



# Something to **PROVE**

Coming off a disappointing season, Theo Epstein feels the Cubs have their edge back.

**BY GARY COHEN**

**T**heo Epstein joined the Cubs organization in October 2011. In chronological terms, that's not all that long ago. But in baseball, eight years is enough to create a generational divide.

When Epstein came to Chicago, he rebuilt the baseball operations department from the ground up, using a mix of new-school analytics and old-school scouting. Under his direction, the Cubs became a model for other franchises, signing, drafting and developing young players who would quickly transform the organization into an annual playoff contender. He even accomplished a feat generations of supernaturally inclined fans feared would never happen when the Cubs captured the 2016 World Series title.

But the talented young core has seen diminishing returns since then. The team has been hit by injuries and underperformance, and last year missed the postseason for the first time since 2014. To right the proverbial ship — and,

remember, this ship still won 92, 95 and 84 games over the last three years — Epstein and his cohorts made massive front-office and coaching changes.

“It was a lot of work this offseason, bringing in some new people, putting a lot of good people who have been here in slightly new roles,” Epstein said. “In the case of the pitching and hitting department, we’re using a new paradigm to structure the department, so it’s been great.”

Epstein knows how good the Cubs can be, but he also knows it’s on the front office to put the team in the best position to succeed. The hope is that these changes will help a group still loaded with talent perform to the best of its abilities and rediscover its 2016 swagger.

Toward the end of Spring Training, we spoke with the Cubs’ baseball boss about why changes were necessary, how technology is impacting development and what made David Ross the right man to succeed a legend like Joe Maddon.

**Cubs Yearbook: Fans were expecting major free-agent signings or trades this winter, which didn’t happen. But you made several front-office and coaching changes. Are those flying under the radar?**

**Theo Epstein:** We built the amateur scouting and player development departments over eight years ago now. As rapidly as the industry is changing in those areas, that’s a whole generation. We’ve been making improvements and innovating and incorporating new

technologies along the way, but it’s a different thing altogether to start with a blank slate and build the department from scratch and exactly the way you want to give them a new landscape in the game and for where we think the game is headed.

**CY: Why do you think the timing was right for these changes, and what were you trying to accomplish?**

**TE:** When the departments were built eight years ago, we had some of the same leadership and some of the same structures in place that were doing things a certain way. As much as you push change and try to incorporate new technologies, it’s hard to break some old habits. Incorporating new technologies into an existing structure is not the same as building a data-driven process. That’s what we’re doing. The new structure is really player-centric and data-driven. A couple of teams have passed us in certain areas, and that’s not a comfortable feeling.



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I believe that what we have in place and the incredible brain power that we have behind these ideas and the buy-in and how thoughtful it's been in its implementation with some of the new leadership that we have, we have the best practices in the industry. Now we have to prove that with the results.

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**CY:** *One of the keys is trying to guess what the next evolution of the game is going to be. Is biokinetics part of that?*

**TE:** That's an important new field where, as part of player development, hitters can get real-time feedback on the way their body moves to try to shape their training to get their body to move in an optimal way to maximize their performance. It's really just making the training a lot more efficient and targeted. Strength and conditioning used to be completely separate from on-field hitting instruction, for example. But if you think about it, hitting a

baseball is obviously very difficult and unique in our sport. So why would you train all hitters the same way? Certain bodies are wired tight. Certain bodies are wired loose. Every swing is different. Every set-up is different.

You should target your training to maximize your ability to hit the ball hard and hit the ball hard often. The ability to get real-time feedback on your body and on the way your body moves and on the way your swing works, and then put that into practice as you seek to improve day to day with your practice, is really important. It's been really cool now that we can break down body types, movements and swings to a really granular level.

**CY:** *With technology, the Cubs have been able to hit on some under-the-radar pitchers, whether it's Rowan Wick, Brad Wieck, Kyle Ryan or others. How has the pitch lab and technology impacted your ability to do that?*

**TE:** First off, it's certainly an industry-wide trend now where instead of just a pro scout going out and evaluating a player or an analyst sitting there and looking at a results-based track record, you're now looking at exactly what a pitcher does, how he does it and forecasting potential adjustments to make him better. Our pro scouting department works really well in tandem with our R&D department in the evaluations of pitchers



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in other organizations and trying to understand what they do well and, more importantly, understand what they maybe could do a little bit better. That's factored into the acquisition process where you take a Rowan Wick or a Brad Wieck and just based off what they were doing and how they were performing, they probably wouldn't have been guys we would have targeted to acquire even in small deals.

**CY:** *Based on what: performance, the numbers, old-school stats?*

**TE:** Yes, based on the underlying characteristics of what they did and some adjustments that we forecast would suit their bodies and their movements and the way their hand grips the ball and their arm action. With some adjustments to their arsenals, we felt like they could be even better. By definition, that makes a player potentially undervalued if you think there's some hidden value there or some things that they can do better with adjustments.

It's not always right, but it was gratifying to see the pro scouting and R&D work together to target those guys, our major league ops



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following through on the trades, and then our R&D and coaching staffs working together to unearth that potential pretty rapidly, sending those guys into the lab and then having it play out on the big league field in helping us win some games.

**CY:** *Two years in a row, this team has been in a decent playoff position going into the stretch run before fading late. What can you do*

**to try to ensure the team is peaking at the right time?**

**TE:** As far as the baseball operations side of it, our job is to provide as much depth as possible so that when injuries happen, we don't suffer on the field. We weren't as deep a team this past year as we've been in previous years. That showed when we got banged up late, so there's something you can actively do to combat that. Some of it is luck. It's just staying healthy or suffering your injuries at the right time when you have a chance to do something about it, not after the trade deadline. Obviously, we suffered a lot of late injuries last year. And then some of it is these soft factors, or intangibles. We've been open about the fact that that's an area

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where we haven't been as sharp for the last couple of years. I don't think as an organization — and that goes for all of us at the very top down to what's going on in the clubhouse — we haven't responded as well to winning the World Series as you would like. We haven't been quite as hungry, quite as locked in as we were, say, in 2016, when we were clearly on a mission and unified and had that edge.

It's easy to eyeroll that, but how connected you feel to the mission, how locked in you are, how you feel about the people around you, when you show up to work, that matters in your job performance. With David Ross here, who is so well respected by the players and so passionate about team-building and all the little things that are







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important to building a championship team, I think we'll be a little bit more locked in here. Sometimes that can help. It's really important to play your best baseball when it matters most.

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**CY: You're handing the reins of a playoff-caliber team to a first-time manager. Why is David Ross the right man for the job? And given your shared history, did you always know this day was coming?**

**TE:** I'll start with what makes him the right guy. Of all the players I've been around, I haven't seen anyone who is more locked in on what winning looks like, all the

ingredients that contribute to a winning team, and then, importantly, taking it to that next step of how to proactively build those ingredients. Taking a teammate who's starting to get isolated out to dinner or having a tough conversation with a star player to hold him accountable when he's not living up to the standards of the team. Making sure there's energy in the clubhouse and in the dugout every day. He was really proactive about that.

Then he's got this unique personality where he can call players out and hold them accountable but still be the guy everyone gravitates to. He's got an edge. He can even be a hardass at times, but he's also someone who lifts people up and is sort of the center of the connectivity universe in that clubhouse. That's a real special skillset.

I was digging through some old emails, and I found some references telling others in the front office, "This guy is definitely going to be a great manager, and we have to find a way to keep him involved." We did after he was done playing. We signed him to an unprecedented personal services contract of sorts to make sure he stayed in house — overpaid him for what he was doing. He was out *Dancing with the Stars*, but we were paying him a good amount of money just to keep him close. Then he eventually came and took advantage of that. He dove in with the R&D department and with the scouts, saw the game from 360 degrees instead of just from a player standpoint,

and made himself into a fantastic manager candidate. The timing lined up where we needed something new, and he was there ready to go.

**CY: The Cubs have had success bringing talented bats through the system and to the major league level. The weakness has been developing homegrown pitching. How do you feel about the state of the organization's pitching heading into the season?**

**TE:** I'm excited about what's to come. We have some best practices now and some talent to work with, so I'm excited that there is a wave coming in. It's a scenario where we clearly have to get better. At the same time, since we started our competitive phase in 2015, we have the second-best starter ERA in the big leagues and the second-best reliever ERA in the big leagues. I care a lot less about where players come from. I care a lot more about how we perform at the big league level. Our



pitching has actually exceeded our position player contribution.

That said, in order to sustain success and keep this thing going, it's going to be important to get some contributions. But I look at the wave we have coming through and the infrastructure

we have in place to help these guys get better, and I'm pretty excited about where it's going.

**CY:** *Certainly from a budget standpoint, it's beneficial to have those guys come up through the system.*

**TE:** Absolutely. To keep it sustainable, you need some minimum salary contributions. We've been able to get that from outside the organization, but

it would be really nice to eventually get it from inside. I personally don't believe that you have to exclusively build your organization around homegrown pitching because what that means is suffering through all the ups and downs and all the attrition of trying to incorporate young starters into your big league rotation. It's really hard to do that and contend. If you look at the teams that have won, there are very few that have built their rotations around homegrown pitching.

Yes, we want that flow of pitching coming through to keep and to trade. But, again, we've acquired most of our pitching from outside the organization and have been the second best in the big leagues. Part of that is letting pitchers sort of weed themselves out elsewhere and suffer the really difficult transition process of going from a coddled, 100-inning, minor league prospect, adjusting to big league pitching, going through your injury phase,





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learning how to get up to 180-200 innings, and then you can still acquire that pitcher from outside. If we can develop the right kind of pitching and incorporate an impact starter or two, or any kind of starter, and then obviously fortify our bullpen from the inside, that’s the goal.

**CY:** *The big pitching prospect is Brailyn Marquez. What do you like about him, and does he have a chance to be the next great Cubs homegrown pitcher?*

**TE:** I don’t want to hang that burden on him, but he’s got the

potential to impact major league games. He’s got a phenomenal arm. It’s hard to find a left-hander who can touch triple digits, and he’s not like a freak carnival thrower. He knows what he’s doing out there. He’s got a good delivery. When he’s right, he’s sitting in the upper 90s, and he’s got an overpowering fastball. His change-up and slider really took big steps forward last year. He made some adjustments, and his stuff is playing really well. A couple of years ago, his stuff was playing below the velocity, and now it’s playing at or above the velocity — how it plays through the zone, the swings hitters are getting or not getting against him.

He’s starting to feel how good he can be and putting the work in. He had a really good last year in terms of the adjustments he made, how his delivery looked and then the mental side of the game. He’s really been working hard and getting after it. He’s still got some hurdles ahead of him. Double-A can be a big separator for guys, but we’re excited about where it’s going. I think he’s a guy who could fill a variety of roles. As the three pitches develop, he’s got a chance to be a really good starter and then probably a quicker path if he ends up going in the ‘pen. But certainly we’re going to work hard to make sure he’s an impact starter.

**CY:** *In recent years, you guys have always had a*

*target on your back. This year, it feels a bit more like you’re the hunter versus the hunted. Is that an advantage, and do you feel like the NL Central is still up for grabs?*

**TE:** The NL Central is obviously up for grabs. You’ve got four teams that function really closely together in terms of the talent. I thought we’d be really hungry coming off 2018 because we played so poorly down the stretch — lost Game 162, lost the one-game playoff and lost the Wild Card Game. But, honestly, I think it was too easy to fall back on 95 wins. That’s a lot of winning. But there’s no doubt that coming off the pain of that nine-game losing streak and failing so extremely in September that our guys have a ton of hunger and edge and feel that they have something to prove. That’s evident in camp, and we hope it shows up from Opening Day to the last game of the season.



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