	1.24	10.3 %	1.41	4.77	4.40	-0.2

Theo and Jed must've seen something in Rondon, because they showed no

hesitation in keeping him on the roster (they had to as he was a Rule 5 pickup) even though he was getting his brains beaten in for most of the year. We might have gotten a glimpse of what in September. In nine innings in the season's last month, Rondon gave up one hit while striking out eight and walking two. Granted, in September you're facing a lot of hitters who are so tired they can't tell you their name or are already planning winter getaways, but it's something. Rondon has the stuff, but we've seen a lot of guys have the stuff. There was some talk about trying to let him start again in Iowa but considering his injury history and his limited repertoire that idea was scrapped. Hopefully Rondon can build off that September, otherwise he'll just be another guy you mention at the bar in a few years to make everyone laugh.

#### #40 James Russell

2013

G	IP	SV	BS	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
74	52.2	0	8	6.32	3.08	1.20

BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.258	0.66	8.9 %	1.22	3.59	4.45	0.0

Everyday Jimmy should get something of a reprieve this year. Last year, when Dale Sveum wasn't bringing him in (which was most of the time) he was having him warm up. Russell might have not thrown a baseball for like four games. He was also bounced from being a set-up guy to a LOOGY and everything in between. Russell isn't really a LOOGY, because for most of his career he's had decent success against righties. Wesley Wright should take the LOOGY duties this year so Russell can concentrate on being more of a set-up man. He's not going to overpower anyone but has just good enough slider to keep hitters off-balance. The worry is that Russell has piled up back-to-back 75+ appearances, with 64 in 2011 as well. There just might not be a lot of bullets left. See if the Cubs don't try to limit his outings early in the year to save him for later in the year.



#### Brian Schlitter

Schlitter was the surprise of spring training in the pen, as he made the team over Alberto Cabrera. He came up in the disaster that was the 2010 season and showed some real power stuff but mostly got hammered. He then saw the rest of that season and 2011 wiped out with injury and has made his way back over the last two summers. He was really good in Iowa last year, striking out 45 hitters in 41 innings and only walking nine. He's got perhaps the best fastball in the Cubs' relief corps and a pretty sharp splitter. Could be a surprise package. Could be a dumpster fire. That's the fun of these sorts of things.

#### #46 Pedro Strop

2013

G	IP	SV	BS	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
37	35.0	1	0	10.80	2.83	0.26

BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.247	1.77	4.5 %	0.94	2.83	2.30	0.9

No one illustrates the goofy nature of relievers more than Strop. In 2012 Strop was a pretty decent piece out of the pen for Baltimore, though he couldn't always

# Chicago Cubs Player Previews

## Pitchers/Hitters

tell you where the pitch was going. He started out 2013 horribly, which got him traded, and then he finished the season in something of a dominating fashion for the Cubs. His ERA in August was 0.68 and he struck out 13 in 13.1 innings. Strop will start the year as the main set-up guy, but he still has control issues. Even in that dominant August he walked five. He's got great stuff, and a lot of guts, but at some point not being able to get the ball over the plate is going to cost you. If nothing else, it'll get you accosted by fans in the middle of Marmol flashbacks. If Strop carries over his success he may get a look at the closer job if Veras is shipped out or struggles. Then again, if Strop is really dealing he might also be trade-bait. Man, isn't this fun? Everything nice always ends up leaving us. It's a fucking country song.

### #41 Jose Veras

2013

G	IP	SV	BS	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
42	43.0	19	3	9.21	2.93	0.84
BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.240	1.14	9.5 %	1.00	2.93	3.40	0.6

There's a reason this will be Veras's sixth team in five years. He's good enough to close a reasonable number of games but not good enough to be indispensable. He's basically a different version of a closer-bot that Kevin Gregg was last year and that there are any number of around the league. His strikeouts dipped majorly last year which doesn't exactly thrill, and his BABIP dropped 80 points from the year before. Either he'll save enough games to maybe be whispered in trades, or he'll blow and be replaced by Strop at some point. Either way, in about two years you'll forget this guy was ever a Cub.

### #33 Carlos Villanueva

2013

G	IP	SV	BS	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
32	38.2	0	1	8.84	2.33	0.47
BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.302	0.90	4.8 %	1.14	3.03	2.61	0.6

Villanueva will start the year in the rotation but we throw him in the pen because it's likely that's where he'll spend most of his season. Villanueva's 2013 followed the same pattern as his whole career. He's great in April, then hitters actually get warm and stretched out and paddle him, and then he's good again in August and September when they don't have any amphetamines to prop them up. So it will be again with Villanueva, who will probably have a couple dominant starts in April and then will look behind him a lot after that. Villanueva was able to drop his walks and homers last year, and if he can do that again he'll be mostly effective. A swing guy who takes up space. But you need those, even if he'll bitch a little when he's taken out of the rotation.

### #53 Wesley Wright

2013

G	IP	SV	BS	K/9	BB/9	HR/9
55	41.1	0	4	8.71	3.48	1.09
BABIP	GB/FB	HR/FB	WHIP	ERA	FIP	WAR
.333	1.57	13.5 %	1.48	3.92	4.06	0.0

He'll come in and face lefties. He'll get most of them, but not all, out. But it's never a good sign when you're picking off a couple relievers from the Astros.

### Catchers

Stats Key: PA - plate appearances, H - hits, HR - home runs, RBI - runs batted in, SB - stolen bases, BB% - walk-rate, K% - strikeout rate, BABIP - batting average of balls put in play, LD% - line drive rate of balls put in play, AVG - batting average, OBP - on-base percentage, SLG - slugging percentage, OPS - on-base plus slugging, wOBA - weighted on-base average, WAR - wins above replacement

### #5 Wellington Castillo

2013

PA	H	HR	RBI	SB	BB%	K%	BABIP
428	104	8	32	2	7.9 %	22.7 %	.347
LD%	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS	wOBA	WAR	
21.8 %	.274	.349	.397	.746	.331	3.2	

It's a big season for Beef, as he looks set to prove that 2013 wasn't something of a fluke. But in the end, his 2013 doesn't look all that different from his 2012. All of



his numbers are in line, there are just more of them as he played 113 games last year instead of just 52 in 2012. What jumps out is how his walks really jumped up in the second half last year. He walked 20 times in July and August, causing his OBP to jump 60 points in the second half. He still struck out a lot, and that's probably going to always be the case (as you'll soon see, this is a common

affliction through the whole lineup). You think there's a little more pop to be shown from Beef, and he hit triple the number of homers in the 2nd half than he did in the 1st. He also saw his slugging in the 2nd half jump nearly 75 points. Maybe 15 homers isn't out of the question?

Defensively, when it came to blocking balls in the dirt and throwing out runners Castillo was one of the best around. When it came to framing pitches and helping his pitchers out, he was one of the worst. That has to improve for a starting staff that's going to need all the help it can get (especially after it loses some power stuff at the deadline). Castillo turns 27 so his time is now. Look for a pretty solid season. It had better be, because catcher is one of the few places the Cubs have nothing in the pipeline for.



# Chicago Cubs Player Previews

## The Hitters

### #12 John Baker

2013

PA	H	HR	RBI	SB	BB%	K%	BABIP
46	6	0	2	0	13.0 %	26.1 %	.214

LD%	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS	wOBA	WAR
21.4 %	.150	.261	.150	.411	.206	0.0

Hi John!

### Infield

### #44 Anthony Rizzo - 1st Base

2013

PA	H	HR	RBI	SB	BB%	K%	BABIP
690	141	23	80	6	11.0 %	18.4 %	.258

LD%	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS	wOBA	WAR
19.6 %	.233	.323	.419	.742	.325	1.6

Rizzo's season looks worse than it may have been last year. The dip in batting average, on-base, and slugging could almost all be attributed to his BABIP dropping 52 points from 2012. That won't happen again, at least we hope not. Even just splitting the difference on 2012's and 2013's BABIP would see Rizzo's average jump 20 points or so, and maybe even a bigger increase in slugging. Rizzo also saw a lower percentage of his fly-balls leave the park, and that should rebound a little as well.

That doesn't mean there weren't problems. Rizzo struck out more and really struggled to lay off fastballs on his hands. He's going to have to lay off those this time around. But you should expect him to do so. Even without any improvement (which is silly, considering he's 24) and just a normal rebound of luck, Rizzo is going to be a very productive hitter. Natural growth could seem him be the burgeoning star he's always promised. It's going to be ok, folks.

### #15 Darwin Barney - 2nd Base, SS, Dodgers

2013

PA	H	HR	RBI	SB	BB%	K%	BABIP
555	104	7	41	4	6.5 %	11.5 %	.222

LD%	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS	wOBA	WAR
19.0 %	.208	.266	.303	.569	.252	0.4

The selection of Mike Olt for Opening Day has a pretty interesting domino effect on the rest of the infield. Luis Valbuena will get some looks at 2nd, and the drop in defense wouldn't be much between he and Barney because it's Valbuena's natural position. Emilio Bonifacio will get some at-bats too. So what of The Purple Evolutionist?

Likely, a plane ticket. Barney's defense is exceptional, and he could spell Castro at short which the Cubs haven't really had. But his offense is so abhor-



rent and useless that it's almost not worth it. A contending team that can afford a glove-only middle infielder can absorb Barney. Not that it really matters for the Cubs, but he isn't a long term solution and this whole conversation is moot in July anyway (maybe).

Barney is an honest soldier and is one of the few Cubs to have a plus-brain all over the diamond. He plays hard, carries himself like a pro, and all the other accolades you toss at a guy who can't hit. He probably deserves to play for a winner anyway, and he wasn't going to be here when the Cubs turn into one.

### #64 Emilio Bonifacio - 2nd base, SS, 3rd Base, Centerfield

2013

PA	H	HR	RBI	SB	BB%	K%	BABIP
282	57	3	20	12	4.6 %	23.4 %	.277

LD%	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS	wOBA	WAR
17.7 %	.218	.258	.321	.579	.256	-0.4

Man, do we love speedy no-hit types to play the infield. What Bonifacio is doing here exactly we have no idea. He can play anywhere, and it's obvious the Cubs value flexibility. He's got speed and did have one season of a .360 OBP and another of .330. He's the only leadoff candidate around if you think speed is something that makes you a leadoff candidate. But he can't hit anything more than singles, and should be nothing more than a utility guy who fills in here and there. Which will give the Cubs two of those because...

### #24 Luis Valbuena - 2nd Base, 3rd Base

2013

PA	H	HR	RBI	SB	BB%	K%	BABIP
391	72	12	37	1	13.6 %	16.1 %	.233

LD%	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS	wOBA	WAR
15.6 %	.218	.331	.378	.708	.315	2.0

With Olt taking the starting job at 3rd Valbuena also becomes something of a utility guy. He'll get at-bats at both 3rd and 2nd, and his offense looks a lot better at 2nd. That doesn't mean his offense looks good. He draws his share of walks, the problem is he doesn't pair that with any acceptable number of hits. He really only needs to hit .250 to be effective, but hasn't approached that in his time with the Cubs. His defense at 2nd should really be good enough, because it was at 3rd and 2nd is his natural position. But again, this isn't going to matter much when a certain call-up is made at some point in the season.

### #13 Starlin Castro - Shortstop

2013

PA	H	HR	RBI	SB	BB%	K%	BABIP
705	163	10	44	9	4.3 %	18.3 %	.290

LD%	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS	wOBA	WAR
19.9 %	.245	.284	.347	.631	.280	-0.1

You've probably heard enough about Castro already and the season hasn't even begun. Last year, the Cubs tried to shift him into a more patient hitter with



# Chicago Cubs Player Previews

## The Pitchers

more pop and the results were there for everyone to see. If you can bear to look at them that is. Castro looked lost and in between all season. He was behind on fastballs and ahead of breaking balls. Only when he was returned to the leadoff spot in August and told to do what he does did he show signs of life.

The Cubs will probably let Castro be Castro this year, and then try and figure out if that's something they want. Starlin has to hit .320 or so to be a really productive piece, or at least to up his doubles from previous years (though he was just two short of his career high last year, strangely). If Castro is just going to pile up the singles with no walks he doesn't really have that much value. If he can eclipse 40 doubles and add 10 home runs or more, he does.

For the first time however, Castro should get a look at his own vulnerability for the Cubs. Javier Baez is going to be called up at some point, and though the Cubs will move him at first, if Castro doesn't show improvement sharpish then they may start to consider if he's a long term asset or not.

One thing that did fly under the radar with his offensive struggles is his defense really improved over the last half of the season. Showing a significantly better glove than Baez would help keep him in town.

### #30 Mike Olt - 3rd Base, 1st Base

Olt might be the major surprise of camp, because he wasn't really expected to win the 3rd base job for Opening Day. But he did and now begins the infield shuffle.

If you dismiss his disaster of a 2013 season due to injury and such, then what you're left with is a powerful prospect who might just hit a ton of homers. He's also going to strike out a ton. His K-rate in the minors was always around 25% and that's not going to change here. He's basically a three true outcome guy, and the hope is he can crush enough to make up for the whiffs. Lord knows he's going to see a ton of pitches in the dirt right from the off to test that. The other worry is a shoulder that prevented him from playing much 3rd in Arizona. He can spell Rizzo at times at 1st though, especially if Rizzo has so much trouble against lefties again.



It's exciting though. This is a guy who had two seasons in the minors of slugging over .500 and his 28 homers in 95 games in Double-A in 2012 does make the mouth water. He at least gives fans something to watch from the beginning of the season. Could end up being a true steal.

### Javier Baez - 2nd Base, SS

We're going to throw Baez in here even though he won't start the year with the Cubs and we're not totally sure where he's going to play. There's a lot of conjecture about when or if Baez will be up. The Cubs have been clear they won't call him

up until they are sure they won't have to send him back down. They won't say it, but they almost certainly won't call him up before his contract clock would start so they can have control of him for another year.

But they won't keep him down if Triple-A becomes a waste of his time. And that will happen sooner rather than later. He only needed 54 games in Tennessee to make a mockery of Double-A, and

there's no reason to think it should take too much longer in Iowa. He will instantly become the most exciting position prospect for the Cubs since... fuck, we don't even know. Sandberg? The holes are obvious. Baez will struggle with breaking and offspeed pitches because everyone's going to know from jump street that he'll turn

fastballs into plasma.

But that bat speed. That swing. You can't teach that stuff. Baez is going to do some major, major damage before too long. Maybe even by August. The power and violence of his swing is a sight to behold. You almost won't believe it when he gets here. And by himself he makes this season worth it.

## Outfield

### #21 Junior Lake - Left Field, Center Field 2013

PA	H	HR	RBI	SB	BB%	K%	BABIP
254	67	6	16	4	5.1 %	26.8 %	.377
LD%	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS	wOBA	WAR	
27.8 %	.284	.332	.428	.760	.335	1.2	

We don't know what to make of Lake, other than he's great television. He alternated last year between being scalding hot and one of the most exciting players in the league to looking like he'd never played the sport before and back again. He was so raw you couldn't help but laugh.

Where does it go this year? Probably through a wall at some point. You look at that BABIP though and you think it could be a harsh wake up call for Junior Bunk. There's no way that's going to stay at that level this time around. Lake doesn't walk at all and strikes out a ton so that won't help make up for the amount of luck he had last year that he probably won't get this time. Still, a home run every 10 at-bats is kind of encouraging. He's so athletic that you don't think he can totally suck. But you're not sure he won't.

Defensively he should stick in left as that's where he can do the least amount of damage while he still learns to be outside the infield. He'll probably get some starts in center but do that at your own risk. Still, you know he's going to be fun to watch.



### #6 Ryan Sweeney - Center Field 2013

PA	H	HR	RBI	SB	BB%	K%	BABIP
212	51	6	19	1	8.0 %	14.6 %	.288
LD%	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS	wOBA	WAR	
21.0 %	.266	.324	.448	.772	.337	1.1	

Sweeney is actually more solid than you think. Just not physically because he gets hurt every season. In Oakland, Sweeney put up four seasons with an OBP over .340 and he hit over .280 three times. He never showed much power and there isn't much reason to think he will do so here. He plays a very solid if not better center, and that's probably enough for now. He's only holding a place for a year for Albert Almora, and as placeholders go you could do a lot worse. For the 100 games he's healthy, that is. Certainly won't let anyone down.

# Chicago Cubs Player Previews

## The Hitters

### #19 Nate Schierholtz - Right Field

**2013**

PA	H	HR	RBI	SB	BB%	K%	BABIP
503	116	21	68	6	5.8 %	18.7 %	.270

LD%	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS	wOBA	WAR
20.3 %	.251	.301	.470	.770	.331	1.4

Nate Schierholtz's numbers were almost completely compiled in the 1st half. In the last two months of the season he was awful, with an OBP under .300. He blew his career-high in homers away, thanks to playing in Wrigley and not the graveyard for lefty hitters that San Francisco can be (if you're not injecting bull semen or whatever else). But Schierholtz turned back into Schierholtz after the All-Star break, and that's just a guy. He plays an ok right, but doesn't get to a lot. He won't play against lefties so Justin Ruggiano can justify his existence, but the hope will be he shows something in the season's first two months again to be moved along for anything. After all we may need this space for Kris Bryant in August.

### #20 Justin Ruggiano - Right Field

**2013**

PA	H	HR	RBI	SB	BB%	K%	BABIP
472	94	18	50	15	8.7 %	24.2 %	.260

LD%	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS	wOBA	WAR
16.6 %	.222	.298	.396	.694	.307	0.9

Ruggiano is the player we've just decided to irrationally hate at the start of the season, because we didn't think the Cubs needed another Jeff Baker. Ruggiano had one useful season in Miami in 2012 when his BABIP was over .400. Every other year he's basically been a suckfest and at 32 he doesn't figure to get any better. He doesn't even hit lefties all that well which is what he'll be asked to do here. Smells like a DFA by June, really.

### #51 Ryan Kalish - Right Field, Center Field

Kalish has seen three seasons wrecked by injury, and perhaps any development he would have had has been stunted by that. He hasn't played 100 games at any level since 2010. But before that he did toss up some pretty impressive numbers in the Red Sox system and might be worth the flier the Cubs are taking. He got on base at a decent clip, showed a little power and a lot of athleticism. He can play center but will see time at all three spots. You never know. Can't hurt. Could help.



# From The Twisted Mind Of Morpheus



# SPOTLIGHT

## Ricky Renteria



Hey, he wants to be called, "Ricky." We didn't make it up.

We'll be honest, we have no idea if Ricky Renteria is going to be a good manager or not. We don't know how imaginative he is, whether he'll get the wheels moving offensively or use his bullpen in a unique fashion. And frankly, no one else does either. Not even the front office.

What was so peculiar about Renteria's hiring is just how different the hiring/interview process was than when they hired Dale Sveum. From all reports, when Theo Epstein and Jed Hoyer were going through this process the first time, they grilled every candidate for hours with multitudes of angles, and then tossed them in front of the media. Most had never seen anything like it.

This time? It felt like the entire process was asking, "You speak Spanish?" "You like young players?" "You know anything about sabermetrics?" "When can you start?"

What's jarring about the difference is when hiring Sveum (who we weren't a fan of) and now hiring Renteria is that there's something at stake now. There wasn't before. Sveum survived that grueling process for the right to manage utter trash on the field. There weren't any pieces in place.

Meanwhile, Renteria faced a much more lax process, and there are pieces here. He has to resuscitate Anthony Rizzo and Starlin Castro. He has to welcome Mike Olt to the majors. Before too long, he'll be the first

major league manager that Javier Baez and likely Kris Bryant will have. All of these guys are considered part of a future core (possibly, in Olt's case). That's much more volatile than whatever Sveum was handling.

Of course, Sveum was fired because he mangled his handling of Rizzo and Castro. He threatened them both with demotions that everyone knew were never coming. He couldn't provide them a consistent message on what they were supposed to do and how they were supposed to approach the game. He couldn't keep Castro's head in the game at all times. He jerked Rizzo around the lineup and Rizzo didn't seem to be thrilled about it. Communication was a problem.

All Renteria seemingly has to do is not be Sveum. Rizzo and Castro should bounce back just due to natural talent. Baez has far too much as well to be a total failure. Basically, he has to keep Baez from having his throws land in the 7-11 on Addison from second or short or wherever he plays. But next year if Baez and Bryant are struggling, would they pull the trigger again?

Theo and Jed almost certainly wouldn't have twice made the mistake of hiring a guy who wasn't on message. They know how they want the team run. They just don't have the team yet. Renteria isn't going to be Joe Maddon, and you wonder if there isn't another guy in mind when the Cubs are actually ready to contend. But for now, this will do.



# Mellow Arguello

## It Could Be A Surprise

*This article first appeared on [chicagonow.com/Cubsden](http://chicagonow.com/Cubsden) yesterday.*

It's inaccurate to say that the Cubs are sitting around waiting for prospects to arrive and it's too simple to say that the Cubs have a long term plan that they will someday switch to a short-term plan. It's more accurate to say they have a multi-level plan that they operate simultaneously. Part of that plan is starting to come into fruition this very season.

When we talk long term, we mostly talk about scouting, acquiring, and developing first year talent and that is indeed a big portion of the puzzle. It's how the Cubs have acquired top prospects Javier Baez, Albert Almora, and Kris Bryant. But draft and IFA classes can take time before they reach the big leagues, much less make an impact. It's too soon to invest big in short term players who will be past their prime before those players get there. Moreover, the new CBA has made it difficult to acquire multiple first round talents in a single draft. The Cubs needed more than just the draft and the IFA signings for the long term. They needed upper level talent to, in effect, create a new first wave that would have otherwise been too far away.

One of the things this front office had to address right away was the lack of young MLB ready talent. The team they took over had some talent, but much of that was at the lower levels that were mostly acquired through the 2012 draft and a couple of recent solid IFA classes. There was some talent but beyond Baez -- who was still a pretty big question mark at that point, you had to look deep to find guys like Jeimer Candelario, Dillon Maples, Carlos Penalver, Mark Malave, and Dan Vogelbach.

Another part of the mid-term plan was to develop some of the existing talent in the system, talent that included upper level prospects such as Brett Jackson, Junior Lake, Wellington Castillo, Trey McNutt, an already fading Josh Vitters, and a whole lot of role players. There was some talent, but hardly enough to feel confident about once you take prospect attrition and injury into account. Sure enough, Lake and Castillo are the only players from those Pre-Theo upper levels of the minors who figure to play a significant role in 2014.

The Cubs also hoped to continue to develop some of the lower level, higher ceiling talent in the hopes that it could develop with a greater emphasis on improving approach and defense to fit the organization's philosophy. They've struck gold with Baez on that front, who has developed faster than most imagined, and also have to be pleased with the improvement of a second potential MLB starter in Arismendy Alcantara.

But that still wasn't going to be enough to bridge the gap. The Cubs still needed to bring in talent they could add to that group and give them some young talent to build around Starlin Castro and fill the roster with young talent until the front office could draft and develop it's own prospects.

There are essentially two ways to pick up this talent. One is to trade for it and the other is to take some flyers on failed prospects and hope you strike gold with one or two. The first can be costly and the second method doesn't exactly yield a high rate of return, as we've found out in recent years, most notably the failures of former top prospects Ian Stewart and Chris Volstad.

But things are beginning to turn around this season in what I believe will be the first significant step forward in terms of young talent at the MLB level. Taking a quick look at the Opening Day Roster, we get a glimpse of some key young MLB ready talent from that mid-term plan:

1B: Anthony Rizzo - acquired for Andrew Cashner

3B: Mike Olt - acquired as part of Matt Garza package

C: Wellington Castillo -- signed by Hendry regime but development accelerated by this organization

OF: Junior Lake -- signed by Hendry regime but development accelerated by this organization

OF: Ryan Kalish - former Red Sox top prospect signed as free agent

SP: Travis Wood -- acquired for Sean Marshall

SP: Jake Arrieta -- acquired for Scott Feldman

RP: Pedro Strop -- acquired for Scott Feldman

RP: Justin Grimm - acquired as part of Matt Garza package

RP: Hector Rondon - Rule 5 selection

The Cubs also have a number of players of this ilk who could be ready mid-season or sooner:

SS-2B: Javier Baez -- drafted by Hendry regime but development accelerated by this organization

2B-SS Arismendy Alcantara -- signed by Hendry regime but development accelerated by this organization

SP: Kyle Hendricks -- AAA starter acquired for Ryan Dempster

3B: Christian Villaneuva -- AAA starting 3B acquired for Ryan Dempster

RP: Arodys Vizcaino -- AAA SP/RP acquired for Paul Maholm

RP: Neil Ramirez -- AAA SP/RP acquired as part of Matt Garza trade



That's 10 players on the Opening Day roster that have either been acquired, re-developed, or re-purposed by the new front office -- and as many as 16 by the end of the season. 15 of those 16 players were once ranked as top 10 prospects within their respective organizations while Kyle Hendricks, the lone exception, has been on the cusp of that status.

Even if you strictly count acquisitions, we're talking 12 players with the potential to make an impact this season. Not all of them will, of course, but I like the odds that several of them will at least approach their expectations.

And you know what the real scary part is? All of the players listed above are at their prime athletic years or younger. Their arrow is pointing upward. And it's not like they're being paired up with a bunch of overpaid, past their prime geezers. The oldest player on the Opening Day roster is Justin Ruggiano, who just turned 32 in February. Jason Hammel is 31 while Edwin Jackson and Carlos Villaneuva are 30. Those are all still considered within a player's prime range.

If you want an Oakland Athletics-style, non-star, low payroll style turnaround that's pretty much the formula -- stock up on prime and pre-prime aged players. A look at the 2012 Athletics roster that surprised and won 94 games shows a similar breakdown as far as the age of their players. That does not guarantee the same results, of course, but good things can happen when you fill your roster with a bunch of talented players who still have yet to play their best baseball.

So, if you think this plan has been standing in place and twiddling it's thumbs waiting for the front office's hand-picked prospects to arrive then you are missing the larger picture. The Cubs have already started the transformation to a younger, more athletic, more talented roster and we don't have to wait until next year to see it happen. This is a team that has been evolving right under our noses and, from a physical, athletic, and age standpoint, already looks drastically different than the roster they inherited. It's still hard to imagine this team going very far this season but it's clear the focus has switched from shedding old contracts and changing a failed clubhouse culture. The attention now turns to the actual addition of MLB ready talent. Even if they don't all pan out as hoped, a few probably will. If nothing else, it's the first step toward a new direction for the organization - and the exciting part is that the best is yet to come.

*John Arguello is the editor-in-chief at Cubs Den, found at [www.chicagonow.com/cubsden](http://www.chicagonow.com/cubsden). You can follow him on Twitter @CubsDen.*

# Ground Floor, Going Up

Continued from page 1

season is bereft of storylines and should be totally ignored. Well, it probably should be ignored by anyone with actual lives. But that's not us, and that's not you if you're reading this. So what's on tap for 2014?

## **Nobody Had Better Beat The Rizz**

What the Cubs and their fans will be watching closely to start the year is whether Anthony Rizzo and Starlin Castro can rebound from a 2013 that didn't exactly become worthy of framing and mounting over the fireplace. But hey, they did get a manager fired. Isn't that the mark of a true star? Oh right, it's not the NBA. Well still, it's a merit badge they can put on their vest one day.

Rizzo is the one the Cubs will most want to see bounce back. He was this regime's first acquisition, and he doesn't have a true stud breathing down his neck to make him expendable if he doesn't bounce back like Castro does. If Rizzo can't pull out of this one-year tailspin, the Cubs will be running in place.

The signs say he should. Rizzo's 2013 wasn't as awful as it might have looked. His strikeouts went up a tad from 2012, but not as much as his walks did. He hit a ton of doubles, and 23 homers isn't exactly awful. Some of those doubles will turn into homers simply due to dumb luck. What did drop was the amount of balls he put in play turning into hits, and it dropped to an unsustainable rate. If it rebounds to his 2012 BABIP, you can look for Rizzo to have 30 HR, while hitting .280 with an on-base percentage somewhere around .340. And no one will refuse that. And he might actually have some help in the middle of the lineup, but we'll get to that.

Rizzo got eaten alive by fastballs on his hands and breaking pitches away, which a lot of lefties struggle with early in their careers. He's either going to have to learn how to lay off that inside pitch which will then not have him set up for the slider in the dirt or figure out how to turn on those while keeping them fair. That will open everything up for him.

As for Castro, it's harder to predict, and there's a new wrinkle. As soon as Baez hits his first homer that kills an old lady in the parking lot in Iowa, Castro is going to face questions about whether he or Baez should move positions, whether they can actually coexist in the same infield, and so on. For the first time since he came up, Castro might actually start to worry about his job. No one knows how he'll deal with that.

As for what went wrong last year, the rumblings were that Castro simply had too many voices trying to change his approach. The manager, coaches, front office, whoever else, and basically what we got was a surrealist painting of a breakfast cereal. The Cubs wanted Castro to be more patient and show more power to justify hitting him in the middle of the lineup, but that's just not what he is. He could be a little more patient, but he's simply not going to step on 20 home runs per season like some had projected/hoped. Most likely the Cubs will just let him go back to what worked, swinging at everything and making contact with most of it and hope to God he hits .290+ to make it worth it. What he didn't get enough credit for was how much his defense improved over the last half of last year, which is why Baez will shift to second because no one can guarantee he can play short in the majors without critically injuring patrons along the first base line.

Castro was only two off his career-high in doubles last year, and if he can cut down the strikeouts just a touch he could be a 40 double guy, which will make his swing-happy ways palatable. Sure, he's never going to be a Thed Hoystein type player, and because of that you always wonder if he isn't going to be trade-bait when it comes time to acquire an ace on the mound (Cubs don't have one anywhere close in the system). But without a manager trying to eat his face everyday, Castro might relax a bit and just do his thing.

Castro and Rizzo returning to just normal service is probably worth three or four wins by itself. That doesn't mean the Cubs are going to be contenders or anything resembling that. It just means they'll be more watchable than they've been.

## **And The Rest**

There were a couple surprises out of Mesa. The biggest and perhaps most important was that Mike Olt made the team and looks poised to be the everyday 3rd baseman. Of course, this position has always been a tortured abyss for the Cubs, save the Aramis Ramirez era. Olt might start his own era if everything goes well. But that's kind of a big "if."

Olt was one of the pieces acquired for Matt Garza last year, and it was kind of stunning how he went from the Rangers' most prized prospect to a reclamation project in the span of a year. You heard about all the problems with a concussion

and his vision and an inability to make tears (dude needs to listen to Tears for Fears's "Bad Day." That should solve that problem). But Olt says that's all behind him, and the evidence of playing his way onto the team would suggest he's right. The problem with Olt is that if you throw out last season there isn't a lot of evidence on what he could be.

In 2011, Olt crushed High-A to the tune of a .504 slugging percentage and 14 homers in just 69 games. The following year he wolfed Double-A to the tune of 28 homers in just 95 games which earned him a call-up to Texas (which did not go so well). So other than last year when he apparently couldn't see anything other than blurry lines and small woodland creatures that weren't actually there, he only has about 150 games of experience.

Here's what we know: He'll strikeout a lot. Like, a lot a lot. Even when he was tearing up the minors he sat his ass back down on the bench at the ump's orders a quarter of the time. He'll also walk a lot. His walk-percentage was always over 10% and sometimes tickled 15%. Basically, at third you're going to get an Adam Dunn/Mark Trumbo type. A lot of three true outcomes. But if there's enough contact, most of it will go a long way.

He's worth watching as he'll give Rizzo some support in the heart of the order. And if he pans out, he also gives the Cubs some flexibility, as they have a raft of prospects who play 3rd base. They'll feel better about launching them in trades for pitching if Olt has stapled down the spot.

The fear about the Cubs is that when the midseason clearance sale begins, they won't have the support system in place to not be truly awful for the last half of the year (which of course comes with a higher draft pick. Not all disaster). Jeff Samardzija is almost certainly going to be gone, Jason Hammel was signed for the specific purpose of flogging him for pieces, and if Edwin Jackson shows an unexpected level of competence he might too. That will leave Travis Wood, a possible call-up of Kyle Hendricks, Chris Rusin and his underwhelming stuff that works more often than it should, Carlos Villanueva's mustache and God help us. Jackson can't be worse than he was last year, though he probably won't be too much better. With Samardzija still around and Chris Bosio working his magic the pitching should be ok before the Cubs start their now annual police auction.

That pitching should be held down a bit better as the bullpen won't be as tire-fire to start the season as it was last year. There's no Carlos Marmol turning into a Vietnamese monk. There's no Kyuji Fujikawa overthrowing everything when he realizes his stuff isn't good enough to get Major League hitters out. There's at least fewer overmatched kids. There's enough guys throwing smoke to be something above a total crash. Jose Veras is at least a passable closer. They won't have a lot of leads to protect of course, but they won't be tossing their eggs constantly when they do. Maybe. Ok, it's a fucking bullpen, it could be anything.

Elsewhere around the diamond the outfield is kind of a hodge-podge of goofiness. It's got Junior Lake who honestly could be anything. Whatever he is, he's fun to watch, though you have to watch in every direction such is the franticness of his game. Ryan Sweeney will be a serviceable "guy" for the 80 games he can stay in one piece. Ryan Kalish is the flier on a failed prospect the Cubs are hoping turns into gold. Nate Schierholz will be the player the Cubs pray can goof decent enough numbers in the season's first two months to punt and open up room for someone else down the line. Justin Ruggiano will do something here. He'll definitely wear pants on the field. Other than that, we have no idea what he'll do.

Wellington Castillo will look to build on a really superb last half of 2013 and establish himself as one of the NL's best catchers. He sure did walk a lot, but a BABIP of over .345 makes you wonder. What he'll also be working on is calling a better game and framing his pitchers better, as he cost Cubs' pitchers at points with that. The rest of the infield is basically jammed into second base and onto third when Olt's shoulder gets cranky again. Luis Valbuena should play second because he provides something that if you squint real hard might resemble offense, whereas Darwin Barney does not. Emilio Bonifacio will take some starts to do his whole waterbug act, though he'll see some time in the outfield too.

It's not the most appetizing picture, we know. It's going to finish last. But it's getting younger. It's starting to bring products to where you can see them. It's the ground floor for sure, but the doors to the elevator are finally closing and it just might be heading up. Finally.



# The Ombudsman

## Darkest Before The Dawn

My brother, the fine editor in chief of this fine publication, called me the other day with a tremor in his voice that appeared to have an extra shot of worry.

"Lemme ask you something Mr. BASEBALL....," he said. He likes to call me, "Mr. Baseball." I like to call him "Otis." It's not your run of the mill brother-brother relationship. "Joe Sheehan has the Cubs losing 100 games. That can't possibly be right. Can it? I mean, they have to be better than that. I can't take another 100-loss season. I simply can't."

Now I never figured the Cubs to lose 100 games this season. But then I thought about how bad the Cubs ended last season, and that the front office basically double-downed on the same shitty Cubs team that was gutted at the trade deadline. A quick thought about a whole year of Jake Arrieta's inconsistency, another year of Edwin Jackson, Jason Hammel trudging out to the bump, Luis Valbuena, Darwin Barney's bat, and OH SHIT THIS TEAM MIGHT LOSE 100 GAMES...

I told Sam that I didn't think the Cubs were going to lose 100 games. I still don't. I tried to remind Sam that Rizzo and Castro returning to average numbers would bring back more wins, let alone the above average numbers we expect from two building blocks. There's no Shawn Camp and the bullpen can't be nearly as bad as last year. And Baez simply has to be up at some point....maybe even Bryant.

But still. The possibility that the Cubs could lose 100 games this year has been lodged in my cranium. Brain dart with a bullseye. And being a Cubs fan, my narcissistic nature knows how to answer the bell. This season has already been pretty painful. The offseason saw Theo and Jed play grab-ass with each other while gearing up to come into second place in the Masahiro Tanaka sweepstakes. Justin Ruggiano was introduced into our lives. And then, when Javier Baez and Kris Bryant started raining bombs on the new Cubs Park in Arizona, every baseball poindexter came out of the wood work to assure us that there was no way they were going to break camp with the big club, so they could throw around big words like "Super 2" and "Extra cost control". So many poindexters...

Now it should be pointed out that Joe Sheehan did go on to say positive things about the Cubs. How the Cubs are setting themselves up to be one of the most loaded and competitive teams in baseball for the latter half of the decade. Mr. Sheehan also likes to vent against Major league Baseball's ridiculous new rules concerning the draft and international signing and thus over values the idea of "tanking" where teams not only get better draft selections, they get more money. Thus Sheehan thinks it's a good idea that the Cubs not show "some progress" but stay in the dregs and get yet another top five (top three, top...?) pick but the extra money as well.

If this 100-loss season were to happen, IF, it would probably be best in the long run. And the way Cubs fans love to wear their heartbreak on their sleeve, one has to ask if it would make for the best story that the Cubs got good after the worst three year period of a 108, 109, 110 year World Series-less streak? Like Hulk Hogan getting up off the mat right as the referee is about to count to three.

Part of what makes this daunting season so dark is that the light is visible. Granted most people just started getting excited after seeing Javier Baez hit a few home runs. But a lot of Cub fans have used this down period

in major league play to educate themselves on minor leagues. Not just see players, but learn leagues, see how a player progresses from one team to the next. I've watched (or more precisely read about...) as a bunch of 18- and 19-year-old kids dominate and take a title at low-A in Boise. Most of those kids went on to Kane County and some of them wound up at Daytona last year where the team won the FSL. The Tennessee Smokies have been in the playoffs two out of the last three years. There are usable parts, including cornerstone franchise players in Iowa, Tennessee and Daytona to start the year and a lot of them could be here by September or the beginning of 2015.

And Theo has said you have to have something for the rookies to come into so that the pressure is not on them. Which kind of makes this winter's inactivity even more maddening. But perhaps they're hoping Rizzo and Castro take that next step. They were the reason Dale Sveum was fired after all. If only there was a fast-forward button where we could get some of the kids up...

But no. No sneak previews. No rush jobs. Take the year to clean the house for when the kids arrive. To me, this entire season is about turning the corner. It really has nothing to do with record and more to do with mindset. That the Cubs are no longer tearing down or stocking assets but are in fact "building." This corner can be turned at any time during the season and is not dependent on a winning record. Although that would be awesome. No, the Cubs could turn the corner in May, even if they're say.... four games under .500, if Renteria decides that Castro is his man and will be the SS and hit \_\_\_\_\_ (I'll go ahead and say 6th) for the foreseeable future. The Cubs can turn the corner

if Samardzija pitches himself into an extension. Edwin Jackson returns to the more respectable sections of the Edwin Jackson zone. It could even happen in September when a bunch of kids with a lot of talent and a lot of pride win 12 out of 15 to avoid a 100-loss season. It can start anywhere, by almost anybody. As long as it winds up involving everybody.

That's pretty much my strongest argument for this season not going into the toilet like the other two seasons have gone. The future is not as far off as it was. Some of it should be here right after a silly "Super Two" deadline in late May/early July. More is coming in September. That should inspire everybody. That should inspire veterans to play harder for their jobs. It should inspire managers to plan harder. You'd like to think it would inspire the front office to build a better support roster around them. Or maybe those wheels are in motion. That's why they have a season I suppose.

The light is coming. Which might make this season the darkest one yet. And while I can't see it being that dark; and am doing everything to imagine it won't be that dark, I look forward to at least getting through it. Because the years after that are going to be magical. And then we can look back at the first three years...err... two and a half years of the Theo Era (fingers crossed) and laugh.

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Adam Fels

# The Cubs' Record When...

At home	0-0	Rizzo homers	0-0	Playing on a Saturday	0-0
On road	0-0	Castro homers	0-0	Playing on a Sunday	0-0
Samardzija starts	0-0	MIKE OLT!!	0-0	Fuckwad sings the stretch	0-0
Jackson starts	0-0	SHAKE HANDS WITH BEEF!	0-0	Wind blows in	0-0
Hammel starts	0-0	Junior Lake homers	0-0	Wind blows out	0-0
Villanueva starts	0-0	Junior Lake crashed into a wall	0-0	Wind blows cross-field	0-0
Wood starts	0-0	Schierholtz homers	0-0	On CSN	0-0
Villanueva starts	0-0	Samardzija homers	0-0	On WGN	0-0
Some jamoke starts	0-0	Drawing no walks	0-0	On WCIU	0-0
Starter goes 7+	0-0	Drawing 1-3 walks	0-0	On Fox	0-0
Starter goes 5-7 innings	0-0	Drawing four or more walks	0-0	On ESPN	0-0
Starter goes less than 5 innings	0-0	Committing no errors	0-0	Ronnie Woo should be put down	0-0
Use two or less relievers	0-0	Committing one error	0-0	Len Kasper mentions cool band	0-0
Use three relievers	0-0	Committing two errors or more	0-0	Len Kasper mentions terrible band	0-0
Use four or more relievers	0-0	Castro threatens child's life with throw	0-0	Jim Deshaies sounds very tired	0-0
Getting seven hits or more	0-0	Garza critically injures child with throw	0-0	In April	0-0
Getting less than seven hits	0-0	Playing during the day	0-0	In May	0-0
Hitting no home runs	0-0	Playing at night	0-0	In June	0-0
Hitting one home run	0-0	Playing on a Monday	0-0	In July	0-0
Hitting two home runs	0-0	Playing on a Tuesday	0-0	In August	0-0
Hitting three homers or more	0-0	Playing on a Wednesday	0-0	In September	0-0
Hitting one triple or more	0-0	Playing on a Thursday	0-0	Wearing throwback jerseys	0-0
Stealing one base or more	0-0	Playing on a Friday	0-0	Fan passes out in bleachers	0-0



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