



# ROSSY'S SECOND ACT

David Ross is back in the Cubs' dugout. Now his goal is to get the team back to the World Series.

BY GARY COHEN

It's nearly impossible to imagine a more storybook ending to a career than the one David Ross enjoyed. So much so that it's hard to reconcile the way things actually concluded with the back of his baseball card.

It's not that Ross had a lackluster career. He played 15 seasons in the big leagues with seven teams, went to the postseason seven times and won two World Series rings. He spent his final two years with the Cubs, where he enjoyed back-to-back playoff runs, including a curse-breaking, magical 2016 World Series championship. During Game 7 of the Fall Classic, he delivered a dramatic sixth-inning homer, helping the Cubs to their first title since 1908. Then, in his postgame interview with Fox's Ken Rosenthal, Ross received a heartfelt hug from manager Joe Maddon before being hefted onto the shoulders of Jason Heyward and Anthony Rizzo and literally carried off the field by his teammates.

There aren't many backup catchers who get that treatment.

But the "why" of that moment is the key. Why was he treated like a

conquering hero following the World Series title? Why did Heyward pay for Ross to have a hotel suite on every road trip during his final season? Why is he a legend in Chicago after spending only two seasons here and (let's face facts) hitting only .203/.304/.351, good for a 77 OPS+ (100 being league average)?

The answer to those questions is the reason Ross is embarking on a new journey in 2020 as manager of the Chicago Cubs. Ross was always more than just Jon Lester's personal catcher. During his years on the North Side, his upbeat personality, intensity and attention to detail stood out. Baseball president Theo Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer had worked with Ross in Boston before bringing him to Chicago, and they knew he was exactly the kind of player who could help teach a young team what winning was all about.

"Of all the players I've been around," Epstein said, "I haven't seen anyone who is more locked in on what winning looks like, all of the ingredients that contribute to a winning team, and then, importantly, taking it to that next step of how to proactively build those ingredients."

While the Cubs have had tremendous talent on the roster since that 2016 season, they have failed to repeat its success. Now, it's up to Ross to again instill that winning mentality in a 2020 Cubs squad looking to find its way back to October after missing out on the playoffs last year. This spring, we sat down with the Cubs' new skipper to talk about what he brings to the team, where the game has changed and how technology impacts his decisions.

**Cubs Yearbook: This is your first Spring Training as a major league manager. Is it everything you expected so far?**

**David Ross:** Yes. I came in with open eyes and trying to just take it all in. I know the manager's job is a lot busier than you give it credit for as a player, and what they've got to deal with. There are just a lot of different departments. I would actually say it's giving me a ton of energy and just a confidence about who I am and what I believe in and what I want to see out of my players and the organization. It's powerful stuff to say what you believe over and over again and really embrace that, put that into action on the field.

**CY: Everybody has talked about the intensity you bring. Do you feel like this team was lacking in that department, or do you feel like there is something you can add?**

**DR:** I think there is something I can bring. It's just the attention to detail. Sometimes when you come to Spring Training, you are trying to think about getting your body ready and trying to take it



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**CY:** Once a team wins, especially a young team like you guys were in 2016, everybody just assumes they are going to keep winning forever. How hard is it to maintain that consistency at the major league level, even if you've got the talent?

**DR:** Yeah, no doubt. There are so many distractions too after you win. There's just off-the-field stuff. We all get stroked when we get off the field too in those moments. When you are the backup catcher on the 2016 team and you retire and you get carried off the field and the city of Chicago loves you, I felt it myself, like, "My God, I'm a career .220 hitter, and look at the way the city treats me." Then what my teammates said about me, I mean ... everything. It's all-encompassing. What these guys did for me, I can never replace or pay them back for it. That's hard to deal with at a young stage too. Now it's about, "Wow, I'm the man," and how you deal with that, what you found, how you worked, how you paid attention to certain details. Maybe you get off track a little bit.

I've always said it takes many years to realize what kind of big leaguer you're going to be and how you're going to prepare and how you're going to work. Are you an overworker? Do you need to work more? Do you need to work less? How do you treat your body? Mentally, what do you need when you go through some adversity to be tougher? All those things happen throughout a career, and I just happened to be at the back end of mine and very comfortable in my stages. These guys had success early on, on the biggest stage possible, maybe one of the biggest championships in sports history, so dealing with that is difficult.

slow, and you don't want to get injuries. Everybody is just like, "It's early," and we always preach that. It doesn't take a whole lot to turn that mental aspect up, and sometimes we take that for granted. If we can mentally focus and be intense, it just goes a long way in our drills and what we are thinking about, and we'll be that much sharper when things do start.

There is a fine line there between being the guy that's on everybody all the time, but when you see the details of losing and you see the details of winning, they stand out. I had just seen some winning. I'd just come from winning in Boston two years earlier. When you see it done the wrong way, you just want to make sure you point it out, because at the end of my career especially, all I cared about was winning. We all go through these stages as players, like, "I just want to make the team, and we all want to make some money." I was definitely that fifth-stage guy that Joe [Maddon] talked about. I don't care what I've got to do to win, I'm all in.

When you're brought in to be a leader and you know you need everybody in camp to win a championship, you want to start pointing out some stuff like that.

**CY:** People have this idea of who you are: the fun-loving, salsa-dancing, "Grandpa Rossy" character. What would the fan base be most surprised to learn about you?

**DR:** I think they love the "Grandpa Rossy" stuff, but I would say I'm more of the grumpy Rossy.

I like to have fun. I shoot people straight. I do have strong feelings about what I believe and the things I've seen in my career from experiences. I've had a lot of failures also that have shaped my career and who I am. I don't have a lot of tolerance, and people think I'm this nice guy that's going to explain things. I'll shoot people straight, and I want to tell you the truth. That's the way I want to be treated. I try to be open and honest with the players about their careers, where I see them, how they stand in my eyes. That's my job now.

I've got a lot of Joe Maddon in me that wants to have a good time and relax and back off. But when something is important to me, I'm going to stand up and say it.

**CY:** I think it's also that ability to communicate. Joe definitely had that, and that's what everybody talks about with you.

**DR:** That goes back to being honest. I was a better player when I knew how the managers saw me — when I was a young guy, a middle-of-the-road guy, a guy out of options. What do you expect from me? What do you want out of me? I want you to be yourself. This is how I see you.



STEPHEN GREEN



We all like to be lifted up in moments because the game is really hard, but I think players see through fakeness or fluff — if you're just telling me what I want to hear. I think the realness and open honesty and just shooting somebody straight goes a long way with a group of guys that just want to be the best they can be.

**CY:** You broke into the majors with the Dodgers in 2002. What is the biggest change in the game between then and now?

**DR:** So much has changed. Information, I think, is the biggest. It's really made the player be more well rounded because your flaws, somebody is going to find them out really fast. It's going to be hard to be an extended big leaguer that's going to stay around for a long time because you have to be well rounded. Whatever you don't do well, some team is going to try to exploit it. So it's created an opportunity for these players to be at their best.

**CY:** Does that wealth of available information make it easier for you to make the transition from player to manager?

**DR:** Having been a catcher and having gotten those scouting reports, I'm used to gathering information before a game, processing it and trying to figure out how

to put it in play. That's what I did. I had the whole wristband thing, going over my scouting report before I catch. I'll have that same kind of information in the dugout.

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**CY:** What did you do this offseason to hit the ground running, and how much did you benefit from the work you did with the Cubs' front office?

**DR:** A lot, a lot. Those guys are really smart. A lot smarter than I am. They've done a lot of work and gathered a lot of information. Their information is not just off experiences but about the history of the game. Finding out how they see the game, where their head's at, what historically has worked. I wasn't a big historian. I'm not a guy that watched baseball growing up. I loved to be out there playing. I was that guy. I don't follow the analytics side. Just gathering information from them, understanding, creating a relationship with them so we can have open, honest conversations throughout the year.

I wish I knew more as a player how much work went in from that side, the analytics side, so that these [players] succeed. We feel like they point out our weaknesses, but they're just trying to set you up for success. At the end of the day, we all have a job to do, and we all want to keep our jobs. You go to work every day trying to do the best you can for the Chicago Cubs, and that's putting those players in a situation to succeed.

**CY:** You had some great managers in your career. Do you have one that influenced you the most?

**DR:** Bobby Cox, for sure. I was at a weird place in my career trying to figure out who I was and what I was all about. The way he treated people; the way he managed the game; the way he was old school and believed in some of the old-school rules but yet gave you the freedom as a man to be your own person; the way his positivity spread throughout the group; his simplicity in it all; I would say that was the biggest.

I have so many. I got to play for Terry [Francona]. Joe [Maddon] was a huge one at the back end. I tell people this all the time, Bobby Cox and Joe Maddon are very similar. You feel like it's new-analytics Joe and old-school Bobby, but they really gave you a lot of the same freedoms, and Joe reiterated a lot of those beliefs I had when I came here.



**CY:** Maddon will always be a legend here because of 2016 and finally delivering a World Series title to the Cubs. Any hesitation about following in his footsteps?

**DR:** No, because I don't look at it like that. I understand anything less than a World Series is a bust around here, and I want that for me. That's more on me. I think the worry comes from, like, I had a really good reputation in this town. I can't keep that up. There's no chance of that. As much I've loved how this city has treated me, I understand that's part of this job that I'm taking now, and you're not going to make everybody happy. Joe is a legend for what he did around here.

There's not too many of these things that end positively is the way I look at it. So I'm going to go about it, be myself, and try to win every game I possibly can and bring a championship back. At some point, it's going to be somebody else's time.

**CY:** How beneficial is it for you to have already built relationships in this organization, and are there any drawbacks to that?

**DR:** I think the relationships in general are such a positive. I can walk into Theo's office and tell him exactly how I'm feeling. That's scary because this guy has seen a lot, done a lot, had a lot of great managers, and I can get in there

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and have an open, honest conversation with him and Jed. I don't know that I would have the guts to do that in a new environment. I've got to feel my way, get to know somebody.

The relationships are also very important because I can shoot the players straight. I did that as a player when I was their teammate. I can do that as a manager because I'm invested in the guys. I care about them. The drawbacks are the hard conversations. Like, I care about somebody, I don't want to give them bad news. I don't want to give them negative feedback, but I'm real with them. That's the approach I take. Some of the hardest conversations I'm ever going to have are going to be in this job because I've made history with those guys. Those guys are brothers for life. Unfortunately, to our relationship, I've got to tell them the truth, and I hope that doesn't hurt our relationship. I hope they respect me for that. The fact is, that's on them. The best way I know to do that is to tell them truths. In the end, we're connected for life either way. We've made history together, and I've got to approach it like that.

**CY:** This team was in good playoff position in each of the last two years before fading down the stretch. You can't do anything about injuries, but what can you do to make sure this team is peaking at the right time?

**DR:** It's about a commitment and a focus throughout the season. This team is really good. I think we all know that. There's so much written about the falter down at the end, and it has had to do with injuries. It has had to do with these guys not being 100 percent. That's part of our game.

I think depth is a real thing in our game. We've got to have guys that step up when a guy goes down, and we have to have guys to rise to the occasion and prepare for at-bats when they get their opportunity. It can't always come down to KB and Riz and Javy. Ian Happ, Albert Almora, these guys have to get the big hit. Kyle Schwarber seemed to have taken that second-half leap last year. Willson Contreras has to continue to stay healthy for us and be on the field. We're at our best version of us when we're all healthy and on the field.

**CY:** How beneficial is it for you to have all the new bells and whistles — the pitch lab, the high-speed cameras — that didn't exist when you started your career?

**DR:** Well, here's my thing with that: It's so great for the pitchers to gain information. You can reinvent things sometimes and get some feedback, especially those labs or the work that we see with the cameras and getting immediate feedback on spin rates and all these different things we can use.

My message is: Let's not rely on those things. Let's make sure we understand who we are from that information. We can tweak stuff, but when we step between those lines, it's time to compete. We have to be the best at competing. I love the information. I love the labs. I love the technology. I love all that. It's gained us a lot of talented guys that were kind of lacking in some areas. But we can't rely on that for our feedback. We have to know a good pitch without looking at a screen.



STEPHEN GREEN

**CY: We're going to finish up with the lightning round. What's the best advice you've ever gotten?**

**DR:** Be yourself.

**CY: What talent would you like to have?**

**DR:** I would really like to sing, believe it or not. What's that saying — the rock star always wants to be the athlete, and the athlete wants to be the rock star. I think it's the coolest thing to be a musician, to play an instrument and get up there and perform with thousands of people coming to watch you. Now, I don't know that I could do it, but I just think that's cool.

**CY: What's one thing you wish you could change about yourself?**

**DR:** I wish I had more patience with kids, being a dad. These people that just have endless patience with their kids and handling adversity, I'm so jealous of that. I'm a competitor, so I want

to fix it now. I want it changed now, and I want it done now. With my kids, you want your 4-year-old to act polite when you go to the nice restaurant with the two other ones. In dad terms, when I think about just that patience, I wish I had more.

**CY: How do you get away from the game and clear your head?**

**DR:** Being a player, we're not allowed to ski. I got into skiing a little bit. You know, my phone's away. I'm up there in the mountains. I have gone two years now, and there's just a sense of peace out there on a mountain skiing.

**CY: You definitely can't ski as a catcher.**

**DR:** No, you cannot. I can't hurt my knees.

**CY: What's your definition of happiness?**

**DR:** Family.

**CY: One last question: What's your definition of success?**

**DR:** That's a tough one. For me, the definition of success is giving your all day in and day out, preparing, commitment, giving respect and trust to everybody you're around, and doing the best you can. At the end of the day, bringing yourself every day, your energy, it's a lifestyle. Success is a lifestyle. Greatness is a lifestyle for me.



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