

YEAR TWO: PITCHING, YOUTH, AND PITCHING

The infatuation is over. We're getting to know each other now. I might make a few mistakes, but you'll see by now if my plan is working. In 2013, we'll turn the corner and play .500 ball, maybe better. In the mediocre National League Central, that might be good enough for second place.

Here's what I expect to happen:

Starlin Castro hits his prime. He develops into a better-than-average defensive shortstop and shows off legit power.

Jackson and Rizzo hit in the middle of the order, along with Castro, forming the core of the offense for years to come.

The clubhouse is fun again. The players are loose.

But the most important development will be pitching. Starting pitching, to be exact. Garza will still be the ace (unless I trade him), but we'll have at least two or three young starters you've never heard of giving us big innings and racking up wins. We've already picked up Gerardo Concepcion, a 20-year-old who was rookie of the year last year in the Cuban National League. Not only can he pitch, but he might also give us a head start when we go after the biggest prize from Cuba, 20-year-old outfielder Jorge Soler.

With or without Soler, we're going to increase our pool of young talent. Baseball executives around the league will be buzzing about our kids. That makes it easier for me to trade for the missing pieces. Don't expect any big-name free-agent signings. Unless a once-in-a-lifetime player

Take Bryan LaHair, our new first baseman. A lot of people think LaHair's not a big leaguer. Maybe they're right. He's 29 years old and no one has given him a shot until now. But he did hit 38 homers last year in the minors, and I'd like to see what he can do. The time to do it is now, while we're rebuilding. He might open some eyes. If he doesn't, fine, I didn't waste a lot of money on an aging star. And I've got a backup for him already in development. Kid's name is Anthony Rizzo, a left-handed slugger who hit .331 with 26 homers last year in the minors. You're going to love him. When Rizzo's ready, maybe LaHair's playing well. Now I've created an asset with value, and I can trade LaHair for another piece of the puzzle.

Year One is all about building those assets. I'm lucky to have owners unafraid to spend money and fans who shouldn't mind waiting a few years.

That's why we traded a good reliever, Sean Marshall, for a younger starter, Travis Wood, and two promising minor leaguers. We saved some money and made an investment in the future. That's why

we signed a 32-year-old guy named David DeJesus to play right field. He's a career .284 hitter coming off his worst season, so we got him at a good price. It's why we signed an old favorite, Kerry Wood. Some people say he's over the hill. Relief pitchers are insanely inconsistent, but good old Kerry is a known quantity. He still gets guys out. And he was cheap.

I inherited a mess here. So in Year One, we're going to redesign the system. We're going to start growing our own talent, change the team's attitude, and save money so we'll have it when we need it. I know you're infatuated with me, so I'm going to use that to my advantage.

If it's working, you'll see:

Starting pitcher Matt Garza emerge as the ace and our most valuable asset.

Shortstop Starlin Castro improve on defense and hit for power and average.

LaHair, DeJesus and third baseman Ian Stewart play well enough that I can trade one or two of them and get young talent in return.

Pitcher Chris Volstad, whom we got in the Carlos Zambrano trade, help the bullpen.

Brett Jackson get promoted from the minors and give us a center fielder we can look forward to watching for years to come. He hits for power and average and provides strong defense.

And here's what you won't see:

Behind the scenes, I'm building one of the best scouting and development teams in the league. Senior VP Jason McLeod, GM Jed Hoyer and I get a lot of pleasure from spotting and developing talent. So don't worry about how many times the W flag flies over Wrigley in 2012. It's not about the Ws yet. It's about the kids.

Dear Theo,

I've been burned before. I know I said I'd never let it happen again. But I can't help it. There's just something about you that's different—something special. I think you could really be the one.

Hopefully,
Carlos Portocarrero,
Cubs fan

Dear Carlos,

I understand why you've become jaded. You've had a bad century. But I am different. I could try to win you over with a lot of empty words, but you've heard them all before. Carlos, you need a man with a plan. A man who knows where he's going to be in three years.

I'm that man, Carlos. And this is my plan. Read it. I await your reply.

Sincerely,
Theo

YEAR ONE: DESTROY AND REBUILD

This might hurt a little. It might even hurt a lot. It might get so bad that you even see Alfonso Soriano batting in the leadoff spot. Don't worry. I know what I'm doing.

I'm building from the ground up. We need to teach players the right way. It's about more than words. It's about more than baseball. It's about showing we're committed. That's why we've written a manual covering everything we believe in. We call it "The Cubs Way." The Cubs Way used to be losing. Not anymore.

Okay, so manuals don't win ball games. I know that. I also know there used to be market inefficiencies I could exploit by crunching numbers, and those days are gone. Everyone crunches now. Now you've got to do everything right: Look at the numbers, find players with talent and grit and big potential, and figure out how to coax greatness out of them, like we did with Dustin Pedroia in Boston.

THEO'S THEORY

Here's what we thought Epstein might say beyond "wait till next year."

Theo Epstein inspires one fan to dream up a World Series comeback for the Cubs' dreamy new president of baseball ops.

Perfect gameplan

By **Carlos Portocarrero**

PHOTOS: OPPOSITE PAGE, G. FLUME/GETTY IMAGES; THIS PAGE, CHRIS CARLSON



FIRST DIBS Can the Cubs build first baseman Bryan LaHair into a tradable asset?



A STAR IS BORN Cubs shortstop Starlin Castro should hit his prime in 2013.

becomes available at a good price, I'll probably stick with the cards in my hand. I'm not ready for the big move yet.

The pieces are coming together. It's standing-room-only at Wrigley in late August as the Cubs rattle off a couple of winning streaks and raise hopes of snatching the last National League wildcard spot. The scalpers are happy again. The beer vendors are delicious. You can smell it now. As autumn settles on Chicago... yes, that's optimism in the air.

YEAR THREE: IT'S GO TIME

I don't mean to brag, but I like our chances in 2014. We're not going to enter the season as the favorites to go all the way, but we'll be in the discussion. We've got great young arms. We've got Castro, by now one of the best hitters in the game. Center fielder Brett Jackson is an All-Star. Matt Szczur takes over in right field. And in left, Alfonso Soriano, if he's still a Cub, will be playing as if he cares again because he's in the final year of his contract. Thanks, Fonsie.

Before the start of the season, I make my first big free-agent splash. Possible targets: Robinson Cano (three-time All-Star and Yankees second baseman), Alex Gordon (Royals left fielder and leader of the new youth movement in KC), Joey Votto (Reds first baseman and 2010 NL MVP), Jacoby Ellsbury (Red Sox center fielder), Adam Jones (Orioles center fielder and best player on the team) or Tim Lincecum (Giants pitcher and two-



OUT OF LEFT FIELD Will Alfonso Soriano help lead the Cubs to a championship in 2014?

time Cy Young Award winner, a.k.a. "The Freak"). It depends on where I see the greatest need.

We play hard and smart. We don't hurt ourselves with bad baserunning or sloppy fielding. The pitching and defense are so good we have more than enough offense to win. And we do win. A lot. By mid-summer, we're in first place. The minor-league system has been stressing fundamentals for two years, and role players called up late in the summer provide a shot of adrenaline.

As we run away with the Central Division, I'm thinking ahead to the postseason. Now I can afford to add a veteran down the stretch, just like the

Yankees did in 2000 when they picked up David Justice. Maybe I pick Tampa Bay Rays center fielder B.J. Upton... just thinking out loud. We'll see what's out there.

By the time the playoffs begin, this team's rolling. Every game's a sellout. The rooftops are rocking. It's Mardi Gras all summer long on the streets of Wrigleyville. When we win our first playoff game, they can hear the roar of the crowd all the way to Lincoln Park.

I'm not going to promise we win the World Series in 2014. This game's not that easy. But we'll be close. And the best part: We'll be built for long-term success. The organization will be so strong we'll contend year after year; 2014 is just the beginning.

That's not a promise; it's a commitment.

So, Carlos, what do you say?

Dear Theo,

You had me at "I understand..."



STONE IN LOVE

The vet broadcaster admires Epstein but predicts a rough year for the Cubs.

Steve Stone, former Cubs pitcher and broadcaster (and current White Sox TV analyst), is known for his strong and often critical opinions. But when it comes to the new regime at Wrigley Field, he's an optimist.

"I really like Theo," Stone says. "I think he was a terrific hire."

But don't expect the team's new president of baseball operations to make a big difference right away. "It's not going to be a great year for the Cubs," Stone says. "It's not even going to be a good year. It's going to be a mediocre year." Look for the Cubs to win 70 or 75 games out of 162 and finish fourth in the National League Central.

Luckily for the Cubs, the division is weaker than it was last year. The Astros are terrible. The Brewers lost star slugger Prince Fielder and right-fielder Corey Hart is injured. Oh, and the Cardinals? They didn't just lose the best hitter of the modern era in Albert Pujols—they also lost their manager and pitching coach.

Epstein will enjoy being away from the monsters of the American League East, but he'll still need time to scout and develop talent.

"When Theo came on, he didn't say anything different from other GMs that have come in," Stone says. Some top execs have talked about rebuilding the minor-league system. Others have talked about changing the culture. The difference with Epstein is his track record. "Theo has had success in the minor leagues," Stone says. "Look at [Boston Red Sox stars] Pedroia, Ellsbury, Youkilis, Bard, Papelbon."

Stone's ETA after a championship-caliber Cubs team? 2015.—CP

CHICAGOSIDE Carlos Portocarrero writes for the new sports website ChicagoSide. For more great takes on the local sports scene, visit chicagosidesports.com.